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Continuing “Continuing the Conversation”

BY MICHAEL CART

As a writer, I often joke that I can count on having at least two readers: my mother and myself! Of course, I secretly hope that others might be reading my work, as well. But I seldom find much evidence that they are. Imagine my pleasure, then, to have received a copy of Sandy Brehl’s delightful article, “Continuing the Conversation,” in which she responds at such delicious length to one of my *Carte Blanche* (Cart, 2001) columns from *Booklist*.

Ms. Brehl is my idea of the perfect reader: not only does she express pleasure in what I wrote (for which, many thanks!) but she also demonstrates that my words inspired her, first, to thoughtful analysis and, then, to further reading and writing of her own.

How can I resist the temptation, then, to thank her by responding to her response, by doing some conversation continuing of my own? The short answer is, “I can’t” and so, here a few more thoughts on words and pictures.

First, I sympathize with her frustration that picture books “are so often limited to use with young children.” After all, pictures—like stories—are creative acts that should offer inherent delight to minds—and eyes—of *all* ages. The problem is that in our society those of us—librarians and teachers—who work with books have, for too long, tried to surround their prospective readers with parameters. “Picture books,” we declare, “are for children in grades K through 3.” After hearing this often enough, young people themselves become complicit in such categorizing and begin dismissing picture books as being “for babies.”

Such old habits are hard to break, but in this case, at least, some creatively revolutionary talents emerged in the late 1980s to begin the liberation of the picture book from age-range restrictions. One of these talents was, of course, David Macaulay about whom Ms. Brehl writes so eloquently and about whom I will have more to say in a moment. But first let’s acknowledge the equally innovative contributions of those two inspired zanies Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, whose first collaborative effort, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf*, was published in 1989. Its playful reinvention of the classic story of those three house-proud porkers hints at the more ambitiously deconstructive work that would follow in David Macaulay’s Caldecott Medal-winning *Black and White*, which would be published the following year. It also prefigures S & S’s (Scieszka and Smith’s) own more elaborate exercise in iconoclasm—and irony—*The Stinky Cheese Man*, which would be both a Caldecott Honor title *and* a Best Book for Young Adults selection in 1993. Moreover, as arguably the first metafictional picture book, it surely must be acknowledged as being as important to David

In addition to his current Booklist column “Carte Blanche,” Michael Cart has written more than 200 articles and reviews for such prestigious publications as The New York Times, School Library Journal, and The Lion and the Unicorn. His books include From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature and What’s So Funny? Wit and Humor in American Children’s Literature. His young adult novel My Father’s Scar has been selected as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults 1997. Mr. Cart is past president of Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and has served on both the Caldecott and Notable Books committees.

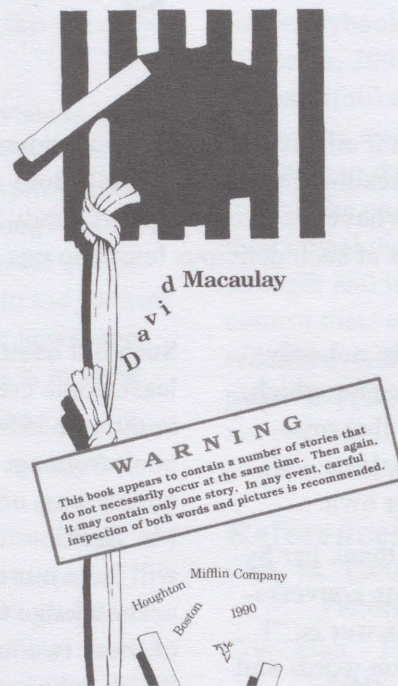
Wiesner's inspiration for his own version of *The Three Pigs* (2001) as was *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990).

Speaking, now, of Macaulay, I must admit I've always felt a tad proprietary about his magnum opus, *Black and White* (1990), since I served on the Caldecott Medal Committee that selected it as the 1991 winner. Several years ago I had the pleasure of being invited by the California Center for the Book to have a public conversation with Macaulay about his work and I can testify that he is still bemused by the fact that a committee—any committee—should have chosen such a nontraditional title for children's book illustration's premier award.

I'm a bit bemused myself but also very proud to have served on a committee that had the, well, courage to select a work that, in retrospect, is—along with *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963)—one of the select handful of truly seminal picture books of the 20th century. Certainly it is a book that continues to reward the sort of "Closer Look" that Ms. Brehl has so insightfully given it and to make possible the kind of groundbreaking work that other artists, like David Wiesner, have subsequently done.

It's also enormously gratifying that Macaulay's work—and my own thoughts about the picture book—should have inspired Ms. Brehl to "continue the conversation" by developing the new way she describes of sharing books with her students. I can't resist suggesting one other strategy she might use: I think it'd be fascinating to ask her classes to look at two

Black and White



other books by Macaulay—*Why the Chicken Crossed the Road* (1987) and *Shortcut* (1995)—and to share their thoughts on how he began his "black and white" conversation in the former and continued it in the latter.

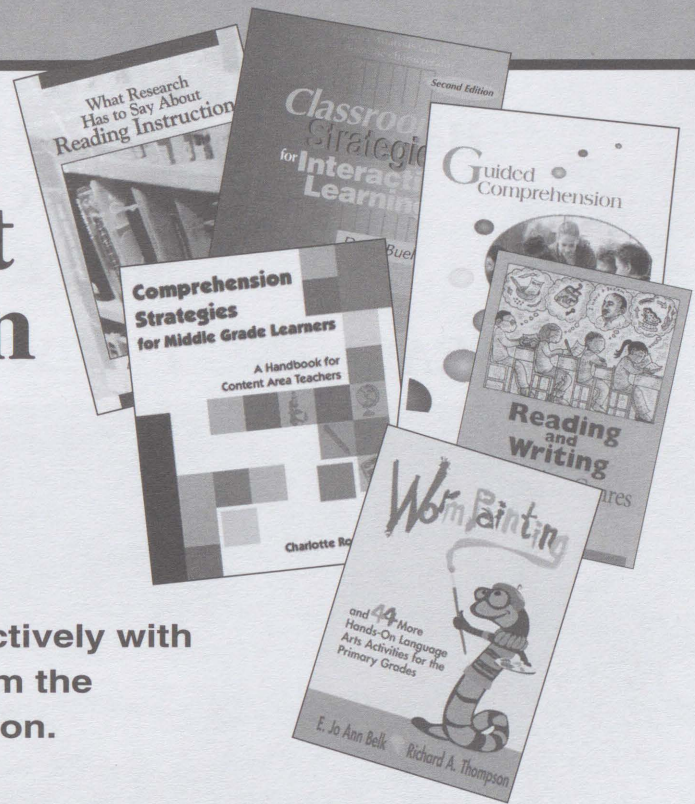
There are few better demonstrations of how the creative process—like the conversation about it—is a continuing, even organic one.

When the day finally comes that I am taken away from this vale of tears to my eternal reward, I can only hope that I will find it to be an eternal conversation of just this sort about books. For that's *my* idea of heaven!

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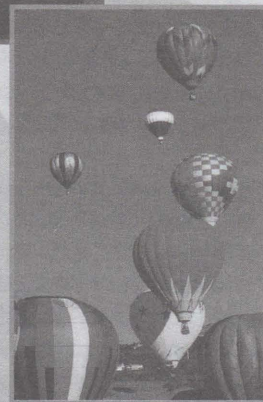
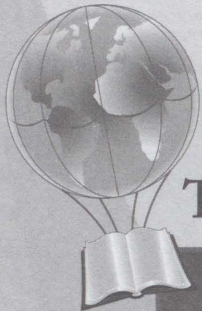
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