Exploring the Creative Process: A Conversation with Chris Raschka

by Patricia Austin

When I think of avant garde and often potentially controversial books, the name Chris Raschka comes to mind. An innovator in the field of children’s literature, Raschka is the creator of more than twenty delightful picture books such as Yo! Yes, a Caldecott Honor book, Charlie Parker Played Be Bop, Arlene Sardine, Mysterious Thelonious, and John Coltrane’s Giant Steps. So much of Raschka’s work exemplifies Eliza Dresang’s concept of Radical Change—books with unusual forms and formats, books with different perspectives, and books which extend the boundaries of what many readers expect in children’s literature.

Chris Raschka was born into a very literate family; his mother, originally from Vienna, is a translator, his father, a college history professor. Art, music, and stories have always been part of his life. Although Raschka remembers such American cultural artifacts as “Dick and Jane” readers, the picture books from his mother’s heritage most influence his work. “I loved books such as Die kleine Hexe (The Little Witch) by [Otfried] Preussler,” Raschka said in an interview for Something About the Author (Gale, 2000).

Another all-time favorite is the illustrator Winnie Gebhardt Gayler and Wilhelm Busch with his “Max and Moritz” stories. I even liked Struwwelpeter when I was growing up. I know they are all pretty frightening, with horrific things happening to children who disobey their parents, but I think that kids are so used to seeing dangers all around them that they can deal with it. (p. 151)

I couldn’t help but be struck by Raschka’s reference in this previous interview to the very same influences on the perception of the purpose of children’s literature that Eliza Dresang has detailed in her featured article of this issue.

The following interview, exploring Raschka’s creative process, was conducted by phone on October 8, 2002.

For me as a working writer and artist, it only seems reasonable to try to do something new, to experiment with ideas, with language, with images, and with making books.

P. A.: The focus of this particular issue of our journal is controversial books, so I’d like to begin there. Your books are not the run-of-the-mill picture book; you obviously bring a unique vision to this art form—a different way of working with both words and art, of seeing the interrelationship of text and picture. When you were working on any of your books I wonder if you anticipated that they would spark controversy.

Chris Raschka: From the start, my editors have known, and I’ve known, that my books are not for everyone, and I have always been comfortable with that. I have to say that I was lucky in my first, and I’m still lucky, in my home editor, which is Richard Jackson. He told me early on that some people would get the books and enjoy the books and find value in them, and some people wouldn’t. For the folks that find these books useful, that’s great, and for the ones that don’t, that’s fine also. I think, in as much as I know that my books won’t be everyone’s cup of tea, that’s all right with me. For me as a working writer and artist, it only seems reasonable to try to do something new, to experiment with ideas, with language, with images, and with making books. I find making a picture book quite fascinating.
I think there's a danger in going too far, becoming too conceptual, but I have to say that the book Mysterious Thelonious I consider one of my most straightforwardly conceptual books. When I was doing it, I really had this sense that no one was going to be terribly interested in it. For a variety of reasons I was separated from Dick Jackson in speaking about this book, so I just worked away at it myself. Lo and behold, many people have liked it. I think if a book can just capture an impression of its theme, whatever that might be, then that's enough. Thoughtful and creative readers can do a lot of things with that germ of an idea.

P. A.: While Mysterious Thelonious may be the most conceptual, you have other books also focused on music that convey musical ideas. With Charlie Parker Played Be Bop, John Coltrane's Giant Steps, and perhaps even Simple Gifts: A Shaker Hymn, I have the sense that you're trying to create a picture of sound.

Chris Raschka: Right.

I continue to be fascinated in taking apart or thinking hard about other forms of art, like music, and how they might be reassembled in a picture book.

P. A.: What these books do for me is speak to the similarities across three art forms. You're operating with the principles of art: balance, emphasis, contrast, repetition, proportion, and unity, and you evoke the organizing principles of music: symmetry, variation, contrast, and repetition. It's the same thing. And I think we can say that writers, too, apply these same ideas to text.

Chris Raschka: Sure, exactly.

P. A.: I wonder what kinds of relationships you see or want to convey between basic principles that operate in art, literature, and music.

Chris Raschka: Well, just that. As you say, I've tried to make sound transformed into visual elements, sometimes doing a very careful one-to-one mapping of one element of music--notes, to one element of art, a particular color--and taking the relationships of music, the notes and the harmony, and building an exactly comparable relationship within the art in the book and seeing how that looks. I was just kind of experimenting with that as I was first thinking about a book about Thelonious Monk and just found that those relationships in art were very pleasing to look at. Just the way the colors fell when I transcribed them from the notation was pleasing, and so I followed that. I think those principles of balance and proportion and of movement and rhythm that hold true in one form of art often hold true in another. I continue to be fascinated in taking apart or thinking hard about other forms of art, like music, and how they might be reassembled in a picture book.

P.A.: In creating John Coltrane's Giant Steps, you're not doing one-to-one mapping, but you're still picturing sound. When readers open the book, the end papers show your palette—the pastels of lavender, coral, peach, yellow, green and blue—and the readers can watch those colors emerge into shapes and watch shapes change colors. You also toy with the shapes, elongating them, using the principles of positive and negative space, placing the shapes and colors on top of one another, layering, mixing, harmonizing, making patterns of color and rhythm and form.

As an adult I got thoroughly wrapped up in seeing the interplay of elements. I found myself aware of the very elements and principles we were just talking about. But I know that kids won't necessarily see that. Heck, most of my college students won't necessarily see that. What do you want readers to take away from your books?

Chris Raschka: What I want readers to take away from the books is an impression. So if, for instance, it's a book about Thelonious Monk, I want the readers to get an impression of him and his music through the pictures they've seen and the words that they've seen. If their impression is that this is a little difficult, that it's unusual, that it's formal, experimental, if they think "I don't get it," those impressions echo what people of the era said of Thelonious Monk's music and still do. So that's a fine impression. If that's the impression that kids have, that's okay. It will possibly bring them one step closer to thinking about that music the next time they hear it.

P. A.: That's an important point. But then again, your book might be the child's first introduction to these musicians. In that case, playing a CD of the music would really enhance the experience.

Chris Raschka: I have always had really modest
What I want readers to take away from the books is an impression.

and that Charlie Parker played the saxophone. As with so many things you learn in life, once you get the vocabulary, it's the first step in understanding the subject. Vocabulary in jazz music is, in some cases, just the names of the artists, the performers. John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker. These names you often hear but you don't know who they are. If you have just a simple something to hang those names on, like that Charlie so many things you learn in life, once you get the vocabulary, you know just a few wild flowers, but the next time you see a much richer landscape. That's the same with art and music, and the knowledge of one can let you leap into a higher or deeper understanding of the other.

P.A.: That's so true. I think it's important to attach language to elements and principles in order to heighten expectation. Taking a look at one of your newest books, what was the process in creating John Coltrane's Giant Steps? Where did you begin? Why a box, a snowflake, some raindrops, and a kitten?

Chris Raschka: There's a real clear answer for that question. My initial idea for this book was to do it on John Coltrane's best known hit "My Favorite Things." And so, my idea was to take elements of that song...

P.A.: The Rodgers and Hammerstein song?

Chris Raschka: Yes, the Rodgers and Hammerstein song, and export those bits of language, literally, taking those things and repeating the syllables of the words and doing the same visually with the visual elements. I tried to find simple elements from the song and those included packages tied up with strings, raindrops, snowflakes, kittens, and wings. I had a lot of these images in my first version of this book. I had raindrops repeated many times and sort of fractured and overlaid, and I had the thing with the kitten. The kitten was very abstracted. I was trying to create this "sheets-of-sound" effect with the language as well as with the images.

But, in part, because we were concerned with legal snafus with the Rodgers and Hammerstein folks, because it was going to be a basic riffing on a known poem or song, "My Favorite Things," Dick Jackson was a little leery of going down that road with the questions of copyright and so forth. So that's why I decided to go to another of my favorites, and that was "Giant Steps." I then used some of those elements from the first draft, the raindrop, the kitten, the snowflake, and the box—instead of the package.

P.A.: Not only do you create a picture of sound in the book but you also picture the creation of sound, the rehearsal—how sometimes the musician must back up and listen to how one element relates to another. I love the
two-page spread (see figure 1) which analyzes where the music went wrong and how to make it clearer until the text says: "Sheets of color. Sheets of sound." When I shared the book recently with a group of librarians, I played a CD of "Giant Steps" as I read. We couldn't help but wonder if you played the music while you worked on the book.

Chris Raschka: Yes, many many times. It's a wonderful record.

P. A.: Regarding the choosing of the images, was your process for Simple Gifts similar to the process for John Coltrane's Giant Steps, that is, in how you selected the images?

Chris Raschka: Simple Gifts, again, went through some big revisions. It went through three complete incarnations. What happened there I wish I could show you, but I'll try to describe it. For the first one, I wanted to capture the sentiment of the hymn, so I wanted to create a world graphically that mirrored the chaotic world as the Shaker writer saw it. I had many layers of images, and I used stamps and stickers and lots of different colors. As the pages turned, "to turn, turn," I would eliminate a layer of stuff until finally, when the text read, "in the place just right, 'Twill be in the valley of love and delight," there were only vertical stripes of different colors and then these stripes would turn and turn. So then I had the stripes turn and spin. Then with the pages "till by turning, turning/ we come 'round right," the image became a geometric flower shape in colors, and then it repeated the first section.

I based the illustrations on the Shaker spirit drawings, which were drawings that mostly young sisters made. Believed to be the mediums of the Shaker sisters who had passed away, the mediums were speaking through them. They were very beautiful, very simple graphic linear drawings of flowers and angels. That was the first one, and it remains my favorite version. But Marc Aronson, the editor, and the art director thought it was too difficult. Talk about controversial, they thought it was going to be too much. They wanted something more accessible to children. I think it would have been quite all right.

Then I did a different version, and I made a dance between a little boy and a chair, and two birds. I composed the entire book with the boy dancing with this chair, occasionally standing on top of it, coming down on the "turning" and "falling." That one was pretty good, but this time the art director and the editor felt that it was too simple. It was not enough.

So finally, I decided I would try to embody the spirit of the text which is to me a way of extolling the blessings of simplicity and renunciation of the trappings of modern life and the endless possibilities of modern life. I tried to do that by means of the simplest execution of painting that I could do with big heavy brushes and kind of flat fields of color brushed on very directly and unrefinedly. Once I'd decided on that, I could have a companion story of the peaceable kingdom tale of the animals living peacefully together. The turning came in with the flowers and the cats in the end. That book went through enormous change, more than any other did.

P. A.: Essentially you created three complete books to publish that one. That must have been kind of discouraging.

Chris Raschka: I consider the making of a book a process. And it's not so much something that leaps full-blown from a writer or artist's head and then is recreated in paper and cardboard by the publisher. The life of a book involves discussion and thought and argument and disagreement. And the book has a life that is separate from the life of its creator. The artist/writer is maybe that most important part of the creation, but I think the other people's views of it, their input, is part of that book making.

P. A.: Reviewers likened the art in Simple Gifts to the work of Paul Klee and the art of Fishing in the Air to Chagall and Picasso. Do you see these influences in your own works?

Chris Raschka: I have to confess to the influences of Paul Klee. He's one of my favorites, and I do study his work pretty heavily. The others, yes, I like, but it's not a conscious thing. It's conscious with me with Paul Klee, in as much as I try to follow those principles. I try to follow this procedure for making art and see where it takes me.

P. A.: That is essentially what he did?

Art was always something I just did.
Chris Raschka: That is what he did. He created many different approaches and followed them and would name them. He'd create. He'd draw forms. He pushed them one way or another to give them symbolic meaning, perhaps, and then he’d give them further meaning by giving titles to them. It was a kind of organic way of creating based upon natural forms and ways of growth. He very much tried to do that in his own paintings, letting his paintings grow comparably to how a plant might grow, how it puts out a new branch or a new leaf or a new layer. So I have often followed that.

With Fishing in the Air, it was a more impressionistic approach. That one, I didn’t know how it would turn out. I painted all the paintings at the same time and sort of would paint forward. I think I did the black line first and moved back and forth adding color. I really had no idea if it was going to turn out.

P. A.: So when you say that you worked on all the paintings at one time for Fishing in the Air, this is not something you normally do?

Chris Raschka: Sometimes I’ll do a painting start to finish and then move to the next one or the next spread. And sometimes I’ll do them all at once. I’ve flip flopped in deciding which approach I like better. For Mysterious Thelonious and Simple Gifts, I painted one page at a time. For John Coltrane’s Giant Steps I did them all at once.

P. A.: When you say “all at once,” what exactly do you mean?

Chris Raschka: I will cut and prepare as many sheets of paper that I’ll need including throw aways, so a lot of sheets. I’ll get them ready and do the first layer of paint, like in Coltrane, which has many layers. Then go ahead and do pages 2-3, then 4-5, and have them drying all over the floor. I’ll go all the way to the end and then go back and do the next layer and then the next layer until all the colors are down. Then the last thing I did was to take a big brush and load it up with ink and splash the cats on top of everything. If I messed up, then I started over from the beginning again. Rather than doing a page at a time, this process can get me in trouble, because it takes longer, and if it turns out that it’s a disaster...

P. A.: Then you do thirty paintings all over again.

Chris Raschka: Right. So I’m always kicking myself. I want to figure out how to do it, and I never figure it out. Usually I try a combination. I try to finish one painting to see if it will work, but then as soon as I’ve done that I’ve screwed up the balance.

P. A.: Like losing the flow.

Chris Raschka: And then it doesn’t work, and I get panicked. Since I’m not doing finish art work right now, I’m working on things in their earlier stages of development, I’m not panicked so I can talk about it calmly. When I am in the middle of it, it feels as if the world is going to end.

P. A.: I know you were trained as a biologist and expected for a time to go into the medical field; what’s been your training in art?

Chris Raschka: Art is something that I always did. I took art classes when I was a kid. I did all my biology fast in college and headed straight to the art department, so I took quite a bit of art in college and since college now and then, I’ve taken different classes. My wife and I met in color class. So for me, it was always a given. Art was always something I just did. I was the kid who could draw. I was an artist. But it was never anything I considered as a serious occupation. Somehow, though, when it came right down to it, when I was about to enter medical school, I realized that I would have to give up all the art that I had been doing up till then. And I couldn’t quite do that.

Actually, when my wife and I lived in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, we were working in this home for children, and the job was so stressful that we maintained our sanity by painting a lot on our off days all over the island. Coincidental to our being there, a woman from New York set up a gallery and was looking for people to show paintings. We showed ours, and they started to sell, so we had a big show of just us. It was lovely, and it was the first taste of a world in art, a working world. And that taste was enough for me. When I was to return from there and go to medical school (I’d already been accepted and I had a deferment of matriculation), at the last minute I said I wasn’t going to go. On the morning of the first day of orientation I called and said I regretted to say I wasn’t coming.

P. A.: Lucky for us. Another book I wanted to talk about is Arlene Sardine. Now that has certainly been one of your most controversial books.

Chris Raschka: That too had an interesting birth. It
was one of the very first books I ever wrote. It existed as a dummy for many years. Its genesis came about when I was working at the children's home in the Caribbean. My wife and I had just gotten married, and, as I said, we were working in St. Croix. All of our food was donated.

Chris Raschka: I'd already started this book, and I'd already named my sardine Arlene Sardine. I was kind of stuck. I didn't want to go back, so I thought I'd keep going with this story and allow Arlene to die in the middle of the book, then let the story be about food or about life and death, however you chose. As I say, it was one of the very first things that I ever did. It existed as a book dummy, and I did not hand it to anyone for years, knowing that it was...

P. A.: Bizarre?

Chris Raschka: A little too much maybe. But then I thought, let me just see what people think. So I showed it to an editor. She was on the fence about it for a long time. When you ask about whether I'm aware of a book's being controversial, those questions don't even come up in a conscious way when I'm sitting (or standing) and working. I just am trying to create something that is satisfying to me and that I feel I can read to a seven-year-old or a four-year-old. Yet in terms of whether it's good or not, I let others decide that. So I left it in the editors' hands, and they decided to go ahead and publish it.

Initially, the way I had written it, after Arlene died I had her continuing to feel emotions and have all kinds of things going on as she went through the story in that she felt well rested on the conveyor belt and that she was nervous. The editors didn't like that. One editor thought this was too much. At that point I introduced the narrator a little more strongly and finessed it by saying, "I wonder if she was a little nervous." Maybe I shouldn't have done that, but it was controversial anyway.

I think death is a question on many children's plates and certainly one that is impolite to speak about in this country. As soon as you say you're sad in this country it's un-American. So to talk about death, you're morbid. And yet this concept hits many children like a ton of bricks. I saw it with my son. It didn't hit me so much as a child, but this notion—that we will die and there's no getting around it—is a difficult pill, an uncomfortable hair shirt that we have to live with everyday. I think it's worth talking about.

P. A.: I do too. And I've had extraordinary response sharing this book from second grade on up through high school. The first response of course is that it's weird, but it led to deeper discussions about death and about how
we interpret literature. Some kids, as did I, saw the book as a plea for vegetarianism; others saw it as a book about the fishing industry. And many looked at it and talked about the life cycle theme.

What do you make of the reviewers’ response? Booklist (Cooper, 1998) really took you to task for that one. Here’s a journal that’s a positive-review-only kind of journal, and they make an exception in their policy to talk about this book. How special this makes you! What does this do to you as a creator?

Chris Raschka: The danger is that that kind of review can make me feel like I’m very important indeed. It’s very flattering to have people get so upset about this. But it’s odd to me, because sometimes those very angry reviews attribute all kinds of power to me, personally, which surprises me. I have the sense that I’m scheming in my fortress, my studio fortress, to create these things. And that’s remarkable. When I read that review, it crystallized my own vision of the book.

P. A.: which was . . . ?

Chris Raschka: Which was that this was supposed to be a funny book. The use of humor to get people to talk about a taboo subject—that’s why I think people got so upset, because there are elements of humor, black humor, and apparently that is very wrong to use when talking about death. I was laughing when I read the review, because it described the book in such a funny way. I thought, I get it now. This is a funny book, and I will just let it be a funny book about life and death and eating sardines—little fish that we don’t think twice about eating. It’s really one way of introducing a difficult topic, sliding it in sideways through humor. Certainly when I wrote it, it was meant to be wry or funny, to think of this fish taking a salty bath. To me, it was just pointing up the comic possibilities of our shared poignant experience of being, that whether we’re a fish or a human being, we’re all going to die and wind up either in a can or a box or sprinkled some place.

Out of insecurity can come creativity.

P. A.: Right.

Chris Raschka: And that’s the joke that we’re all the butt of. There’s no getting around it. There’s nothing wrong with chuckling about it a little bit, I think. But for some people, for the people at Booklist, it was very wrong indeed to chuckle about what is a great tragedy. I dedicated it to my grandparents, who are all dead, and my mother got an enormous chuckle out of that (I was pleased to discover) because as she said, they’re all in their boxes. So to me, I still stand by the book. I eat sardines. And I think it’s a book that’s showing that we are all in the same metaphorical boat. All of us living creatures, we’re part of something bigger. We’re all going to be consumed one way or other.

It might just be a fulfilling thing to become a sardine if you’re a little fish, because your options are limited. You’ll probably be eaten by a bigger fish. I don’t think there are a lot of little fish in the ocean that died of old age. And even if they do, I feel that the world that we live in is so much more interesting than we are willing to give it credit for. Yet when the world around us steps out of the comfortable idea we have of life, it upsets us. So if we can’t imagine all these fish growing old and moving to Florida and being happy old grandparent fish, then it’s upsetting. I remember learning about mayflies, that the adults are born without mouths, and they live a day. They don’t eat. They just live long enough to mate and create other mayflies. That can be the next book.

P. A.: You beat me to the punch line; the mayfly scenario sounds like a book waiting to happen.

Chris Raschka: May, the mayfly with no mouth. Poor May is not going to eat anything. It’s a funny world we live in.

P. A.: So in this funny world, we have more than just the reviewers’ reaction. What about librarians, teachers, and parents? What did you hear from them? Did any reactions to Arlene Sardine surprise you?

Chris Raschka: Well, I think I was disinvited from speaking at a library because of that book. I was told I was, and I know a number of other librarians who didn’t like it because of this taking lightly of death. And I certainly can understand that. I was on the fence about it myself for a long time. But then there are many people who have loved it, I think, and have sought me out specifically to tell me about that book and how much they liked it, including librarians, kids, and lots of grownups.

P. A.: Reviewers are constantly referring to your text as sparse, your art, simple or minimalist. Speaking of minimalist, I’m thinking of your “Thingy thing” books, Slugly Slug, Goosey Goose, Doggy Dog, Lamby Lamb, and Snaily Snail. I see them as little books with big ideas. What was your impetus for that series?

Chris Raschka: I wanted to create books with a sense of their being accessible to kids who were just beginning to read. They aren’t strictly tied to short a vowel sound
words or families of words in a phonetic way, but they are all limited with the number of words that they have in them. All the books have about 20 different words, including some longer words but mostly sight words. I wanted to create books that would be of interest in and of themselves to those people reading them, so I very closely followed the interests of my own son in those books. When I was thinking of them, I was trying to create books for emerging readers.

It was the idea of another editor, Ken Geist, to create something like that. He also had the idea of having them small—only 15 pages long—and he wanted them to be very cheap, which I also liked. Making them shorter I thought was lovely because it allowed them to be simpler, and it allowed them not to have to bear the weight of importance of a picture book with a significant theme. They could be about little jokes, little four-year-old jokes in a little four-year-old world of getting dressed, of doing exactly the opposite of what you’ve been asked to do and finding that very funny. They could be about knowing what you want to do, playing hide-and-seek, being shy, and being grumpy. Some of them were based on my watching kids play on playgrounds. Goosey Goose came straight out of a little girl’s mouth almost. I loved working on those. I wanted them to be minimal and to be pretty close to readable. I love watching kids read them.

P.A.: Another book I wanted to talk about was Waffle. What’s the story behind Waffle?

Chris Raschka: The story behind Waffle—it was another book that had existed for a long time, the basic premise being that there is a positive nature to being insecure. We tend to think of someone who is insecure as a negative thing; this is not something you want to be. As an artist, insecurity is part of your life. Everything about your life is insecure. You don’t know if you’re going to come up with new ideas; you don’t know if you’ll be able to finish the book; and even in terms of making a living, per se, you don’t have a regular income. Everything is insecure. But out of insecurity can come creativity. I think if you’re very secure, the more secure you are, the less you can move. You become steady to the point of inert, and so it’s difficult to be insecure.

Kids are insecure about who they are; I think, but it can be an okay thing. Certainly if you become insecure and become just a puddle, a puddle doesn’t move either. At some point, you do have to move. When my sister read the book, she said, “Yeah, I like it, but how do you move? How are you insecure and then you fly?” I guess that has to be the next book. But Waffle is mostly about suggesting that insecurity isn’t necessarily bad or all bad.

P.A.: On this one page (see figure 2) in Waffle that I absolutely love, you have the character’s name “Waffle”
written all over the page—"Waffle Waffle Waffle Waffle" and the final letters before turning the page are "waf"—and then when the reader turns the page, the next word is "flew"—toying with the visual and the construction of meaning. The word "flew" finishes the sentence, "Waffle flew." But visually, it also supplies the "f - I - e" to finish spelling Waffle's name. So clever! All that, I'm assuming, is conscious symbolism?

Chris Raschka: Oh, yes, definitely. "Waffle" within it contains the other possibility. The word itself contains a number of ways it can go. I had thought about this idea, and I had already thought about this character, and I had already thought about this name "Waffle." As I was staring at the two words wafflewaffle, that's when "flew" came out of it to me. But it was going to be Waffle even before I saw that it was flew in the middle of two waffles. The idea of waffling was already there.

P. A.: In a way Blushful Hippopotamus is that same theme.

Chris Raschka: Yes, it's true. That one I wanted to be a valentine to friendship. It is similar in terms of you're insecure because your big sister is telling you you're nothing, and you don't know exactly. Maybe you are nothing.

You know what? This is the solution. I'm glad you've just clued that in to me. When we're insecure, that's why we need people. Insecurity is difficult because our identities become shaped by other people. And when it's the big sister, you're shaped as a blushful hippopotamus. When it's your friend, you're shaped by your friend and you're a wonderful hippopotamus. That's interesting. I think that is an aspect of the insecurity question. What comes first I'm not quite sure. I'll have to think about this.

P. A.: We were talking a few moments ago about symbols, and I mentioned intentionality, that is, what kinds of symbols you intend as an author. In another book Can't Sleep, there are some lines and images I want to ask about. On one page, we read "When you can't sleep/The moon will keep" and that creates a certain image in our minds before we turn the page to have your line continue: "you safe." So the image changes, "The moon will keep you safe." I enjoy noticing those lines and thinking about the images they evoke, and I wonder what the experience was for you as a creator of those images. The symbolism is so amazing to me.

Chris Raschka: Thank you. A lot of those images come from what I read and what moves me as I read. And in that case, the notion was of the moon as a companion and protector.

P. A.: "The moon will keep"—that by itself evokes the feeling that there are certain things in the world that are always there. We wake up and we have the sun, and the moon is always there. There's a comforting element to that. Very, very lovely.

Chris Raschka: That's a book in which the text was written on its own by me. Usually, I work the text and images at the same time. That was one where I really sat down to write this book. The imagery came from my own childhood experience of not being able to sleep, being petrified of being awake when everyone else was asleep. Also it's a sense of being alive when everyone else is dead, and the mystery of that. It always frightened me very much. So, I was trying to find something that is eternal as far as we're concerned. The moon I always feel is a softer presence than the sun. The sun can be too hot. I find the moon as a shining thing of beauty to be a lovely image of something that will keep.

P. A.: Since this book was sort of based on your experience, why did you make all the characters dogs instead of people?

Chris Raschka: It's sometimes more effective to transpose feelings onto an object external to oneself, for both writer and reader.

P. A.: There are other symbols in that book that intrigued me. You have three rooms essentially, the protagonist's room, the brother's room, and the parents' room. The only one with an empty chair is the one with the dog who can't sleep. There's a sense of emptiness that comes with the fear. (See figure 3.)

Chris Raschka: Interesting. I hadn't realized that about the chair. That was another project that went through some changes because it did start as a poem. Initially, when I started the book, it took place in a single room. A dog is getting up and hearing things; he's peeking out the window; it was all very much centered on the main character of the dog. This was another good example of strong editorial judgment by Dick Jackson. He never told me to change it; he was just full of questions.

P. A.: That's what a good editor does.
Chris Raschka: I don't know how that happened, but it's been happening lately.

P. A.: That style of full-face and profile is evident in one of the last books I'd like to talk to you about, I Pledge Allegiance. How did this project come about?

Chris Raschka: As far as I'm concerned, it came about when Chris Paul, the editor at Candlewick, asked to talk with me. We were at a Book Expo in Chicago, and she proposed this idea to me. She described it. There was this manuscript from Bill Martin Jr. and there was kind of an annotated version of the pledge. Initially, I thought, you're asking me to illustrate the pledge of allegiance? But then as I thought about it more, a number of things occurred to me. First of all, some kind of book like this was needed. There are so many kids who still say the pledge all over the country. We need a book that tells what the heck's going on. Also I thought maybe I would be a good person to illustrate this because I do have a very ambivalent feeling about the pledge and pledging allegiance in that manner in general. So that's why I agreed to do it.

You've probably read my little statement about my parents. They both very much object to the idea of a pledge of allegiance, and my mother was appalled when I told her I was going to do this. She fished in her purse and pulled out the citation of the Supreme Court decision that she carries with her at all times. It states that it is unconstitutional to require anyone to say the pledge, to make it a requirement. She keeps that in her purse, a 1946 decision, I think. Another coincidence. Later my mother described the very man, the pastor who preached the sermon that Dwight D. Eisenhower heard, which made him put his presidential weight behind the movement of adding “under God.” This man is still living and he's retired to the town where I was born in Pennsylvania. My father said the guy preached that same sermon again. An encore performance. But then, all that helped me work on the book. I became quite emotionally attached to the drawings as I did them. I enjoyed working on it very much.

P. A.: I love the dedication, by the way: “To my parents, who taught me to think freely.” And in a sense I think that's what I've been trying to explore in this interview—the thinking freely.
Chris Raschka: I worried about the dedication. I didn't want to indicate that I think freely. I'm as hide bound as everyone. I think exactly what my parents think. So as my wife pointed out, you're not really thinking freely; you're just thinking the way your parents think. I meant to say that I dedicated it to my parents who tried to get me to think freely.

P. A.: And that's often so true. There are interesting images on the page “every person... has a right to make his or her own choices.” You picture the people with different colors—orange, yellow, black, and green boxes surrounding the head or body. What intrigued me was the notion of boxes. That people are free to act in certain ways and make certain choices within a box. It's like you were talking about a moment ago, like your parents taught you to think freely, like them. We all create our boxes. And other people keep us in those boxes. Very interesting.

Chris Raschka: I think some of the images have shed their boxes. I was fascinated by painting onto the little boxes. It appealed to me. I wanted to create this sense of everyone in the country, from every different place. I found that using those different backgrounds, literally, helped create that sense of differences.

P. A.: It works.

Chris Raschka: It's funny how things work. We make language to describe backgrounds, like “black” and “white” as races. Then you're an artist and you come along and you're trying to create people of different backgrounds and races. You're aware of the symbolism of these literal paint colors. They have a weighted symbolism in a language sense, and a completely different function in an art sense. A black line and a white line can do the same thing, and often work in terms of creating an image hand in hand or identically.

They have to shed their literal interpretations in order to function as art. And balancing that is sometimes tricky.

P. A.: Let's talk about the page that says: “All Americans have the right to be treated fairly by our laws.” (See figure 4.) Inherent in the way you've shown two splotches of color is the point that people have the right to be treated fairly, but that's not always a reality. You have a black square behind one figure, but only behind part of that figure. In sharing this book with kids, I might ask kids to talk about why, and we might conjecture that there was a time when the black person was by the law of the land not considered to be a whole person. I wonder if that kind of symbolism was intentional.

Chris Raschka: There's the justice page when there are four images of the same person (see figure 4).

P. A.: With the pink splotch, the pink is behind the whole person, the ones that are green and orange are just behind part of the figure, but without the loaded language, one doesn't focus on that. But with the black splotch of color, we couple it with race immediately.

Chris Raschka: Yeah, it's right. As you look at it, you can't escape your own literary overtones. I tried to do that justice page very straightforwardly, just the same line image on four swatches of different color, half of them on black and half of them on white backgrounds. And that allows the reader to make of that what he or she will. Look at the facing page. There are four people. What do you see there?

P. A.: Two women, two men.

Chris Raschka: What else?

P. A.: One is sitting down. Three are standing.

Chris Raschka: One could be old.

P. A.: Okay, so it might be an ageism thing. Something I didn't pick up. That was the page that I was so hung up on the black splotch, and that was the sym-

Figure 4. I Pledge Allegiance (2002 Candlewick Press)
bolism that I was divining from it.
I'm almost surprised to hear you say that this book is one that has been in the works for a while. I figured that it came out on the heels of 9-11 and the surge of patriotism.

Chris Raschka: No, it didn't.

P. A.: Now that's a book that must have been very difficult for you to work on, 911: The Book of Help, which Marc Aronson has talked about as being controversial just in the way it's received.

Chris Raschka: Those drawings that are in there from me, I did on the spot, the day it happened.

P. A.: How close are you to the area?

Chris Raschka: I'm up the river, quite a ways, but I pedaled my bike down to a pier that sticks way out into the river where you can see all of Manhattan. When I was home trying to figure out what was going on, I was getting calls from my wife, not knowing what was happening, so I rode my bike out there. When I got fairly close, there was just one tower standing. It was horrific, of course. So I pulled out my little sketchbook and started drawing.

P. A.: I love the book. It's very powerful. I know you have miles to go, so let me say this has been extraordinary, just a wonderful opportunity to talk to you. You're an innovator, extending the boundaries of children's books. What's next?

Chris Raschka: I'm working on a rendition of Peter and the Wolf, trying to create a way of showing the performing. It'll be a dramatic rendition of the story. And immediately next is I'm about to go to the airport and fly to Chicago on my way to Rome. I'm going to Rome to be with my friend Vladimir Radunsky, and we're doing another book. We've written another book, and we're going to finish it. So that's what is immediately coming up.

P. A.: And what is that book?

Chris Raschka: That book is called Boy Meets Girl. I hesitate to even tell you that it's called Boy Meets Girl because it's not what the editors are expecting.

P. A.: I seriously doubt that you've ever given editors what they might expect.

Chris Raschka: Right.

P. A.: I can't thank you enough for your time today and for all you give readers.

Chris Raschka: Thanks, Pat. I'm always thrilled and amazed when people think hard about my books.

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