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>> Each year tens of thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capitol to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its seventh year this free event held on the National Mall Saturday, September 29th, will spark reader's passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best selling authors, illustrators and poets. Children will be greeted by their beloved story book characters like Clifford the Big Red Dog. In addition to readings by your favorite authors there will be book signings, musical performances and more. Even those not attending the National Book Festival in person can access the event online. These pre-recorded interviews with well known authors are available through the National Book Festival website in podcast format. To download or listen to those you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest.

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We now have the pleasure to talk with three time winner of the Caldecott Medal, Mr. David Wiesner, who will be appearing in the children pavilion at the festival on September 29th. Mr. Wiesner has truly perfected the art of visual story telling. His latest book is a fantastical watercolor journey called Flotsam which tells the story of a young boy who discovers an old camera washed up on the Jersey Shore and his adventure after this wonderful find. Flotsam was recently on the New York Times children's best seller list. Mr. Wiesner, thank you very much for joining us.

>> Thanks for having me.

>> And, now, while I was looking at this book it occurred to me there are no words. Do we call this reading? What do you call it when you look at a picture book?

>> You absolutely do call it reading. You're just reading pictures instead of words. It's a different way of telling a story. There's actually a relatively long history for wordless books. And they don't offer a better or worse reading experience, just a different one. And I think really the difference comes in the fact that each person reading the book tells the story in their own words. There isn't the text, the author's voice telling you the story. Each reader can complete that themselves which is really a neat thing to see. Everybody brings something a little different to the way they tell the story. I view it as I'm just using different tools than words, using pictures. But the writing of the book happens in a very similar manner as to writing a text. I'm concerned with the same sorts of story elements and character and beginning, middle and end to the story as I would with the text except I'm using pictures. I think it can be a little maybe intimidating. Usually not for kids, more often for parents who aren't quite sure what to do with it. But I've found that if I'm in a bookstore or something and I read the book out loud often you see the light of recognition in the eyes where they go, oh, I didn't know how to do that, but that makes sense. Because when I tell the story I throw in dialogue and description

and anything I feel like to tell the story. It's very open to whatever you want to bring to it.

>> Yeah, I think in some ways it's almost even more compelling because it does cause the reader to sort of create their own internal dialogue with it.

>> Yeah. And there's no right or wrong here. It's an interesting phenomena. It's something that I came to as an art form that I was intrigued by and wanted to explore. And it really wasn't until I've started to publish because I've done four of them there [inaudible] books and started to get letters back from teachers, librarians and kids obviously that I began to see how they're really used. And it's been great. I've recently got a package from a school that wrote a play around one of my wordless books. And they sent me photos and the text, the script for their play. It was amazing. It really seems to want to inspire -- I think it seems to want to inspire kids to then turn around and then write their version of the story which I hear a lot from teachers. And also huge use in English as a second language classes and like that where kids who might be a little intimidated by text sort of gets freed up to just sort of tell the story in their own words. So that's been very interesting for me to see how they're actually used.

>> I think that inspirational element is really a big reason why we like to put on the book festival. Could you talk a little bit about why you think the book festival is important and why you're coming?

>> I think anything that inspires people to want to read and get involved with books is just a wonderful thing. It's the world's that are offered within books and the journeys you can take whether it's using your imagination or in nonfiction books into history, it's a pathway that engages the mind in a very active way. I'm not going to completely slam movies and TV and things, I certainly love them, but it's a very passive sort of medium to deal with. The books really engage the child's mind and gets it stimulated and thinking. And the fact that the National Book Festival is helping on this grand national stage I think is just a wonderful thing. I'm delighted to get to be a part of it. It's really an amazing place to meet and see the wide variety of books and get to meet the people who actually make the books, too. It's always a neat thing. I certainly never met any authors or illustrators when I was a kid. And it's so great now that you can see that there are real people who create the books. Who knows, some of them might want to do that themselves.

>> Well, I really appreciate what you're saying about the active versus the passive experience. I mean I found myself really lingering on some of the images in a way that you really can't easily do with TV and movies. Talk a little bit if you would about your illustrating process. What goes into creating these unique drawings? I mean I read that you use story boards and, for instance, clay models of frogs for your book Tuesday.

>> The process for -- a picture book is an amazing thing. It's a really unique art form. And for me I bring to it -- sadly often a response that's G I never realize how much work went into putting a picture book together, but it's just something for kids. And these books are the first

art that kids see. And, quite frankly, I think it ought to be as good as it can possibly be. So I bring everything that I've learned over the years as far as picture making and storytelling to [inaudible] when I put a book together. And I have a great time doing it which is even better. There's a very cinematic quality I think to my work. So I'm laying out the entire book in very rough form in a sketch book and then in pencil studies. But really just creating a rhythm to the pictures that hopefully will make an interesting reading experience. So there are pages with many little panels of different action going on followed by a big double page spread of a single image that has a whole load of material, stuff happening, characters. Things in the background, things in the foreground so that your eye kind of scans these pages with lots of panels very quickly. It's a very quick thing. But when you then follow that up with a page full of detail, it's a place where the eye lingers over the page and kind of get lost back in the pictures. I think to put things in there that maybe you don't see the first time around. And later you'll read it again and, oh, I didn't notice that the last time. So the reading, I'm really thinking about the act of reading the book and how quickly or slowly your eye is going to scan the pages. And that is a great thing I find about the book compared to, say, a moving image on TV or so which goes by in a flash. With a book you can really hold it steady and examine it and see what's happening. Because particularly in a wordless book everything in the picture is being part of the storytelling process because the text isn't out there. So in the opening double page spread and flotsam we see our protagonist, the boy who the story is about sitting on the beach. And he's found a sand crab, and he's looking at it through a magnifying glass. Everything else in the picture there is to immediately tell you who this kid is. He's lying on a beach towel but he's got a collecting box. He's got buckets and shovels, but he's also got a big bag with a butterfly net and snorkel. He's got binoculars, his magnifying glass. He's even got a microscope in a Ziploc bag there. And you can see this is one serious collector. He's a really curious kid who is really into this. So I put all that stuff in there to immediately describe his personality in picture form as opposed with words. So I'm thinking about all that as I'm creating the rough version of the pictures. I then have to make the pictures, draw them the way they're really going to be in the book. That's when the fun part starts because then I just go out and I find really neat things to draw, things that I'd like to spend time drawing. But I also have to as in that page I just described I have to go get a microscope and binoculars. I always like to look at the real thing, obviously, that I'm drawing. Because there are things out there who know what everything looks like. If you make mistakes you hear from them, and they'll send you a letter and say, you know, on this page you drew this and it's wrong. So I always want to make sure I'm very careful. And often just in a desire to see more clearly what it is I'm going to be drawing I'll make models of things. In my book Tuesday which is about frogs flying on lily pads I didn't really want a frog on my drawing table, and I couldn't pick it up and turn it around and draw it as I needed it. So I made clay frogs that I could use which worked just fine. I built structures or buildings. It's very rudimentary, but it's enough to give me a sense of what it is I'm really trying to draw and how I want to view it. So it's just anything that needs to be done to help further create hopefully a believable universe within my book I'm happy to do it.

>> Yeah. I think the readers will see a lot of influences from the past from maybe some past artistic movements in your work. Can you talk about who have been some of your influences in terms of painters. I think I also heard that the renaissance and surrealist movements have influenced you as well.

>> Yeah. When I was a kid I would go down to my local library, [inaudible], New Jersey Public Library. And they had the great big series of Time Life books on the great artists and the art movements. And I just loved to sit and look through these books. Each often seemed like each painting was full of stories. And I particularly was drawn to the renaissance painters, Da Vinci and Michelangelo and Durer and people like that. And if you look at the back of the Mona Lisa, she's painted pretty well, but if you look in back of her there's this landscape that clearly Da Vinci just made this up because there's no place on earth that looks like this. It almost looks Mars. It's wild. And I loved that sort of thing going on in the back of a lot of the paintings. Painters like Peter Bruegel who you can start in the very foreground of the painting and follow roads and paths and little people all the way back through roads and forests and things to the very, very distance. And I love that level of detail that you can just get sucked all the way through into the deep recesses of the picture. So that sort of painting style always appealed to me. I think discovered the surrealists, a number of whom painted in that very academic style as well. But the stuff they were painting was really, really strange. And certainly to me at 12 or 13 or however old I was that was really appealing, too. Not only their technical ability but just all this really weird stuff. And if you could see the things that I was painting and drawing at that age it clearly reflects the influence of the surrealists painters. It was just a very believable dream world that they were showing which is something that I have I think tried to catch. Although for myself I think I began to realize after the fact the fantasy that I create is all pretty much set in the ordinary world, sort of the day-to-day. I grew up in suburban New Jersey, and that seems to be roughly where a lot of my stories take place, just kind of our in suburban America. And I love that if you could just maybe look around the corner at the right time or be in the right place at the right time something really and amazing would be happening. Whether it's something as silly as flying frogs or giant vegetables flying through the sky. Or picking something up off the beach and discovering a whole world revealed beneath the ocean. Just that ordinary, that simple act of plucking something up off the beach leads to that sort of thing. I love that fantasy based in sort of everyday reality.

>> Yeah, I really was fascinated by the interplay between those especially in Flotsam. Can you talk about do you have any favorite illustrations from Flotsam or from previous books like Tuesday or The Three Pigs, all of which won the Caldecott Medal of course?

>> I don't know. It's all -- first and foremost it's the story for me. And much as I try to make each of the individual images as well as I can they are part of the bigger thing. But there are certain recurring things that come back to me. The image of the octopuses reading under the water there has been in my mind. The octopus in sort of the overstuffed chair

I'd been drawing that in my sketch books for a couple of years trying to figure out what to do with it. And I was thrilled to be able to find a place to use it in this book. I have several other variations on the theme where I wasn't quite sure how it would take place. But in the end I liked this idea. I tried to root it in a little more, pardon me using the word reality, in that picture. But if you look in the back of the picture there's a moving van that has fallen off a barge or some ship somehow and ended up in the water. So that, in fact, the octopuses have gone in there and taken that furniture, the little living room set there and set it up directly from that. So I was attempting to create a story within the picture that if you look at all the elements you can kind of get a sense of how this came to be rather than just -- at one point I had a house under the water sort of a full living room of walls and things which looked really neat. But I like the idea of somehow taking the story aspect of that image a little farther.

>> That was probably one of my favorites, too. If you were a young boy right now and you were just starting out as an artist what do you think are some of the new influences that you might be able to find in the world today? Or are there? Are we just bombarded by too much nonsense?

>> Yeah, it would be interesting. I clearly spent a huge amount of time as a kid outside playing with my friends in the neighborhood. We just all went out and ran around and had a huge imaginary life out there. But I also watched a lot of TV, old movies and stuff. You know, they built the schedules back then with King Kong and old science fiction movies and flying saucers. And my favorite were the giant bug movies, the atomically mutated giant insects. It seemed there were dozens of those movies. And they look so old fashioned now. They certainly were magical as a kid, but what kids see now is so incredibly realistically rendered. I don't want to sound like a curmudgeon or anything. But I wonder sometimes whether it takes some of the wonder out of it to make it appear so real. I don't know. There's a lot more visual input in the world today. And I don't know that that's bad, I don't know that that's good. I'm not sure how, that's an interesting question, how that would affect a kid who was inclined to draw, inclined to create. My own kids I know read voraciously, and a lot of their inspiration comes out of what they read which is great.

>> Yeah, that actually leads to my next question. I mean as you're an adult now I mean do your own children inspire the work that you do? Do you get feedback from them? Or do they even enjoy drawing themselves?

>> Oh, they're both very much creative kids, incredibly creative in doing -- I've always made a point of having all the art supplies there and available and encourage them to use them without saying -- do what you want. And they're wonderful feedback people. I always show them. They see everything I'm doing through the early stages when they're very rough pencil drawings right through to the end. And it was a little unnerving when they were younger at first because really other than my wife nobody ever gets to watch me work. And suddenly my kids were coming into my studio going what are you working on, let me see. And it was fascinating how immediately engaged they were even in the very rough stages, just some quick pencil drawings and things like that. Really just wanted to

hear the story, wanted to see it in that form. And so they're sort of the first line of defense. My wife and my two kids always kind of know what I'm doing. Sometimes I'll mull over what I'm thinking about in terms of the story and where I want it to go just to get some initial response from them. I have a story that I abandoned because the story started great, oh, it started great. But I just couldn't get it to go anywhere equally as good as the beginning. And my daughter loves it. And she keeps saying when are you going to finish that alien story. So there's a part of me that's trying real hard to bring that book together because she just really responded to it in these very early stages.

>> Now, in reading your work I saw a lot of similarities to another genre, the graphic novel. Do you have any plans to move in that direction into that market?

>> Obviously comic books were an enormous influence on me. And had the graphic novel sort of been in existence when I came out of art school I could have imagined going down that path. I didn't want to go into creating comic books mostly because certainly at that time it was super heroes, and it was pretty much all aimed at a 14 year old boy level. The graphic novel now the rang of the audience and what they've done I think is fabulous and wonderful. The problem I find is it's just an enormous of work, and it takes me a very long time to do a 32 page picture book. To do a graphic novel could take forever. I have a couple stories that are too long to be picture book, and I'm mulling over the reality of trying to create a graphic novel. But it mostly depends on whether there's a way to streamline the process so that it doesn't take an endless number of years to do. But, yes, I'm really excited by a lot of the work I see out there.

>> Can you talk about any other projects that you have in the works, or is that all hush-hush?

>> I've only got, let me see, two of my contracts that have on them the name of the book that I actually produced. I have a habit of getting into something and if it doesn't work switching and changing. Flotsam is not the book I was contracted for. Tuesday was not the book that I was contracted for. So I don't like to talk about stuff too early in the game because you never know if that's what I'm actually going to do. Although I will just say there's a couple of things that I'm working on, and so far it looks promising.

>> Great.

>> That's about all at the moment. I did recently complete a new set of covers for the Chronicles of Narnia which was a very different and interesting project to get involved with, taking a classic like that and seeing what you can do with it. So that was an interesting sort of a sidetrack for a little while. Those are [inaudible].

>> Well, thank you very much, Mr. Wiesner. And, of course, we look forward to hearing more from you at the National Book Festival on Saturday, September 29th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a list of

participating authors you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. That's all we have time for from the Library of Congress. Thanks for listening.

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