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**Invited Dialogue**

**From *Uptown* to *Trombone Shorty* and Beyond: An Invited Dialogue with Bryan Collier**

*Alan R. Bailey*

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In this candid interview, award-winning illustrator and author Bryan Collier shares thoughts and wisdom acquired throughout his artistic journey that began at the age of 15.

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**Alan Bailey (AB):** Bryan, as a child, what were some of your favorite picturebooks?

**Bryan Collier (BC):** Three books really stand out: *The Snowy Day* (1962) and *Whistle for Willie* (1964) by Ezra Jack Keats, and *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955) by Crockett Johnson.

**AB:** *The Snowy Day* is one of my favorite children’s books and a favorite of many African Americans. For many of us, it was the first time we saw a protagonist of color in a book. Do you think these books inspired you to become an illustrator?

**BC:** I don’t know. I do know they had an impact on me and my relationship with books. Peter, the character in *The Snowy Day*, looked just like me. He had my pajamas on—they even had the same pattern. I am from Maryland, so I related to snowy days. I was the youngest in the neighborhood, and the youngest kid in my family, so like Peter, I always wanted to play with the big kids. Seeing Peter struck me as a surprise. Although I didn’t have any expectations when I read the book, I definitely did not expect to see that boy named Peter. I had so much in common with him. And that was visceral because I could not articulate what that really meant. Slowly but surely, I gravitated toward being an artist.

**AB:** At what age was your artistic gift discovered?

**BC:** Not until I was a teenager. I was heavily into sports. I wanted to be Dr. J. [Julius Erving] because I had the Afro and played ball, both football and basketball. I was a ball player, and art did not become a part of my life until I was around 15.

**AB:** When did you realize you wanted to be an illustrator?

**BC:** Before I was an illustrator, I was just a painter. I was making art and that’s what I did. I didn’t become an illustrator until I graduated.
from Pratt Institute in 1989. I walked into a Barnes & Noble in New York City, and when I looked around, I did not see any books that looked like me. And that’s when the light bulb came on. I said, “Wait a minute, I’m going to make a book.” As I looked around, I saw some great books on the shelves, like the wordless picturebook *Tuesday* (1991) by David Wiesner. There were beautiful books by great artists, but I didn’t see me. I thought, there has to be space for brown boys and girls. But, incredibly, there was none. All these books and no one of color was on the shelf.

I bought five books because I liked the way they were made—the way the art was photographed and the weight of the books. I looked at the addresses in the books and went to those publishing houses the next week with a portfolio. I was rejected. So I went back to the bookstore, found more publishing houses, and dropped off a portfolio to each of those houses. I continued to be rejected. I went back every week, once a week, for seven years until I got a book deal. It was just a part of my regimen. I told myself, “Every week you’re going to a publishing house with a portfolio, and you’re going to see if you can get a book deal today.”

**AB:** Now that’s what I call determination.

**BC:** Yeah, because at some point, I knew I had a story to tell, and I was totally excited about entering into this brand new world, a world I knew nothing about. One day I was sitting in a publishing house, and Julie Andrews walked by and went upstairs. I said, “Wait a minute. What’s going on in here?” I was totally excited and enthralled to be there. I still get excited when I walk into a publishing house. It’s like a rush for me. I don’t know how people who work in publishing feel about the work they do, but for me, going to their offices and seeing the new books and seeing the whole publishing world is a rush.

**AB:** I believe *Uptown* was your first published work.

**BC:** That’s correct.

**AB:** Tell me about your journey from visiting publishers to actually having *Uptown* published.

**BC:** I went to many of the same publishing houses several times. Eventually, Henry Holt said okay and published *Uptown*. I think I wore them down. Laura Godwin sat me down and said, “We like your work, but we want you to write the book. We don’t have a manuscript for you, so you must write and illustrate it.” Laura took a chance on me. When I think about the offer Henry Holt made me, I realize it was very low, but I didn’t care. When they gave me the contract to look over, I signed it on the subway home. I didn’t even look at it. I didn’t read a single line. I just signed on the dotted line blindly and said, “It took me seven years to get this thing, so I’m going to get in here and figure it out as I go.”

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my main focus. That’s what keeps my nose to the grindstone.

**AB:** You are known for your exquisite collages. What attracted you to this art technique?

**BC:** It just sort of evolved, and I always think back to my grandmother making clothes. She pieced stuff together. She pieced fabric together to make something new. Here’s how it unfolded for me. When I was four, five, and six and my grandmother made quilts, I didn’t pay any mind to them. They were colorful, and I remember them on the bed, but that is all it was. But I have discovered what she was doing. Not only was she making quilts, she was planting a seed: silent gifts through a seed. All I had to do is bear witness to it. Later, when I walked into an art class my freshmen year in high school and I was given art supplies, guess what? That seed was ignited.

It’s all nonverbal. My grandmother never said, “Pay attention and one day you will see how this thing unfolds.” I just watched her do it and said nothing. The seed was planted. It was silent. The opportunity to be creative in that art class ignited that seed. We never talk to our children about what we do around them or what they watch us do because when we are doing these things, we are planting seeds. The question is, what seeds are we planting? I make collages because collage is about piecing fragments together to make something whole. That is what I am trying to do with myself personally—become whole.

**AB:** Very interesting process.

**BC:** If you are watching dancers perform an interpretive dance, look at the lines of their bodies and you’ll see more than the whole performance. I pay attention to the edges without alienating the text. If you listen to the edges, they will tell you a more profound story—an interesting story. It has to be interesting to me before it can be conveyed as interesting to another reader. I am going to be with this book for 4–6 months, so I better be excited about something in it every day.

**AB:** I understand that some illustrators take photographs of people posing in settings, costumes, or with props before anything is actually put on canvas. Do you have a similar process?

**BC:** Oh yes. I use family members and friends to pose for books. Sometimes I’ll have them do things without explaining what’s actually happening in the book. I do this because I am looking at their body language, the way they interact with each other. When using family or people who are familiar with each other as models, they are more relaxed. Their movements are natural, and that’s what I try to capture in a book—natural expression. I try to use family and friends in a comfortable environment, whether it’s their home, my home, or another place where they are comfortable. Sometimes they’ll surprise you because they’ll do something you never thought of and it will just work. I take thousands of pictures to capture the essence. And capturing the essence is important to me because not only am I getting the book done and capturing something visually interesting, I am also building a legacy. They are starring in a book. Imagine if we were kids and starred in a book like Peter did in *The Snowy Day*. That would be amazing. That’s what I try to do, expand the life of the book. The book takes on a life of its own.

**AB:** I’m sure, like most illustrators and writers, you occasionally encounter a creative slump. How do you get through slumps and move forward?

**BC:** I get the text, only the text, and I read it a bunch of times. I do not read it simply to read the words and understand the concept, but I am listening to the spaces in between the words as well. What is the text saying? Am I digesting these words? And then I just listen to the spaces in between. All the pauses. Where the periods are. The space before we go to the next stanza. I need to understand what everything means because that’s where the answers to my questions are. They are always on the edges. If you have a focal point in the text, but pay close attention to the edges, the edges will tell you more than the focal point will.
BC: With a mental block or slump, the issue is me. I’m in the way. It’s nothing from the outside, it’s me. The creative flow comes from God, and what is blocking it is you. Sometimes I have to get up and walk away. Shake it off, walk away, and see it from a different perspective or angle. I have to do whatever it takes to get my stuff out of the way. I’m blocking this flow of blessings. We are vessels and we are here to bring things forth into the world.

AB: It’s no secret that I love all of your books, but *Trombone Shorty* has become one of my favorites. How did this collaboration with Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews develop?

BC: Abrams, the publisher, came to me with the text by Troy Andrews and asked me to look at it. That’s how it was initiated. They asked if I knew him and I said, ‘No, but let me look at the text.’ But when I looked at his photograph and read the text, I recognized him. I knew him when he was a kid. I used to go down to New Orleans every year for the Essence Music Festival. I saw Troy when he was younger because Essence hired him to perform at one of the super lounges. He was well known in New Orleans, but not internationally like he is now. We met while I was illustrating the book, and we clicked instantly. It was just like we were family. We talked, and he invited me to five of his shows. I went, and we hung out before and after he went on stage. It felt so familiar. Getting into his world was so easy. No barriers at all. I never thought a trombone could be a lead instrument, but when you see him on stage, you realize it can be. What he does with that horn is incredible.

AB: I agree. Illustrating a book requires a great deal of research. What steps do you take to research your illustrations?

BC: I go to the location, talk with people, and try to get as close as I can. I try to reenact or reinterpret what I see. Let’s use Nikki Giovanni’s *Rosa* as an example. Part of my motivation for doing the project was to be reeducated about the Civil Rights Movement. I wanted to see up close everything they told us about Mrs. Parks when we were fifth graders. And the idea of Mrs. Parks coming on the road with Nikki and me for a book tour had me really geared up. I had never met her, so the thought of doing a tour with her and Nikki Giovanni was amazing.

AB: Rosa Parks, Nikki Giovanni, and Bryan Collier—what a powerful lineup.

BC: I was thankful that Mrs. Parks was able to see the original art before she passed. She liked the pieces and gave me her approval. I was so happy about that, but of course I was saddened that we lost her two weeks after the book was released. I went down to Montgomery, Alabama, to see where Mrs. Parks lived, worked,
and went to church. I wanted to talk with people who knew her. In my head, I had imagined she lived in a little country house in Montgomery, but when I arrived, I learned she lived in the projects. Her back door opened to the front door of Edgar Daniel “E. D.” Nixon, president of the NAACP and former Pullman Porter.

The reaction to the arrest of Mrs. Parks was like baking a soufflé. The temperature has to be right. The timing has to be right. And when everything is right, it is going to rise. And that is what masses of African Americans did in 1955 when Mrs. Rosa Parks, a well-known and beloved pillar of her community, was arrested—they rose. There was racial unrest all throughout the South, exacerbated by the heat of Alabama. That was the tone of the book Rosa. When you open the book and look at the sky, the sky is troubled from day one. When you look at the endpapers, a gentleman is reading a newspaper with the words, “The Life of Emmett Till.” That reflects history because Emmett Till was murdered three months before Mrs. Parks was arrested, and something was going to explode in the South.

AB: What do you enjoy most about illustrating children’s books?
BC: The fact that I can illustrate a book here in America and it speaks to a kid on the other side of the world is joyful.

AB: Have you noticed any trends or changes in children’s illustrations over the last five years?
BC: I have seen more digital work come into play, and here are my feelings about digital art. People use whatever they need to use to create art; the most important thing for me is the idea behind it. If the idea is strong, the image will be strong if it is executed properly. But digital art would never work for me because I’m tactile. I have to make it with my hands. That’s the only way it would artistically satisfy me—handmade with all of its flaws. It can’t be a perfect rendering for me because my hands cannot make anything perfect. The perfection is in the imperfection. Something that seems like an imperfection to the illustrator may be what the reader is drawn to more than anything else. The beauty is in imperfection. If everything is perfect, your work will not stand out from other art.

BC: Oh, there are some great illustrators, but I have to speak first of my mentors, Ashley Bryan and Jerry Pinkney. Ashley would whisper in my ear about being an illustrator and the work I was doing. He is always encouraging, and I’m a big fan of his. Then there’s Kadir Nelson. Kadir is younger than me, but I knew about him when he was in junior high school. Kadir is great. I’m also a big fan of E. B. Lewis—I love how he blends light and colors—and David Wiesner. In terms of writing, one of my favorites is Jacqueline Woodson. I have wanted to work with Jackie since I got into the business.

AB: Are you working on a project now? If so, please tell me about it.
BC: My most recent book is called Lift Your Light a Little Higher: The Story of Stephen Bishop: Slave-Explorer (Henson, 2016). It is about a slave who gave guided tours through caves in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. While leading tours, he would encourage individuals to write their names on the ceiling with candle smoke. Unbeknownst to them, this is how he learned to read and write. He discovered many wonderful things, including his own freedom, and he had to discover that freedom at the bottom of a cave.

AB: Intriguing. I look forward to reading it. You are respected internationally for your illustrations, but you have written children’s books as well. Do you plan to write and illustrate another book in the near future?
BC: I am currently writing a book about the childhood of Quincy Jones. His childhood was filled with poverty, abandonment, and loss. A girl living next door played piano, and Quincy could hear the music through the walls. This girl planted the seed. It was nonverbal. The seed ignited the first time young Quincy hit the keys on an upright piano. At that moment, every cell in his body changed. Finding music saved his life.

AB: What advice would you give to an aspiring illustrator or author?

BC: Whatever your dream for life is, know that everyone will not see it and understand it. In fact, most people will not, even the people who love you. They will tell you to get a job. They will tell you being an artist or author is not hard work. Don’t take it to heart because they don’t get it. I tell kids all the time, “Even if you are the awkward kid, and you don’t feel comfortable in your own skin, that is your blessing. That very awkwardness is going to be the genius in your creativity. It’s going to be the thing that makes you stand out because of the way you see the world.” I talk to kids who are in tears because nobody sees them. They don’t feel good because they have this thing inside of them. It’s that creative voice, that thing the world doesn’t understand. Art is there to say it’s okay. It’s better than okay—it’s incredible, and I can’t wait for you to get it out. I tell them to, “Lay into it, lay all in it because that’s your glory. I know what they tell you, but I’m here to tell you it’s absolutely magnificent.”

AB: I appreciate you for encouraging young children and aspiring authors and illustrators to follow their dreams, their hearts, and their passions. That is so important.

Children’s Literature Cited


Alan R. Bailey is an associate professor at Joyner Library on the campus of East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. He can be contacted at baileya@ecu.edu.