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Art Professor's Painting Inspires Fantasy Book

by Charlene Winters
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When BYU faculty artist James Christensen saw a documentary about Charles Darwin's expedition on the H.M.S. Beagle several years ago, he speculated what Darwin would have discovered had he gone in another direction.

"As I watched the show, I wondered how different the journey might have been if Darwin had relied on magic and imagination instead of science," Christensen says. "Darwin discovered his theory of evolution and sailed into history. I decided to take the journey of imagination and see where I would sail."

The first result was "Voyage of the Basset," a painting filled with mythical creatures aboard a mysteriously magic vessel full of surprises. The ship's motto, "Credendo vides," Latin for "By believing, one sees," is Christensen's personal creed as well as that of the painting's captain. ("Credendo vides" is carved onto an ornately decorated fireplace at the artist's English cottage. Its forest location is kept secret to maintain the magic Christensen feels whenever he goes there.)

The second, a fanciful storybook by the same title, was released this month through Artisan Press, a division of Workman Publishing and the Greenwich Workshop Press, a division of a notable Connecticut arts corporation that produces and markets limited edition prints for Christensen and others, including Bev Doolittle and James Gurney. "Voyage of the Basset" has been chosen as a national Book of the Month Club selection, and Good Housekeeping named it among its top ten gift books.

A nearly four-year project, the book required a two-year sabbatical from the artist's teaching and research duties at BYU. The effort resulted in more than 80 paintings, not including numerous descriptive ink illustrations that accompany a text produced by Christensen, Renwick St. James and Alan Dean Foster.

The story features Algernon Aisling, a professor of mythology and ancient legends who looks suspiciously like Christensen. He is a widower with two daughters—Cassandra, a
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precocious believer in magic, and Miranda, a sensible teenage skeptic who misses her mother and does not find much magic in her life.

Although the professor believes imagination is where science begins, his view is not shared by all his colleagues, and his department is threatened with closure.

Discouraged, he dreams of a ship that would take him to the land of legends. His fantasy becomes reality one evening when he and his children find an odd little ship moored alongside an abandoned dock. The enchanted vessel is fully staffed with dwarves and gremlins ready to take them on a journey of the imagination.

The professor’s goal is to find the minotaurs, fairies, nymphs, gryphons, trolls, serpents, mermaids, unicorns, manticores, and other marvelous creatures of mythology. To get there, he uses the wunterlabe, a device that carries him out of the rational world and navigates him through the landscape of imagination.

As long as Aisling follows the "credendo vides" creed, he discovers magic, wonder, adventure, and even love from one of the most unlikely mythological beings. But when he encounters solid scientific evidence of mythology in the form of a dragon skull, he begins to think about the fame and acclaim that will await him. In not being true to his original vision, and succumbing to the applause of the world, he nearly undoes his mission and everyone accompanying him.

"I have deliberately left little strings at the end of the story, so the readers can imagine more if they desire," he says. "I could not leave it in a tidy package."

The book’s germination began when Christensen painted "Voyage of the Basset" nearly 10 years ago.

"It is not in my nature to do mere mug shots, and the painting assumed a life of its own. My subjects became grouped in scenes that suggested stories. I had a minotaur playing cards with an ogre, which became a little society. I put a sphinx aboard because, after Oedipus solved a riddle at Delphi, the sphinx needed a new one. Medusa looked bored in the petite boat apart from the ship, yet neither she nor her creator had any idea she would become a major character when the painting became the idea for a story book."

He described his original "Voyage of the Basset" musings in a booklet that accompanied the limited edition prints produced by the Greenwich Workshop.

"By the time I was six years old, I knew all the legends and myths. I found the creatures fascinating; I still do."

-James Christensen

About four years ago, with Greenwich’s encouragement, he decided to commit himself to turning the "Voyage of the Basset" into an illustrated book.
He says several illustrators have asked him how he stayed with this project for so long. "I tell them the discipline I needed when I made a living doing freelance commercial work enabled me to have the concentration to stick with 'Voyage.'"

"I grew up in Southern California near the movie industry, and magic was always a big part of my life. By the time I was six years old, I knew all the legends and myths. I found the creatures fascinating; I still do. I hope my book helps others rediscover some pretty important characters that can add meaning to our lives."

Although he enjoyed what he was doing, the task was laborious.

"Most of the time each painting became a new adventure," Christensen explains. "But due to the sheer volume of work required, I sometimes felt like I did when I illustrated for The Ensign and had to draw two missionaries knocking on the door to find the widow ready to receive the gospel—and do it for the 700th time. It was work, hard work." With the book finished, Christensen describes himself as "happily exhausted" and anticipating some traveling next year to refill his creative well.

"I don’t think I can really look at the book closely for a while because I know where the bent nails are," he explains. "Scott Gustavson, a popular illustrator, worked on Peter Pan for a couple of years before he could look at the painting and enjoy it. I think in a year or two, I’ll be able to say about my book, 'Hey, there’s a lot of good work there.'"

He hopes the book will eventually become a movie or a television miniseries. He thinks the high interest and ratings generated by last year's "Gulliver’s Travel" could help him, and he has already had nibbles of interest from a major television network, a couple of major film studios, and others.

His ideal cast would include Sam Neil as Professor Aisling, Emma Thompson as Medusa, and the entire Monty Python ensemble as assorted characters.

"Hey, I know this is a fantasy cast," Christensen says. "But then, I live in a fantasy, which has created an awfully great reality for me."