Picture-Perfect Children’s Reading

Children’s book author and illustrator D. B. Johnson (CAS’66) is inspired by Thoreau, Zinn

Among Howard Zinn’s lesser-known achievements was inspiring a talking bear that teaches children the virtues of simple living. Really.

The bear, aptly named Henry, is based on Henry David Thoreau. Zinn, the late political activist and College of Arts & Sciences professor of political science, introduced Thoreau to D. B. Johnson (CAS’66) when he was a student.

Three decades after graduating, his career as a freelance editorial cartoonist collapsing, Johnson turned to writing and illustrating children’s books. Henry Hikes to Fitchburg, published in 2000, depicted the sage of Walden with fur and paws, inhabiting Johnson’s angular, cubist-drawn world. Henry clawed his way onto the New York Times best-seller list, beginning a rave-reviewed five-book series—a string for which Johnson gives Zinn (and Thoreau, of course) credit.

“I couldn’t possibly have foreseen that I was going to take my government major and be an artist and then a writer of children’s picture books,” Johnson says. “But that’s how it worked out.”

Johnson has done non-Henry books as well, including his 10th and most recent, Palazzo Inverso, based on the art of M. C. Escher, the Dutch artist whose woodcuts and lithographs depict geometrically impossible buildings, shapes, figures, and space. To hook young readers, Johnson apes Escher’s eye-boggling approach. Palazzo Inverso starts with text at the bottom of its pages and drawings of the young hero, Mauk, running up and down stairs and around corners to the end, when the book can be turned upside down and read back to the beginning, with text on top and a different visual take on the illustrations.

Johnson says Mauk is meant to be a young Escher, “imagining an impossible world full of surprising possibilities. I want kids to feel the power and exhilaration of running on the ceiling, of knowing that everything for them is still possible.”

Scholars wrestle with the thinking of Thoreau and Escher. Rendering it comprehensible to the four-to-eight-year-old set requires Johnson first to zero in on a simple element of their work that would nab a child’s attention. In the first Henry book, that was Thoreau’s counterintuitive conceit in Walden that he could beat a train to Fitchburg on foot.

“Kids love races,” Johnson says. He made Thoreau a bear because children love animals, too, and because “you couldn’t have a woodchuck that would walk 30 miles to Fitchburg.” He simplified Walden’s language. Thoreau’s explanation for forswearing trains—I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot—became “Walking is the fastest way to travel.”

Henry loses the race, of course. But he enjoys a glorious walk through creation’s beauty while his friend labors at his day job before hopping the train and speeding through nature without getting to savor it.

The message for kids, says Johnson, is that “getting there first and winning wasn’t necessarily the most important thing.”

Richard Barlow

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELODY KOMYEROV

WEB EXTRA
Watch a slideshow about D. B. Johnson’s work at bu.edu/bostonia.

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The heroes of two of D. B. Johnson’s books are Mauk (below) and Henry, the talking bear.

exhibition Exiles & Nomads at Angles Gallery in Los Angeles, Calif., last fall.

Linda H. Feinberg (CAS’68) of Manchester, N.H., recently set up a web store for her artwork at www.lindafeinberg.com. Email her at lhfeinberg@myfairpoint.net.

Susan Marx (CFA’68) of Orange, N.J., showed her new paintings in the exhibition The Apex of Transcendence at Agora Gallery in New York, NY, last fall. Learn more about her work at www.susanmarxartist.com.

1969
George Fulginiti-Shakar (CAS’69) of Boston, Mass., was music director and conductor for the show Oklahoma!, the inaugural production in the newly rebuilt Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater in Washington, D.C. The show ran through December 31, 2010. It was George’s 14th musical production at Arena Stage, where he is also an affiliated artist. Email him at geofulshak@aol.com.

1970
Marilyn Edelson (SSW’70) of Newton, Mass., wrote Values-based Coaching: A Guide for Social Workers and Other Human Service Professionals (NASW Press, 2010). Voted...