

Talking with Brian Floca

The creator of the Sibert Honor Book *Lightship* discusses his life, his work, and finding new inspiration.

By Jeanette Larson

Brian Floca jumped into children's publishing in 1993 by being in the right place at the right time. Hand-picked by Avi to illustrate *City of Light*, *City of Dark*, Floca, then a student at Brown University, was able to skip a lot of the waiting and rejection faced by many aspiring illustrators. Since then, he has illustrated more than two dozen books written by others. He has also illustrated his own stories, beginning with *The Frightful Story of Harry Walfish* (Orchard, 1997), a whopper of a tale set in a natural-history museum. I first met Floca, a native Texan, at the 1998 Texas Book Festival and got to know him better when he created the art for the 2000 Texas Reading Club, a statewide summer reading program. Interestingly, after all these years and so many books—including the Sibert Honor Book *Lightship*—little has been written about this prolific and highly respected illustrator. Hoping to fill that void, I recently chatted with him about his life and work.

JL: *You are something of a man of mystery. You've written or illustrated more than two dozen books, but it isn't easy to find information about you other than basic details about your life. Would you share a bit about yourself?*

FLOCA: "Man of mystery" makes it all

"There's a communicative power in line drawings that is very strong and important to young readers. We all draw as kids, and we mostly draw with line, and I think that stays with us in some deep-rooted way."



sound so interesting! At the risk of stripping away the mystique: I was born on January 11, 1969, and raised in Temple, Texas. My mom, a former teacher, stayed home with my younger sister and me, and my dad ran the family business, a soft-drink bottling company. (My appreciation for gears and machinery is at least partially owed to childhood visits to the bottling plant.) I grew up reading, with frequent trips to the library; exploring the woods behind our house; enjoying the company of the family pets (one cat, one dog, occasional hamsters); watching too much television; and drawing. I went to Brown University for college, where I studied art and history and, while still in school, got involved in children's book illustration, which I've been doing ever since.

JL: *When did you start drawing and when did you realize that you wanted to make a career out of your art?*

FLOCA: I've drawn for as long as I can

remember. I've always loved it, and I suppose early on I recognized that it was something I could do well. Still, for a long, long time I didn't have a clear idea of whether I was good enough to make a living at it, or how I might do that. Then at Brown and also at the Rhode Island School of Design—Brown students can sign up for RISD courses and vice versa—I could hold my own in the art classes, and I began to think about some post-college connection with art.

JL: *Your first published book was *City of Light*, *City of Dark*, a graphic novel by Avi. How did you get involved in that project?*

FLOCA: Avi, who at the time was living in Providence, Rhode Island, had sent a manuscript titled *The Shortest Day* to his editor, Dick Jackson. They talked about turning the manuscript into a "comic-book novel"—this was after Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, but still well ahead of the mainstreaming of the graphic

novel—and Dick suggested to Avi that it would be easier to consider the idea if there were some sample chapters in that format. Against all publishing conventions it fell to Avi to find someone with whom to put together an illustrated proposal. This person would need a tolerance for doing a fair amount of work for (initially) no money, and perhaps that's what led Avi to the idea of recruiting a student. Avi mentioned all this to David Macaulay, who was teaching at RISD and whose class I was taking, and Macaulay mentioned it to me. I met Avi in the summer of 1991. *City of Light*, *City of Dark* came out in 1993. What I got from the experience, beyond being published, were good relationships with both Avi and Dick, who during the whole course of the project treated a greener-than-green young illustrator with great generosity and trust. Fifteen years later, I continue to work with both of them.

JL: *Will you be creating other graphic novels?*

FLOCA: I enjoyed making *City of Light*, *City of Dark*, and there are graphic novels that I love, but I have figured out that I am really more of a picture-book guy. To be perfectly honest, sometimes I open up a graphic novel and I see all of those tiny, tiny, tiny pictures and it just feels like too much. You have more room to breathe in a picture book. You can dip into panels and sequential passages when you feel like it, but your real challenge is to create only a few *essential* pictures, big pictures that can epitomize and carry the key moments in the narrative, but that also end up leaving blank moments for the readers to fill in. It's an interesting, challenging, and rewarding way to tell a story.

JL: *You had been illustrating and publishing for several years when you entered the master's degree program at the School of Visual Arts. What made you want to go back to school?*

FLOCA: About 10 years ago I was at a point where I'd done several trade books, including one book of my own, and I had an agent and was getting



A carefully detailed scene of Mission Control from Brian Floca's 2009 title *Moonshot*.

steady freelance work in the educational market. But even though some of that work was rewarding, I was beginning to feel adrift in the career and the work. I had no focused sense of where I wanted it all to go. So simply as a break really, I signed up for a summer study-abroad course through RISD, and that ended up being a remarkable experience. It was a good, hard-working, engaged group of students, and we were living in central Rome and drinking espresso and wine and drawing and painting and looking at and talking about art. It was only a month and a half, but it was an extraordinarily productive and happy time, and that got me thinking about graduate school, about how useful it could be for me to be around other artists and to be in a space that helped me to think critically and actively about how I wanted to work.

JL: *I see some of Macaulay's influence in The Hinky-Pink. What other artists have influenced your work?*

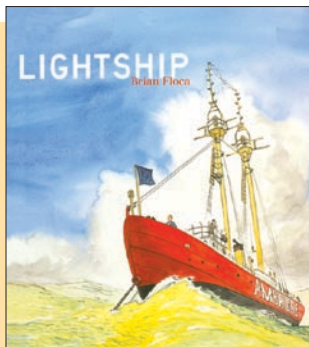
FLOCA: If you grew up with Macaulay's

architecture books, and then sit down to draw the brickwork on the Palazzo Pitti, it shows! As for other influences, I'll tell you whom I admire most and you can decide if there are dots there to connect: Quentin Blake, Edward Ardizzone, E. H. Shepard, David Gentleman, Robert Andrew Parker, Hergé, William Steig, and Warwick Hutton. I grew up on those Richard Scarry books, too, and the quiet cheerfulness, legibility, and amount of story (or story fragments, assembly by reader required) that were offered on each page of those books have stuck with me. So, roughly, the line-and-watercolor gang. Line is less impressive to some people than painterly work, but there's a communicative power in line drawings that is very strong and important to young readers. We all draw as kids, and we mostly draw with line, and I think that stays with us in some deep-rooted way. Also, there's something wonderful about how line drawings can show the drawing and what's being drawn at the same time. Even, or perhaps especially,

WEB CONNECTIONS

For more about Brian Floca, visit the Book Links Web site at <http://www.ala.org/booklinks> and click on "Web Connections."

the simplest line drawings, when done well, have a magic and elegance.



JL: How do you decide on your subjects? Do you approach your work differently when you are illustrating someone else's words rather than your own?

FLOCA: To find my own subjects, I try to put myself in promising situations, to look actively, to be self-aware about what is catching my interest, and to take notes. As for how I work with someone else's text versus my own, it is indeed a very different process. When it's your own text you have the freedom to go in and totally rearrange the plumbing of the book. Not so with other people's writing, but it's good sometimes to have elements beyond your control, to be maneuvered by someone else's ideas into ideas that otherwise would never have occurred to you.

JL: You have a talent for telling good stories based in fact. *Lightship* won a Sibert Honor for being an outstanding informational book, although it reads like a storybook. What has the award meant for you and your work?

FLOCA: I try not to fetishize awards, maybe because I haven't won many of them, but receiving the Sibert Honor was a big deal. It was exciting, surprising, and humbling, and it has lifted the profile of *Lightship* and I think sharpened people's sense of the rest of my work, too. And since the forthcoming *Moonshot* is in the same vein as *Lightship*—it's narrative, it's historical, it doesn't spare the nuts and bolts—then hopefully the award has also helped prepare expectations a little bit for that book. So the Sibert Honor has been a professionally and personally meaningful thing, and I'm grateful for it.


JL: You clearly do some extensive research for your books. Tell me a little bit about the techniques you use.

FLOCA: I enjoy the research, which allows me to employ some old history-major habits, but with no midterms. I do a lot of reading—books, periodicals, and Web sites—and look for visual reference wherever I can find it. When possible I connect with primary sources.

To prove my dedication to my work, I visited Tuscany for *The Hinky-Pink*. I interviewed lightship sailors for *Lightship* and—true story—I ran into *Apollo 11* astronaut Michael Collins at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport days after I sold the *Moonshot* book proposal. What stays the same from book to book is that I try to keep my eyes open not only for the central information that will make the book accurate but also for asides that can add life, texture, and interest to a work. By that I mean things such as the crew drying their laundry on deck in *Lightship*, or the manual pencil sharpener and pneumatic tubes that you'll find in Mission Control in *Moonshot*.

JL: What's next for you?

FLOCA: I'm working now on two illustration projects. I'm just now getting the gears catching on a manuscript by Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan, which is going to push and pull me in all sorts of (hopefully fruitful) ways. The other project is *Poppy and Ereth*, the final book in Avi's Poppy series, which will be a more familiar project but, as a last chance to visit characters

for whom I have great affection, will have its own challenges and rewards. In recent work, between *The Racecar Alphabet*, *Lightship*, and *Moonshot*, I feel that I've found a way of writing and drawing that fits me well. I've enjoyed taking boy-book tropes that might seem like low-hanging fruit to some people—we're talking racecars, boats, and astronauts, after all—and working hard to make good, layered books. 

Sampling Floca

City of Light, City of Dark. By Avi. 1993. 192p. Orchard, paper, \$8.99 (9780531070581). Gr. 3–6.

The Hinky-Pink: An Old Tale. By Megan McDonald. 2008. 48p. Simon & Schuster/Richard Jackson, \$16.99 (9780689875885). Preschool–Gr. 2.

Lightship. 2007. 48p. Simon & Schuster/Richard Jackson, \$16.99 (9781416924364). K–Gr. 3.

Moonshot. April 2009. 48p. Simon & Schuster/Richard Jackson, \$17.99 (9781416950462). K–Gr. 3.

The Racecar Alphabet. 2003. 40p. Simon & Schuster/Richard Jackson, \$17.99 (9780689850912). Preschool–Gr. 2.

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