Questions and Answers with David Wiesner, from his August 2001 interview in Fox Point, WI.

Questions are submitted by subscribers and asked at the time of the interview. You are encouraged to ask questions for future Authors Up-close programs. Access the form to ask questions from the Authors’ Schedule table at http://www.teachingbooks.net/schedule.cgi

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of your early memories of enjoying art, your first memories of saying, "I really enjoy art"?

DAVID WIESNER: I think I have always just been aware that I like to draw. Drawing and painting has always been this activity that I just was naturally drawn to. I can't think of a time where I suddenly said, "Oh, now I've discovered I like art." I had my brother who loved to draw and paint, and my oldest sister loved to draw and paint, too. I have another sister who is a singer, studied opera. There was always this sort of creative stuff going around. There was this big stockpile of pastels and pen-and-ink and things like that in the house. So it was always readily available. I think it must have just been when I saw John Nagy on television, I went, "Oh, he's drawing. I want to do that." It's always been a part of my life. Fortunately, my parents realized this and encouraged it. I was the youngest of five. So by the time they got to me, it was, like, anything I wanted to do, okay, let's go. None of my other siblings ultimately pursued art. But I think they recognized in me a real desire.

My father brought home one day from work an old drafting table that was being gotten rid of. I guess they got all new stuff in one of the departments at the plant where he worked, and he brought home this wonderful old, big, wooden, six-foot-by-four-foot drafting table, with this great chair. I put this thing in my room and it became my home. I lived at this thing. I just sat there. He may not have known at the time what he was doing, but for me it was this transporting vehicle for me to just totally explore these worlds that I was trying to draw.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I keep reading about all the influences of certain artists for you. Are there any influential artistic touches with past art?

DAVID WIESNER: The art that really influenced me I discovered through sitting in the stacks of the local New Jersey public library. I came across a Time-Life series of books on the great artists. Looking through those things, several artists really struck a chord with me right off the bat. The first was coming across the Renaissance painters, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Durer, people like this, who were painting in a very realistic, academic style. I just loved the way they could paint.

I particularly liked -- I've told this so many times, and now I can't remember how to phrase it -- the Renaissance painters were painting in a really academic, carefully observed style that really appealed to me. If you look in the background of the Mona Lisa, there's a landscape back there. I don't know how many people have looked at this, but it could be Mars. It's this alien territory. I loved all that stuff in the background.

Painters like Pieter Bruegel, who also did a similar thing, where, from the very foreground to the very far background, you could follow little trails and paths and roads all through these landscapes, in and out of towns and stuff -- I loved that rich detail, the ability to have a foreground subject, but then just sort of go in the back and almost make up your own stories about what was happening there.

The other group of painters who really just blew me away was the Surrealists, when I came across that volume of Dali and Magritte, DeChirico, all these guys like Max Ernst, who, in large part, were painting in a very formal, academic style as well, but the stuff they were painting was totally bizarre and totally strange. And that really, really appealed to me. There's long been for me this appeal of, I guess, the odd, the strange, the surreal. To see these creations that were just amazing landscapes and objects and
things -- pretty much, there's the line of demarcation, before I discovered the Surrealists and everything afterwards. You can clearly tell where my own artwork started to change.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You need to be a good draftsman to be able to pull off any of that surrealist art, I think.

DAVID WIESNER: I think it helps to be a good draftsman and to understand that sort of academic style when you're creating a sort of surreal landscape or environment because the more convincing you can make the reality that the viewer knows, taking part of it and adding that strange otherworldly element makes it all the more surreal and strange.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Let's talk a little about work habits. Can you describe your workday?

DAVID WIESNER: My workday -- there have been two. There was the workday before I had children, and there's the workday after we had kids. Nowadays, it's a very structured workday for me. I get up in the morning and get the kids off to school, deal with breakfast and stuff, and then come up, and by about nine o'clock I'm ready to sit down and start working. I pretty much stay there at my drawing table and work all day, until about five o'clock, and work's done. Sometimes I come back at night and do a little more. But it's very much a nine-to-five type of job right now. Before we had children, I was up all night. I used to work late into the night for these long odd stretches -- days or a week at a time -- where I'd just work all night and sleep until noon and get up. But life has a way of changing your work habits.

It's fine. I actually enjoy the structure of it now.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What about those times when you're working and working and working, and you're not accomplishing what you had hoped? How do you get through these blocks?

DAVID WIESNER: The creative process works at different paces. There are those times when everything comes together very easily and very quickly, and those times when it's a long struggle. I just always have to keep reminding myself to be patient, to sit there. Even if at the end of the day I have almost nothing to actually visually show anybody else what I've been doing, I've been really working on trying to develop something. Ultimately, it's just a matter of keeping drawing. The temptation is to sit back and think and think and think, but for me I have to sit down and start drawing, make myself draw, even if it's not necessarily what I'm working on. It can be peripheral material. Somehow, to kind of just keep thinking at it will make it happen.

I feel fortunate that now I'm at the point where, when I'm actually painting and working on an actual finished piece of artwork, that I know how to paint a picture now. Early on, I could scream and yell and go through terrible times trying to finish a piece, but I'm at a level of proficiency where that doesn't concern me as much. I can make the art.

TEACHINGBOOKS: That amazes me. Are you essentially saying that the act of drawing isn't too physically challenging for you?

DAVID WIESNER: Yes. That's rendering. Ultimately, that's just pure technique. If I can sit it there and look at it, I can draw it. The concept of the book, to me, the idea, the book as a whole, is the thing that I'm creating. Talking about technique and technical matters -- if someone really wants to know, I can talk to him about it, but I don't find it all that interesting, because to me that's the least interesting part of it. I think there are people far more technically proficient than I am. I like to get the books and pictures within them -- I put everything I can into creating them as well as I can. But to me it's the book as a whole that is the true creation. That's the thing that excites me, more than "hey, look at my beautiful picture."
TEACHINGBOOKS: Let's talk about some of your books. I want to start with Free Fall. Free Fall, from what I've read, is a part of a mural you did in college that was appropriately called "Metamorphosis."

DAVID WIESNER: Free Fall grew out of an awful lot of built-up imagery that I had, which really started to come out when I was in college, in a ten-foot-long painting that I did for an assignment that was the word "metamorphosis." I was encouraged by David Macaulay and some others to quote do more with it. Free Fall ultimately was what I did with it. For me, it was just an outpouring of a huge stockpile of pent-up imagery and ideas that had been sort of building up for years.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kind of affirmation was it to receive a Caldecott Honor for the first book that you wrote and illustrated?

DAVID WIESNER: The Caldecott Honor for Free Fall was a wonderful sign that I, in fact, had made the right decision to stop doing books for other authors and try to concentrate on writing and illustrating my own, which is what I really wanted to do. To receive that recognition pretty much said, yes, right direction; keep going.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you please describe the genesis for Sector 7?

DAVID WIESNER: Sector 7 is very much based on my impressions of New York as a kid. We lived in New Jersey, about thirty miles west of the Holland Tunnel. When we'd go into Central Park or Radio City Music Hall or something like that, I just loved the city. I thought it was this totally overpowering fantasy, Oz-like place. Interestingly, my sister, who is two years older than me, hated it. She was terrified of it. So the reaction can go either way. But that whole feeling I've carried with me. When I finally had a story like Sector 7, when it developed, I was just able to infuse it with the vision I remembered as a kid.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The characters in The Three Pigs are sort-of heroes. They save others.

DAVID WIESNER: They do. The Three Pigs developed in wonderful ways, once I realized what the story structure was going to be, the pigs leaving the story and looking for a safe place to live. Along the way, they had a wonderfully wild visual journey, but they also discover in themselves a heroic element, in that they run across other characters in other stories who have been dealing with the same fate they have, and free them and create a new sort of family unit at the end.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And then the wolf gets his.

DAVID WIESNER: Yes. The Big Bad Wolf in The Three Pigs, while he doesn't end up in the soup as in the traditional story, goes through a lot. He's folded up into the shape of a paper airplane, flown around, crashed into the floor, and scared away by a big dragon, and left sitting on a hill at the end knowing he'll never get those pigs again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you talk about the design of The Three Pigs?

DAVID WIESNER: One of the exciting things about working on The Three Pigs was the chance to a design that would be very different from the books that I had done up to that point. I've tended to do very full, rich, complete four-corner-bleed paintings in most of my books, and this was a chance to do a book that had a lot of white space in it, and have a book that started out that collapsed and opened into this blank white world -- not only to just have some white space, but to have a lot of white space. I had initially, in my book dummy, had a page that was a completely blank double-page spread, in which the
characters, as they're flying around on their airplane, fly right out of the page, and it takes several pages for them to fly back into the picture. I love the idea that they could just go off someplace where we couldn't actually see them and then sort of -- oh, here they are, over here. You really have to kind of find them.

I didn't in the end use the double-page blank spread for a variety of reasons. One, it would have taken too many pages to set it up to visually read well, which pleased the Houghton Mifflin production department to no end, because I'm told that bookstores would have seen this double-page blank spread and thought that something was wrong with the book and returned it. This has been confirmed by some bookstore owners when I tell this story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You really enjoy creating wordless books. Can you describe where this comes from?

DAVdWIESNER: I guess, to me, the wordless book is this pure form of visual storytelling. I love sequential art more than just painting a picture. I got into books because I love telling stories, and telling stories with pictures. The wordless book is kind of the purest form of that. I was inspired a great deal by the examples that I came across as I was growing up and then in art school. The fact that this was something that had been done and was a form was a great eye-opening experience. As a kid, there were comic books. There was a comic artist I liked a lot named Jim Steranko, who was a disciple of the great Jack Kirby. He used to put in one, two pages at a time of completely wordless storytelling -- no word balloons, no "Pow! Bam!" kind of stuff. It was just pictures. That may be the first place that I came across this, and was stunned.

The big turning point, I guess, for me was Lyn Ward. We all know Lyn Ward from his children's books, The Biggest Bear, the Caldecott Medal winner. But back in the 1930s, 1929, '30, and '31, he did a trilogy of books for adults, wordless novels done in woodcuts, two hundred pages long, about all sorts of incredible ideas of art, life, death, religion, science -- I mean, huge social, human issues. They were just the most astonishing things I'd ever seen. I would sit and pore over these pictures, and just the way he was able to convey all this really complex information in purely visual terms was a huge inspiration to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How has your work evolved over the years?

DAVdWIESNER: It's interesting to see how my work has evolved over the years. There are many things that I was drawing when I was a kid, and I'm still drawing today. It's fascinating that I have these visual obsessions that keep haunting me -- fish and vegetables, flying things. I've been drawing them since I was four years old, I think. So in one sense it's still the same stuff. I suppose, obviously, I've gotten better at drawing them. But the visual obsessions have been there. I've learned how to, hopefully, tell the stories around them better.