



Bryan Collier

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Bryan Collier, interviewed in his studio in Harlem, New York on October 8, 2001.

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In Harlem, I've painted thirteen murals with kids. Art is part of how to empower someone. It allowed the children to dictate what their environment looked like. Painting and creativity is about living. It's not about the skill or the hand/eye coordination or the balance of color and composition. It's your life, it's your temperament on how you judge and see the world and act in the world. And that comes through in art.

On Collage

Collage and what it means to me in my life is I can look at objects, pictures, and images and see something else. I can look at a blow-up of a map. And in that map, I can see a pair of pants, I can see a jacket, I can see a handbag.

These patterns of ties that I have here served as clothes and garments for the characters in *Freedom River*. This here is a cut-out. You see this figure? It's a total separate piece of art as well as the baby's head. A separate piece of art. And it's superimposed on the background.

This is about, again, the background and the figure superimposed and lays into the image itself. John Parker going back over the river. And see these little wavy lines for the river? They're just little cutout slivers of magazines. The only watercolor that's happening in this image is just the head. Everything else is collage.

The Photo Shoot

I do a photo shoot for the books. I'm going to use either family or friends to pose for me. And I put regular people in it without any acting ability and have them act it out. And I take pictures of the scene. Because all it is is gestures that are important to sort of illuminate the idea of the scene. This is exactly what I wanted him to do, to creep in, to try to sneak in to get the baby. This is for the cover shot of them just caressing the baby.

On Martin's Big Words

Martin's Big Words was a labor of absolute love. I painted him in watercolor and collage. And then I put a thin layer of design over his face. That design spoke to stained-glass windows in a church which are going to tell the story of Martin. In storytelling, one image has to introduce the next or push the story forward. So we start with the speech in Washington, and the flag continues to this image here: a kid that's strong, meaning the future of America, strong with dignity and beautiful. Feisty, strong, tough, because they want to be individuals. I painted her just in a watercolor and did her garment in a collage. And these colors in the background, like the stars are not white necessarily — that is alluding to the stained-glass feel. So you get the fact that this is an American flag, but it's also of many different colors and shapes and ideas.

On Color Tones

I want every book to have its own distinct color. *Freedom River*: it took place at night so the colors are more blues and purples; cooler color. *Uptown*, where it's vibrant and warm, there are images that definitely kids are attracted to, such as summer basketball. *Uptown* is an orange sunset over the Hudson River. And then we get to *Martin*, who has a whole other color. And the stained glass window acts as a metaphor. See colors in, see colors out. Dr. King's philosophy was to bring all colors together. So we brought them together. *Visiting Langston* is a wonderful story about the dynamics between a little girl and her father and her ambitions to be a poet, like Langston. And then *Langston* had an old soul feel.

Books by Bryan Collier

- WELCOME, PRECIOUS (written by Nikki Grimes), Orchard Books / a division of Scholastic Press, 2006
- ROSA (written by Nikki Giovanni), Henry Holt and Company, 2005
- JOHN'S SECRET DREAMS: THE LIFE OF JOHN LENNON (written by Doreen Rappaport), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2004
- SKULL TALKS BACK AND OTHER HAUNTING TALES (written by Zora Neale Hurston), HarperCollins Publishers, 2004
- WHAT'S THE HURRY FOX?: AND OTHER ANIMAL STORIES (collected by Zora Neale Hurston; adapted by Joyce Carol Thomas), HarperCollins Publishers, 2004
- I'M YOUR CHILD, GOD: PRAYERS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS (written by Marian Wright Edelman), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- KISS IT UP TO GOD (Selected poems by Nadine Mozon), Fly By Night Press, 2002
- VISITING LANGSTON (written by Willie Perdomo), Henry Holt and Company, 2002
- JUMP AT THE SUN TREASURY: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN PICTURE BOOK COLLECTION (an anthology compiled by Andrea Davis Pinkney), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- MARTIN'S BIG WORDS: THE LIFE OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (written by Doreen Rappaport), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- FREEDOM RIVER (written by Doreen Rappaport), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2000
- UPTOWN, Henry Holt and Company, 2000
- THESE HANDS (written by Hope Lynn Price), Hyperion Books for Children, 1999

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