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P. J. Lynch: The Artist Who Fills Stories With Magic

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P. J. Lynch comes from a land filled with magic and stories of the fairy realm. He was born in 1962 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the youngest in a family of five. He was educated at St. Malachy’s College in Belfast and Jordanstown Polytechnic. P. J. Lynch received a degree in art and design at Brighton, with Raymond Briggs as one of his tutors. Briggs, along with Justin Todd and John Lord, encouraged Lynch to illustrate children’s books. His illustrations have received the Kate Greenaway Medal twice, most recently in 1998 for When Jessie Comes Across the Sea (Candlewick) written by Amy Hest. Lynch says he hopes his work “never settles into a recognizable ‘style.’ So long as I am learning my work will be changing” (Biography from Walker Books Limited, 87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ).

Lynch’s art is realistic, but each book has a different feel to it. Melisande (Nesbit, Harcourt Brace, 1989) is all golds and greens; either her golden hair or the princess in her green brocade dress grows at an alarming rate while townsfolk look on with wonder and astonishment. The Fairy Tales of Ireland (Yeats, Delacourt, 1990) reveals Lynch’s skill with pen and ink drawings and lively silhouettes. Each illustration for Oscar Wilde’s Stories for Children (Wilde, Macmillian, 1991) breathes life into the story. The Steadfast Tin Soldier (Andersen, Harcourt Brace, 1992) evokes our sympathy for the heroic, one-legged toy as he falls from a dizzying height (the perspective makes the reader feel as though he or she is falling), travels through sewers, is thrown into the fire, and is finally melted into a heart. The Snow Queen (Andersen, Harcourt Brace, 1994) is a contrast between the cruel blue-white of the wicked queen (with the bluest lips ever seen) and the warmth and life of Gerda, who goes to save her friend Kay. Don’t miss the illustration of the golden angels fighting the snowflake army of the wicked queen. Catkin (Barber, Candlewick, 1994) is also a contrast between the human world of sunshine and growing plants with the land of enchantment under the hill where the fairies live. There the fairy folk are pale but beautiful, with dark hair, green eyes, and dark-green clothes. By contrast, the little orange cat and the golden-haired child the fairies have stolen show by their colors that they come from the human world.

The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey (Wojciechowski, Candlewick, 1995) won the first Kate Greenaway Medal for Lynch. In an August 10, 1998 telephone conversation with the author, Susan Wojciechowski, she told how Lynch came to illustrate her book. Ordinarily, authors have little say in selecting illustrators for their books, but the people at Candlewick Press asked Wojciechowski whom she would pick if she had a choice. The author studied children’s illustrators in libraries and bookstores and came up with Lynch as her top choice. The Candlewick folks didn’t think he would do it, because his work focused on fairy tales, but they asked him. His reply was no, but if they wanted to ask him again in six months, they could.

Wojciechowski was asked to decide if she wished to delay the production of the book for six months, and she decided to do so. In six months, Lynch agreed to illustrate the book but took a long time to finish it; Wojciechowski was afraid he didn’t like it. After the book won the Greenaway Medal, she discovered the story behind the long delay. He was afraid he couldn’t do the story justice, so to get himself “into the setting, the look, and feel of Jonathan Toomey’s world, Lynch first built a model of the village which appears midway through the book. Then he literally brought the story to life by hiring actors (not
models just posing) complete with period costuming and props to act out each scene convincingly." Lynch filmed the action and then used "the dynamics of the live performance to pinpoint the story’s defining moments and infuse each scene with the powerfully subtle, emotional depth that sets his work apart" (Children's Book Review, Holiday, 1997).

Wojciechowski knew Lynch had accomplished his goal when she saw the finished paintings and text together. "After reading it through, I put it down and cried uncontrollably. It was like a miracle." The author also had the unusual experience of writing the book "in a flood of inspiration and was finished in less than an hour" (Children's Book Review, Holiday, 1997).

The illustrations for the story are in wood colors, featuring browns of many hues and shades. They focus our attention on the skill and craft of the lonely wood carver. In the illustration below, notice the intent expressions of both the woodcutter, Jonathan, and the boy, Thomas, as one teaches and the other tries to learn the art of carving wood. They are surrounded by wood—the floor, wooden chests, carved frames, pieces of wood, a wooden chair, a wooden table, and curls of wood from the bird Thomas is trying to carve.

The boy’s hair is the color of light wood; the man’s hair is the color of dark wood. The only non-wood color is their blue shirts and the carving knife.

Another aspect the viewer should note is the incredible ability Lynch has for drawing hands. In the illustrations in The Christmas Miracle, Jonathan’s strong, muscular hands contrast with the small hands of the child he is teaching. In Catkin is a close-up of the Wise Woman’s hands as she fondles the little cat. The wrinkles on her hands tell us of her age and wisdom. The Snow Queen’s hands are like long icy claws; the old lady who tries to enchant Gerda has knobby, arthritic hands. The child who throws the tin soldier in the fire has young, unlined hands as thoughtless as his actions are. Melisande has the graceful hands of a princess as she picks up the invading armies attacking her people. Whenever you see a book illustrated by P. J. Lynch, be sure to look at the hands. They are part of the magic he brings to stories for children.

The overall quality of Lynch’s work encourages the reader to spend as much time looking as reading. It is time well worth spending on the unspoken meanings and emotional depth of illustrations by P. J. Lynch.