Scott Nash, interviewed in Portland, Maine on September 6, 2012.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are the illustrator of many books for children, including *Flat Stanley*, as well as several for Carol Diggory Shields and others. Were you an artistic child?

SCOTT NASH: I was an artistic child from seven years old on. In second grade I determined that drawing was something that I could be good at and something that I wanted to pursue. I absolutely adored drawing and connecting stories to the drawings that I would create. I would find myself at a very early age writing to the drawings—I’d want to expound on them in some way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you grow up in an environment that was conducive to art?

SCOTT NASH: My household wasn’t necessarily an artistic household, although my parents were very supportive of what I did. They were intuitively tapped into what our affinities were. For me, it was clearly art, and for my brother, Eric, it was clearly science. And guess what? I’m an artist, and he teaches chemistry.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Where did you grow up?

SCOTT NASH: My dad worked for a big corporation that had us moving all over the Midwest until I was in second grade. Then, my dad wisely chose to take a job on Cape Cod, which is a lovely place to spend your childhood. There were lots of activities in the summer, and in the winter, things got a little bit quieter. I think quiet is conducive to the creative side of an artist.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your childhood like?

SCOTT NASH: My brother and I had a perfect situation. The areas in front of and behind our house had not been developed, so there were woods that we had access to across the street from our house, and there was a sandpit behind our house. Both of those areas were great environments for all forms of creativity, and there were stories that evolved around those environments. We liked to act out stories we made up as well as various narratives that we had read. In one great example of this my brother and I, after reading *Huckleberry Finn*, determined that we should build a raft and take it down the Bumps
River to the Atlantic seaboard then all the way down to Florida, where our final destination would be Disney World.

We actually built the raft, but unfortunately, we couldn't move the thing after we built it. It was far too heavy. Right into our adult years, we'd walk by this raft on the side of the Bumps River. It became part of the local lore that Eric and I had planned to have this Huckleberry Finn adventure.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What else did your environment inspire?

**SCOTT NASH:** The pirate birds in my books were inspired by my environment growing up. My bedroom windows were nearly three stories above the ground, so I looked over the scrub pine canopy in our backyard. It was a great vantage point for me to observe birds. Because of my ability to view the birds from that vantage point, I came to really admire them as animals. They're tough, resilient creatures.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What was your path to art school?

**SCOTT NASH:** I went to the Swain School of Design, which is now part of the University of Massachusetts. I went on to it to do my graduate work at Cranbrook Academy of Art. I have a BFA in graphic design and an MFA in painting. During my college career, I really didn't do much illustrating; I focused on design and typography and found myself doing a lot of painting. It doesn't really show in what I do now, but I think it helped to inform a lot of what I do.

On Cape Cod, I grew up near where Edward Gorey lived. Inspired by the pen and ink drawings that he did, I spent a number of years when I was in college trying to develop something that came close to a passable pen and ink style, gave up on it, and ended up coming back to it fairly recently. I'm completely enamored with that media.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Did you get to meet Edward Gorey?

**SCOTT NASH:** Yes. He was a shy fellow unless you were able to bring up a particular subject that he adored, like film, or books, or the opera, or ballet. Those were subjects that he loved to talk about. He would show up regularly at one of the local diners and would put on productions of some of his work. It was not unusual to see him about town.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You seem to take great personal initiative in your work and the projects you pursue.

**SCOTT NASH:** I have a broad way of expressing myself creatively. I like to bring the creative process into any number of endeavors. Obviously, I bring my creative energies to bear with something like a children’s book, but I also think of things like positioning, branding, and marketing as being a creative challenge.
I am intrigued by everything from developing a children’s book, to creating programming for Nickelodeon or Disney, to developing kids’ products and toys. I’m happy to do strategic work, as well. For example, at Maine College of Art, I’ve established an illustration department, which I see as largely a creative endeavor.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about some of the logos you have created.

SCOTT NASH: The logo that is probably the best known is Nickelodeon. When we were asked to do a logo for a kids’ network owned by MTV I first asked, “Why do you need a logo?” Then, “What does it mean to be a logo? Does a logo need to be a static thing? Does it need to be one consistent mark? And if that’s true, why?”

I formed a theory that it’s antithetical to being kidlike to create a logo that was a static mark. Instead, if we really wanted to express the notion of kids’ energy, we should create a logo that changes all the time, and that has certain constants, but a lot of variables, too. We chose bright orange and lime green because they were not popular adult colors and we thought would be most associated with children.

So, with colors that kids could claim, a tight font, and the ability for the logo to morph into what turned out to be thousands of shapes, we had our logo. It was great fun.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your creativity, then, goes far beyond traditional illustration.

SCOTT NASH: An anecdote that I’m hearing from a lot of different people is that kids at a certain age, like second or third grade, start defining themselves by what they’re good at or what they’re not good at. Oftentimes, the aspect of their life that falls behind is their creative side because they’re defining it narrowly as “drawing.” They will think, “I am not good at drawing, so therefore, I must not be good at creative endeavors.” I find that to be tragic because there’s so much more to the creative process and leading a creative life than simply drawing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What other logos have you designed or helped develop?

SCOTT NASH: We developed logos for the Cartoon Network, where we provided them with a motif that we found visually striking, that nobody else was using, which was a very strong, black and white checkerboard background. We used it throughout their on-air identity to establish a very distinctive look for them.

For Comedy Central, we wanted to be a little bit goofy and cartoon with that particular logo, and we came up with the planet logo.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If a student were assigned to do a logo, what kind of advice would you give them?

SCOTT NASH: A lot of kids naturally like to copy and play around with logos. I think there is something very, very useful in trying to draw other people’s logos. Copying logos helps
you realize the critical aspects of what makes a good logo and helps you hone your observational skills. For me, there’s no better way to study logo design. It eventually turns into something that's more creative, and you end up creating your own iterations and your own designs. Acknowledging that there are some great logos that were done before us, and studying, admiring, and sketching them is something that I would highly recommend.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How else can drawing logos benefit budding artists?

SCOTT NASH: They are very potent symbols in our lives. I think drawing is a great way of learning about the world in its physical form, but also, it’s a great way to better understand ideas as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What got you into book illustration?

SCOTT NASH: What got me into book illustration, first and foremost, was a love for children’s literature. I grew up reading quite a bit. I also watched my fair share of television and watched my fair share of movies. Through that, I started to develop an appreciation for narratives. The drawing process in a very early stage of my life became—and truly connected with—a writing process. I formalized that as years progressed, but I’ve always felt like those things go together seamlessly.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your illustrations are filled with a million little details to find.

SCOTT NASH: I am completely visual and detail-oriented, and I like to add little treasures for kids to discover throughout my books. I designed a character called Tuff Fluff who makes cameo appearances. In fact, characters from one book and one publisher will crop up in another. In illustrations in The High-Skies Adventures of Blue Jay the Pirate, little dramas are played out in the background.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does your process work when you are not the author of the book you are illustrating?

SCOTT NASH: When I haven’t written the book I will be illustrating, I often have very interesting dialogues with the author about places where the text might be altered slightly because there might be a concept that is better conveyed in an illustration. There are places where we might need some more dialogue or more of this or that. I’m very engaged when I work on somebody else’s book because I have an affinity for both the picture and the words that I developed at an early stage.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You began your work in children’s books as an illustrator.
SCOTT NASH: The first books I illustrated were for an American Girl series. I had actually done some illustrations for a feature in their magazine that was called “Help.” It was an Ann Landers-type feature, where girls could write in about various problems that they were having and get some advice. I ended up doing the illustrations for that feature for probably five years.

It turned out it’s one of the most popular features in the magazine. American Girl told me how I really captured the essence of a girl fretting over some aspect of her life. I just had to chuckle because I grew up with three brothers. I don’t really have any firsthand experience or knowledge of what the experience of growing up as a little girl would be. Somehow, I was able to fake my way through that.

Anyway, those articles turned into three volumes of Help books and became, technically, my first books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your first picture book?

SCOTT NASH: My first picture book was a wonderful title by an author named Carol Diggory Shields. It is called Saturday Night at the Dinosaur Stomp. It has been a very successful book. Since its publication in 1997, it has been reprinted in a number of different languages.

One little piece of advice that I would give to an aspiring illustrator is if you ever get the opportunity to illustrate a book on dinosaurs, take it. Dinosaurs are perennial favorites.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You worked on the Flat Stanley series.

SCOTT NASH: It was a great pleasure and privilege to have the opportunity to work with Jeff Brown. Flat Stanley was my favorite book as a kid. So imagine the thrill when I was asked by Harper Collins to illustrate the full series of the Stanley Lambchop series, by Jeff Brown. That was a joy and a bit of a challenge for me because the original Flat Stanley book was illustrated by Tomi Ungerer, who is one of my favorite illustrators. Evidently, after the first book came out, he was no longer interested in illustrating the subsequent Stanley books. So the books were essentially all illustrated by different artists. I was asked to re-illustrate the entire series, so we had a consistent style throughout. I had a grand time designing Flat Stanley and contemporizing him a little bit, but retaining a little bit of the nature of Tomi Ungerer’s original designs for the character.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you go about giving homage but also creating your own Stanley?

SCOTT NASH: I kept his haircut. Stanley has a particular hairstyle that I kept intact. I did contemporize his clothing. I kept Arthur, his brother, pretty much the same as he was depicted in the earlier books. What I really picked up most from Tomi was the proportions of the characters. You’ll notice that they’re roughly the same proportions as his drawings.
I found the proportions he used to be very pleasing. Yes, Tomi, if you’re out there, I ripped off your proportions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Stanley is still very mailable.

SCOTT NASH: Stanley continues to be quite the celebrity. Flat Stanley is one of these evergreen stories that one generation after another of parents wants to expose their children to.

Teachers make Flat Stanley part of their geography curriculum in a very tangible way, and the kids are sending these flat versions of Stanley, or—even better—flat versions of themselves, all over the world.

Someday I want to publish a book on the flat characters that kids produce, many of which have been sent to me. It’s a big joy and a really wonderful perk of having been associated with that book that I receive Flat Stanleys or flat versions of kids from all over the world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your book Tuff Fluff: The Case of Duckie’s Missing Brain.

SCOTT NASH: Tuff Fluff: The Case of Duckie’s Missing Brain is a mystery. It takes place in an attic with a cast of ragtag castoff toys that live in this attic. And we call the attic Los Attic. It is really like a little Raymond Chandler drama, but with stuffed animals. The featured characters are Tuff Fluff, who is a rabbit detective, and Bluebell, who’s a very large blue bear, and the character, Duckie, whose brain has apparently been stolen. What I love about that book is its unconventional narrative.

I really enjoy kids’ reactions to the idea of a character’s brain gone missing. They love the idea of thinking about what the brain could be. It turns out to be a pile of fluff in the end. It’s very gratifying for me that kids love the absurdity of the story.

Another reason that I particularly like Tuff Fluff is that it was the genesis of my novel, The High-Skies Adventures of Blue Jay the Pirate because Blue Jay the Pirate was actually a clue in the crime story that I wrote for Tuff Fluff. Duckie’s brain is found in a book that’s called The High Seas Adventures of Blue Jay the Pirate. That’s what got me going on the project of developing an adventure fantasy around the concept of pirate birds.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There are very fun little moments throughout The High-Skies Adventures of Blue Jay the Pirate, and it seems like you were having a blast. What was it like writing a longer tale?

SCOTT NASH: I have great fondness for the old Scribner’s classics, like the volume of Treasure Island, which was illustrated by N. C. Wyatt. I remember loving those books as a kid—the way the pictures were placed throughout the book felt almost like a reward to me. I loved how they advanced the story for me, even as a kid. I always wanted to do something that was in that form.
Hence, the story of Blue Jay. I got intrigued with this idea of looking at birds, not as cute, cheerful little characters in the way that they’re depicted in a lot of kids’ media, but as being tough, resilient, and admirable creatures. I started looking into some of my field guides on birds and found birds that either in their behavior or oftentimes in their name, just started to suggest that there are pirates out there in the avian world. The blue jay is a great pirate name and has great pirate behavior, but there are also characters like junco and crossbill and chuck-will’s widow. All of these characters evoked and built on my interest in making this connection between pirates and birds.

Their pirate ship is called the Grosbeak. I was studying bird physiology, looking for nomenclature to use throughout my book, and I also read up on ship design and realized that there are parallels between the naming of certain parts of a ship and bird physiology. For example, the breastbone of a bird is called the keel. The lower part of a bird’s leg is called a tarsus, which is what I named the anchor that comes out of these flying ships. So I had a great time with letting the real world inform the fiction that I was creating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It must have been tricky to decide what you wanted to summarize in your chapter images in The High-Skies Adventures of Blue Jay the Pirate.

SCOTT NASH: It’s interesting. I didn’t want to illustrate too many scenes that would give away plot points. In the beginning, I introduce a lot of the characters with spot illustrations. Toward the end, I showed more scenes, such as the epic battle at Mystic Lake. My philosophy with the drawings was that I wanted to introduce us all to the characters and then build up the action as the book progressed.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It seems like a very different job illustrating a novel compared to illustrating a picture book. What are some of the differences?

SCOTT NASH: Generally, I want the images in a novel to be more evocative than specific. I like the sense of giving the reader almost a greater sense of the atmosphere in which this drama unfolds. The constraint of picture book illustration is to create images that are integral with the text throughout the entire story.

In novels, I think we can get away with being a little bit more evocative; you don’t need to spell out the narrative in the same way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What does illustrating your characters do for you in terms of character development?

SCOTT NASH: For me, illustrating a character makes the character very real; a sketch of a character will actually conjure up a lot of details about that character. It is common to hear authors say how their characters live with them.

I found myself being more opinionated about a specific character once I’ve committed to drawing a character. What’s interesting about this is that I actually incorporate this technique into my teaching with great effect. My students seem to really take to this idea of using drawing as being a way to spark their writing skills.
TEACHINGBOOKS: How does drawing help spark one's writing skills?

SCOTT NASH: I think it helps in very basic ways. If you’re describing a character, having an actual drawing of it helps to realize and describe those aspects of the character in a more fluid sense. There is also this intangible aspect of it in that there is, I believe, a soul to the character drawings.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You worked with Stuart Murphy on the MathStart books.

SCOTT NASH: Stuart and I had a grand time working on those MathStart books in that both he and I are interested in what we call “visual learning techniques” or “visual learning concepts.” Essentially, we were both committed to finding ways to illustrate abstract concepts.

When he and I first met, I knew that he had an editorial status at the publisher as a visual learning expert. I found that fascinating. We’ve only actually published two books together, but we’ve also done a lot of scheming on new projects as well. We continuously look for ways to work together.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about Cows Going Past.

SCOTT NASH: I did Cows Going Past with author Bruce Balan. He sent me this very reserved, pastoral, sweet story about traveling through the countryside and seeing cows along the way. It was a very simple story: leaving town, driving through the countryside, and coming back home.

His descriptions were written very simple: “a black cow in a green field,” or “a yellow cow near the water.” I think he was both surprised and delighted when the black cow in the green field is standing on its hind legs and pushing a power lawnmower. It delighted him, and it certainly has delighted our audience quite a bit.

I have to say, to some degree, drawing a cow standing upright pushing a lawnmower is probably one of the reasons that I am an illustrator. I love being able to do this type of thing. It tickles me to no end, the fact that I have the opportunity to do these types of images and get paid for it, as well. It’s crazy cool.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You illustrated a Dr. Seuss book: Hooper Humperdink…? Not Him. How did you come to illustrate that book?

SCOTT NASH: I received a call from Random House saying that my work had been vetted by the Seuss estate, and they had determined that I was an artist that could work on Dr. Seuss books. They were interested in me re-illustrating this book that was originally illustrated, I think, by Charles Martin. And he did a wonderful job, but it was published in the 1960s and felt very dated. There were specific references in it that didn’t necessarily translate well to modern times, so I was asked to re-illustrate it.
I was inspired to use any number of movie actors as reference for some of the kids in that book. I tried to create the child version of, say, Adrien Brody as Hooper Humperdink. Philip Seymour Hoffman is in there. And there is Peggy Lipton, the actress who played Julie in The Mod Squad, as one of the girls. I was channeling certain actors and actresses and trying to think about them as being eight-year-old kids.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What else did you notice about Seuss books?

**SCOTT NASH:** The picture book these days has become quite prescribed. They generally are 32 pages long. There’s a standard for the length of text on any given page. *Hooper Humperdink* was a very different type of format. It was 64 pages, which is really interesting to me. It has a very luxurious pacing, and it allowed me to do something a little bit more cinematic. I’d love to see that format brought back into picture books.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How do you go about doing your illustrations, and what changes have you gone through?

**SCOTT NASH:** I can start off being very, very interested in a particular medium or a particular way of working, then another one calls to me. Lately, pen and ink has been calling out loudly to me, and I find myself feeling extremely comfortable working with a little metal pen nib and a dip pen and scratching away, creating these drawings. I am blissfully happy.

I scratch away on translucent vellum that has a tooth to it. Then I import those drawings actually into the computer, and I tint them much in the way that Currier and Ives’ pictures were tinted, except I do it digitally. I find that I’ve been reluctant to embrace the Illustrator or Photoshop as a way of creating my drawings because I didn’t like what was being created using computers from an aesthetic standpoint.

But I have realized I can hand draw to retain some of the liveliness and idiosyncratic nature of the line, then have a little bit more control over how I actually color these things via the computer. I’m finding that I do like the dual nature of working in those two mediums. I find it somehow viscerally satisfying to work with this messy medium and then sit at my computer and look critically at the colors that I’m applying to these illustrations.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Let’s talk about your work for the Cooperative Summer Library Program: “Dig into Reading.”

**SCOTT NASH:** I was delighted to be asked to develop the reading posters for the Cooperative Summer Library Program. I was especially delighted by the theme. “Dig into Reading” was, I thought, a very playful theme, and one that almost instantly resonated with me. It is such a great metaphor. “Dig Into Reading” suggested immediately to me both the idea of exploring the world and also, in this specific context, gave me an opportunity to create what I think are fairly cozy scenes. I hope it conveys the comfortable nature of reading and also the explorational aspect of reading as well.
I knew right away that this would give me an opportunity to do a type of drawing that I love: anthropomorphizing animals. There’s a fine literary tradition to dressing up animals, thinking about *Wind in the Willows* or *Uncle Wiggily* or *Freddy the Pig*. We seem to take great delight in having animals take on human characteristics.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please describe the two posters you created for “Dig into Reading.”

**SCOTT NASH:** For the younger poster, the idea of having the main characters be an adult figure reading to its child in a cozy little burrow just seemed incredibly appealing and comforting to me. I made those characters moles. I thought it made sense to have the poster for the older kids to be a little bit more communal—make reading more of a social activity as opposed to alone activity, or a more intimate activity between a parent and a child.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What medium did you use when creating the images for the Cooperative Summer Library Program?

**SCOTT NASH:** I sketched the posters out using my new iPad, creating the rough design for the posters. Then I used those crude digital images to develop my more refined pen and ink style. It’s the first time I’ve done that with an illustration. I think there’s a sense of design in both of the posters that was helped along considerably by using the iPad in the beginning of the process.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Why do you like to teach at the Maine College of Art?

**SCOTT NASH:** I like to teach at MECA because it strips down what I do to the bare essentials. As much as I thoroughly enjoy what I do as an illustrator, I also like to talk about how we go about creating pictures and why we’re excited about creating pictures. At first blush, college students can seem somewhat blasé about everything, but when they get comfortable talking about the thing that they love, there’s a richness to that interaction that I’ve come to really thrive on. Also, I love thinking about different ways to approach teaching illustration. I’m working on curriculum these days, and looking at our methodology. I’ve come to completely thrive on the interaction with these students. It allows me to talk about illustration and to synthesize illustration and talk about the very issues and the very loves that got me into illustration in the first place.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** It seems you like to listen to where the story is going, and you seem to like to listen to your students.

**SCOTT NASH:** Listening is incredibly important. Probably the best part of teaching for me is the informal aspects, the meeting students in the studio and hearing what their
ideas are—as opposed to giving a lecture. It’s the one-on-one interaction that is where real change happens and where we arrive at specific epiphanies.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about NASHBOX.

SCOTT NASH: I have a design studio that specializes mostly in children’s media, and we do a wide range of design projects. The three of us continue to selectively take on a variety of projects for kids’ media or companies that have particularly fun names.

I’m interested in the whole app world, and what I’m particularly interested in right now is the world of augmented reality. It didn’t really thrill me the first time I saw it demoed, because of the specific content that I had seen, but I’m actually becoming interested in thinking about ways in which that technology and apps could apply to the physical world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

SCOTT NASH: When I get stuck in writing, I draw. And when I get stuck in drawing, I write. If neither works, then I go for a walk. I rarely have a complete creative block, because I find that switching between those two things really helps quite a bit.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

SCOTT NASH: Ideally, I write in the morning until about noon, then I come into the office and I deal with issues at NASHBOX. Then, generally, I work on my drawing from 9:00 or 10:00 at night until the wee hours of the morning. I’m a bit of a night owl.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

SCOTT NASH: I like to impart a couple of things, depending on the age range. For younger kids, I try to convey to them that if they find something that they love, whether it be art-related or math or science, to do it like crazy, to be a complete geek. Just immerse yourself in it. If you feel the impulse, if there’s something that you have an affinity for, especially at an early age, then do it. Don’t worry if people call you a geek. It’s actually a good thing to be a geek.

As they start to get older I suggest that they seek out people that will give them honest opinions in the work that they do. It is a real gift to find people that will really tell you what they think of what you’re doing. When you do ask someone their honest critique, don’t argue with them. See it as a gift, because the people that will really tell you what they think are few and far between. It’s good to cultivate those people early on.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?
SCOTT NASH: It’s really important to bring people like me and other creative people into your classrooms or into your library settings. And these days, it’s so easy to connect with artists and creative people. It doesn’t need to be a school visit where I’m physically there. Let students have contact with people that are creating children’s books and kids’ media and a broad array of creative thinkers. That’s very potent for kids.

We have so many opportunities to do this affordably these days. We can do it by Skype. We can do it in any number of ways. I love doing face-to-face, but continue bringing us in, and let’s find new ways to bring creative people into a classroom setting or into a library.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else would you like people to know about you?

SCOTT NASH: I just want to encourage everyone to think of creativity in wider terms and think about ways in which creative thinking can apply to other, surprising aspects of our lives. I think we can add a whole ‘nother dimension to any number of fields of discipline. I think that we should seek out those opportunities and find ways to apply creativity in areas that may have previously surprised us.

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