Gerald (Edward) McDermott

Children's Literature Review Volume 9

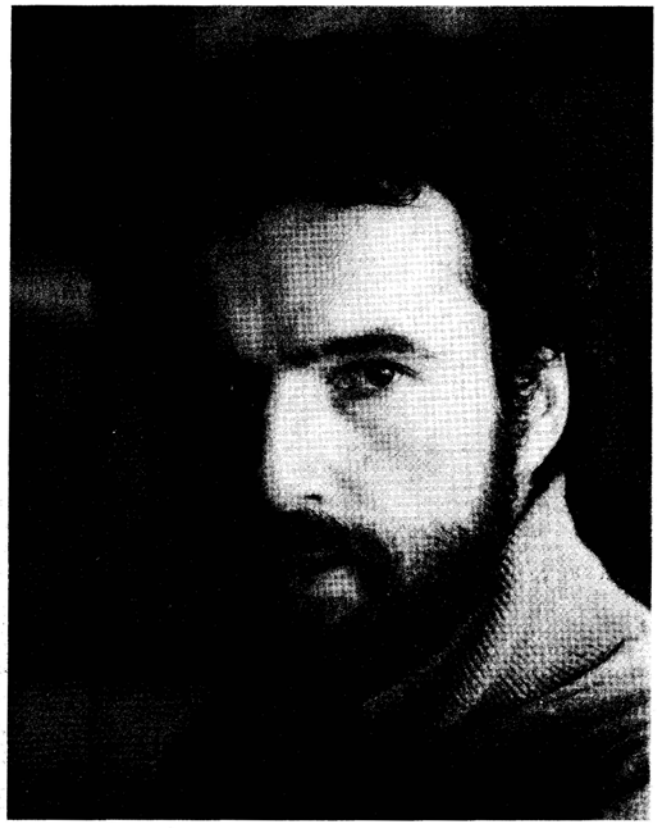
American reteller and author/illustrator of picture books.

McDermott is well respected for his culturally diverse retellings of archetypal myths and traditional tales. Using mythology as a vehicle to express his interest in magic and transformation, he frequently chooses stories centering on mythic heroes and comic tricksters who undertake quests for self-fulfillment. Regarded as a proficient designer and vibrant colorist, McDermott began his career as a creator of animated folklore films which he later turned into picture books. He enhances his written renditions of tales from Japanese, Pueblo, Greek, Roman, and other sources with illustrations incorporating motifs commonly associated with the civilization featured in the story. In *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti,* for example, he blends the rhythm of this native African language with pictures which utilize the colors and shapes of Ashanti art. McDermott has also composed an original tale with folk elements, *Papagayo, the Mischief Maker,* which conveys the sounds and impressions of a South American jungle while relating how a noisy parrot becomes a hero.

An admirer of painters Henri Matisse and Paul Klee, McDermott creates the majority of his illustrations by using the geometric shapes and limited palette associated with Bauhaus-style design principles. His pictures and collages are angular, abstract, and sophisticated. Most often rendered in intense colors, they usually merge primitive art with contemporary design. Commentators note that McDermott's seemingly simple illustrations mask complex symbols, an observation which critics also extend to his texts. McDermott believes that the picture book illustrator has an obligation to nurture the reader's visual development. A strong proponent of exposing young children to modern art, he finds that children intuitively respond to the abstraction and symbolism in his works.

McDermott began his artistic training at the Detroit Institute of Arts when he was four years old. From ages nine to eleven he enjoyed a career as a radio performer on "Storyland," a show that dramatized folk tales and legends. It was on this program that McDermott learned the rudiments of coordinating sound effects and music with story, a skill he later refined in his films. At Cass Technical High School, a Detroit public school for students gifted in science and the arts, McDermott received formal training in Bauhaus principles. His extracurricular interest in filmmaking led to a part-time job with a television animation studio. After winning a scholarship to New York's Pratt Institute, he took a leave of absence following his junior year to work as a graphic designer for television and to write and produce his first animated film, *The Stonecutter.* Based on a traditional Japanese tale, *The Stonecutter* was created from six thousand drawings inspired by Japanese silk screen prints. McDermott toured Europe, visiting and exchanging ideas with filmmakers in England, France, and Yugoslavia. He returned to Pratt to finish his degree, and began producing and directing a series of acclaimed films on folklore subjects.

Meeting Jungian scholar Joseph Campbell was a milestone in McDermott's career. Campbell served as a consultant on three



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of McDermott's films while making the artist aware of the psychological depths of mythology and the possibilities of integrating various cultural symbols into his art. An encounter with editor George Nicholson led McDermott into a new area of artistic expression: he was offered a multivolume contract with Holt, Rinehart and Winston to translate his animated films into picture book format. McDermott lived in the south of France for two years while working on his first book, *Anansi the Spider.* Left without the stimulus and direction provided by music and sound effects, he discovered difficulties in the transition from celluloid to the printed page, and struggled to overcome problems of continuity and emphasis. His success was apparent, however, when *Anansi the Spider* was named a Caldecott Honor Book.

McDermott returned to the United States to work simultaneously on the film and book *Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale,* a creation story featuring the sun and corn symbols of Pueblo art. In this book, he resolved some of his earlier technical difficulties by utilizing large, wordless spaces and a Rainbow Trail motif to sweep the reader's eye from left to right. *Arrow* won the Caldecott Medal, but the aftermath of the excitement left McDermott artistically barren for a year and a half. His next story, *The Voyage of Osiris: A Myth of Ancient Egypt,* concerns the death and afterlife of the Egyptian god. Since McDermott selects his tales to express his personal change

and growth, he has described this work as a reflection of his own death and resurrection as an artist. *Papagayo, the Mischief Maker* came as comic relief after such heavy works as *Voyage* and *Knight of the Lion*, McDermott's longest book and the only one illustrated in black and white. In this adaptation of a twelfth-century Arthurian legend, McDermott deliberately chose to rely on his drawing skill alone rather than his customary use of color and design. With *Sun Flight*, the ancient Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus, and *Daughter of Earth: A Roman Myth*, which relates the origins of the seasons, McDermott returned to the colorful, modern style of his earlier works.

Most critics applaud McDermott for his straightforward, forceful prose, his artistic proficiency, and the skill with which he converts his films into book form. Some observers express concern that the symbolic, sometimes mature themes of his stories and the stylized, abstract designs of his illustrations may exceed the comprehension of the usual picture book audience. Reviewers nevertheless recognize McDermott as an original interpreter of multicultural myths who stimulates readers of all ages with his powerful art.

In 1973, *Anansi the Spider* was a Caldecott Honor Book and won a Lewis Carroll Shelf Award; *The Magic Tree: A Tale from the Congo* was a *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Honor Book in illustration the same year. *Arrow to the Sun* received the Caldecott Medal in 1975.

(See also *Something about the Author*, Vol. 16; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 85-88; and *Authors in the News*, Vol. 2.)

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY

Imagine an ancient and mysterious figure who sits alone on the desert plain. He wears a dark ceremonial mask, and he is robed in desert hues of ocher, gold, and brown. By his side is a clay pot, decorated with magic symbols, and filled with bits of wood, feather, and stone. From these materials, he will create the feathered shaft that releases a spirit into solar flight.

This is the Arrowmaker, a pivotal figure in the drama of *Arrow to the Sun*. Of all the mythic characters who act out their roles in my books and films, he is the one who especially intrigues and interests me. He is a shaman who possesses the ability to see where others fail to see. He can penetrate the unyielding surface of reality with what has been called the open eye. Wordlessly gazing, the Arrowmaker perceives an essential truth and is inspired to action. He gives his vision tangible form by creating a special arrow that will send the hero on his transcendent journey to the sun. The Arrowmaker has thus acted as a liaison between the everyday world and the realm of dreams. He connects the sphere of the intellect with the sphere of intuition.

Many people believe that the role of the artist is like that of the shaman, and, in fact, this role has grown directly from our archaic need for an interpreter of the image world obscured by common sight. The artist must attempt the shamanic task of penetrating surface reality to perceive a universal truth; that is, he draws out the essence of the idea. In transforming this vision into powerful graphic shape, he hopes to communicate it to others. In the process, he can expand our visual sense and enhance our ability to see with an open eye. The artist, like the Arrowmaker, assists in releasing the imagination.

Imagination. Image-ination. The ability to call up spontaneously the visual forms of our inner life. Children seem to possess the open eye, a direct access to "the unpolluted rivers of perception and imagination." But early in childhood, swiftly, almost inexorably, our natural perceptual responses, instead of being cultivated, are eradicated. Other sensibilities are crushed as well, but visual perception seems particularly susceptible to debasement. . . . We have all flailed impotently at the most obvious of [the factors which prevent the development of aesthetic consciousness]: an environment cluttered with synthetic junk, the cheapening influence of advertising stereotypes, the banal imagery of television. We continually bemoan their pervasiveness and lament their trivializing influence upon our sensibilities. We have almost ritualized our complaints against these massive realities which are largely beyond our control.

Meanwhile what about the area of visual experience that we as professionals can control—the picture book. Have we brought to our task as broad a knowledge of art as we have of the written word? Do we encourage illustrators and designers to experiment and to push forward beyond conventional solutions? Do we insist that contemporary artists be true to their artistic age? If we have closed ourselves off from the larger field of the fine arts, if we have established a hermetic world, then we limit our ability to distinguish bad art from good art. This is a crucial distinction. . . . (pp. 349-51)

A picture book of artistic integrity will often be the only place where a child can expand his imagination and direct his gaze toward beauty. In this medium, it is possible to create a dynamic relationship between the visual and the verbal. The techniques of storytelling and the compelling serial image / together convey the force of exciting ideas. In form and content, the picture book can become an essential element in the child's evolving aesthetic consciousness, and the artist creating a picture book has an opportunity—and a special responsibility—to nurture the development of his young audience's visual perception.

This certainly sounds like a heavy burden for that cloistered breed, the picture-book artist, separated as he is from the dynamism of modern art. Often shunned by his brethren in other graphic disciplines, he is looked upon as a thumb-sucking regressive, re-creating his nursery fantasies in pastel hues. Can the picture-book artist really be expected to devote himself to raising the art consciousness of a new generation? Perhaps he would if we demanded that he undertake this responsibility. Yet in our sometimes desperate need to be sentimental about childhood, we ask that the picture-book artist produce an art that is easily accessible and realistic in the most trivial sense, reality being the lowest level of cognition.

Often the only expectation of the picture book is that it provide pretty settings for an easy vocabulary or comic-strip clichés that can divert and entertain as they lure the neophyte reader into the realm of words. Once the truly serious task of acquiring reading skills is accomplished, the images cease to be valuable—if indeed they ever were valuable—and they are dispensed with. . . . The powerful potential of art to communicate what cannot be expressed in words is dismissed and consigned to the nursery along with toys that have been outgrown.

Our language is rich and powerful. We strive to learn it, to master it, to put it at our service as a means of communication and expression. But in our intense effort to verbalize, analyze, and categorize all experience, we tend to overlook the importance of the visual as a means of personal communication and

personal expression. This has resulted in a dichotomy between the values we assign to our word-sense and those we assign to our image-sense. We set a goal to acquire a vocabulary, a grammar, and—if we are ultimately to enjoy the riches of our language—a knowledge of literary tradition and contemporary writing. Yet we have no such aspirations for the development of our visual sense. This faculty is held in such low esteem, deemed so expendable, that few of us even have the equivalent of an alphabet. As a result, our natural, spontaneous, child-response to form and color is left untended, to wither away.

What remains is a kind of art-blindness that makes us ill at ease with any but the most banal and representational imagery—that is, those images that can be narrowly defined or put into words. To the extent an image is representational, it narrows interpretation. To the extent an image cancels out interpretation, it sterilizes the imagination. We all know many adults who feel uncomfortable with, if not actually hostile to, images that communicate in an interpretive, stylized, or abstract manner. Yet children, with their open eye, initially feel no such hostility. Indeed, it has been my experience that even the youngest children respond in a direct and receptive manner to the most stylized of images. I believe this quality is manifest in the magic and symbolism of their own paintings.

Our childhood ease with the symbolic can be seen in graphic ways. For example, when I've had the opportunity to share the story of ***Arrow to the Sun*** with small children, they often react through their art. This Pueblo tale culminates, with the masked celebrants moving rhythmically, in an exultant "Dance of Life." We pretend that the children have also been invited to join in the dance. In order to participate, they are to imagine masks and costumes for themselves—not realistic self-portraits but abstract designs that will serve as symbolic representations. From the hands of eight- and nine-year-olds, gripping fat brushes heavy with paint, come exciting and stylized images. Most of the children make the leap of imagination to this rather abstract concept—to represent themselves in a graphic and symbolic way. They have felt the force of the symbols on the pages of the book and eagerly express themselves in a similar manner. They plunge with delight into a world of color and form and emerge with images of meaning and beauty.

Within a brief time, however, this balance of perception and imagination will be upset. The expression of ideas will become narrowed, and the art will become contrived and awkward. The child's ability to receive the message of symbolic form will rapidly diminish. This will happen because visual expression and communication will be dismissed as invalid. The child's spontaneous image sense will be underestimated and left undeveloped. Eventually, it will be submerged in the deadening tide of inferior visual representation. We cannot hope to reverse this stultifying process until we overcome our denial of the force and value of art and make it an integral part of our lives. (pp. 351-53)

Gerald McDermott, in the Caldecott Award Acceptance Speech given at the meeting of the American Library Association in San Francisco, California, on July 1, 1975, in The Horn Book Magazine, *Vol. LI, No. 4, August, 1975, pp. 349-54.*

GENERAL COMMENTARY

PATRICIA DOOLEY

Despite the many awards won by Gerald McDermott's animated films and picture-books, his work remains controversial for the best of reasons: it is original, thoughtful, and makes few concessions to common children's-book conventions. Both praise and criticism have attended McDermott's attempts to charge the picture-book with "some of the dynamism of modern art," and to keep alive what he believes to be the child's spontaneous response to abstraction. (p. 1)

Except for [***Papagayo the Mischief Maker***] (an original story using folk material) all of the films and books are retellings of myths or traditional tales. It is, indeed, the mythic version of reality, the mythmaker's alternative to "naturalism," that McDermott has sought. He was "drawn to mythology because it offered a starting-point that was filled with mystery and magic and transformation." (p. 2)

Stylized geometric shapes and a restricted palette are part of the vocabulary of an artist formed, as McDermott was, in the Bauhaus manner. The artist also cites Matisse (especially his cut-paper work) and Klee as influences: perhaps it is their ability to combine appealing color with purity of form, to achieve a kind of austere sensuality, that makes them sympathetic figures. McDermott's own colors are vibrant and brilliant, even "fauviste." Unlike much mass-market illustration today, however, his color is not splashed around to compensate for careless design: it is subordinate to, and a functioning part of, the overall graphic and symbolic plan. The use of color as an adjunct to meaning is particularly successful in ***Arrow to the Sun.*** McDermott's combination of discipline and liberty in color and composition brings him closer to Blair Lent or Leo Lionni, for example, than to Brian Wildsmith. Perhaps he owes something also to the influence of the Douanier Rousseau.

Like the stylized shapes richly colored and organized by the artist, the tales too disguise complexity beneath simplicity. "***Anansi the Spider*** is clearly about wholeness"—but so also is it about family relationships, interdependence, and the skills of civilization. ***The Stonecutter*** is about man's insatiable ambition and thoughtless abuse of power—but so also is it about the relationships balancing the natural world, and the limits of perception. ***The Magic Tree, The Voyage of Osiris,*** and ***The Knight of the Lion*** are all about loyalty and betrayal, especially the loyalty between husband and wife.

Mavungu aids the enchanted people of the tree, Papagayo aids the night-creatures when he saves the moon, Anansi's sons restore him to the world, Osiris and the Arrow-Boy are saved and "save" their people, the Knight of the Lion saves his honor and his life. Yet all these tales are in some way about foolishness as well—from the culpable weakness of ***The Stonecutter*** or ***The Magic Tree,*** to the innocent imprudence of Anansi (who "falls into trouble") and Papagayo, to the wise folly of the hero, in ***Arrow, Osiris,*** or ***The Knight of the Lion.***

McDermott himself has acknowledged his obsession with "the circular journey of the individual who sets forth on a quest of self-fulfillment" [see excerpt below in the Author's Commentary for ***Arrow to the Sun*** (1974)]. The theme of self-transformation (successful or failed) appears again in the latest books, where Papagayo is metamorphosed from mischief-maker to benefactor, while ***The Knight of the Lion,*** like ***Arrow,*** is about "growth, maturity, continuity, and the miracle of belief in oneself and one's god."

Myth, typically, simplifies to achieve generality, and employs a highly symbolic language to talk about the real world. McDermott's artistic tactics are similar. . . . Rejecting 19th c. "representational" approaches to illustration (Crane, Caldecott, et. al.), and turning away too from the more expression-

istic modes of this century, McDermott has deliberately contrived a style at once primitive and contemporary, disciplined by geometry, liberated by color, rigidly conventional in one sense but untrammelled by the demands of naturalism.

The large questions addressed by myth can be particularly well served by an abstract and highly stylized art, such as native folk-art or the Egyptian, Byzantine, and other "hieratic" modes. Reviewers who have criticized McDermott's books for being "cold and uninviting" [see excerpt below by Alice Bach for ***The Stonecutter*** (1975)] or accused them of "impersonality" and a failure "to humanize the story" forget, perhaps, that it is the nature of myth to be at one remove from the "merely" human. Both myth and hieratic art are concerned not with reflecting the world but with transmuting it in accordance with a conceptual vision. (pp. 3-4)

[It may be] pertinent to ask . . . whether the "mystery and magic and transformation" of the artist's vision can be communicated satisfactorily in the 30-odd pages of a picture-book. Once she has seen the animated films, the reader of the books necessarily projects motion into the static figures of the printed pages, and even wills the drawings of ***Osiris*** into life. Despite painstaking adaptation, the books seem, inevitably, diminished versions of the beautiful, rich, and compelling films. . . .

The two most recent books are . . . departures: ***Papagayo*** because it is an original tale, ***The Knight of the Lion*** because in it McDermott has striven for a "more emotional approach" to illustration, a spontaneity and a "loosening up." Its black-and-white line is an attempt to capture the "brutal force" of the original 12th c. Celtic Arthurian tale, to suggest its dynamic yet "dark" quality. Thus, an evaluation of McDermott's achievement must perforce await the time when the artist, like his self-transforming heroes, completes his quest "to revivify the dream-world images" of myth and of the artist's imagination. (p. 4)

Patricia Dooley, "Gerald McDermott," in The Children's Literature Association Newsletter, *Vol. III, No. 4, Winter, 1979, pp. 1-5.*

DAVID E. WHITE

[Gerald McDermott's] films and most of the books are retellings of myths and traditional tales which are filled with mystery, magic, and transformation. (p. 273)

McDermott sees similarities between his two major types of characters: mythic heroes and tricksters. In discussing the aspects of these characters that interest him, McDermott says,

> All my work is about the process of *becoming*, the transformation to wholeness. Whether I've depicted trickster or hero, they represent two sides of the same coin. The trickster reenacts in a comic way the exploits of the hero. The goal is to integrate these opposite traits. I feel sure it is this aspect of mythology that appeals to me and reflects my own becoming as an artist and a person. I strive to give that idea of transformation a tangible form and share it, communicate it, to others. (pp. 273, 275)

[McDermott acknowledges many] factors, often unconscious ones, as influencing his decision to start a certain project. He feels that, in retrospect, he can trace the choice of all the tales to a very specific emotional state or to a certain period in his life, and that there are very clear links between all the books and the films.

> With ***The Voyage of Osiris*** I'm sure I was attracted to the theme of rebirth and regeneration, a 'return from the dead' so to speak, because I was just emerging from a period of about a year and a half when I hadn't been able to do any art work at all. There had been a tremendous swirl of activity connected with the publication of ***Arrow to the Sun,*** the subsequent Caldecott Award, and all the traveling and speaking that followed. It was truly exciting, but when all the cheering had died away, I found there came a period where I could not produce a new work. The public exposure connected with winning the Caldecott had been so separate from my life as a creative artist that it took me a long time to get back on the track again. I had become removed from the intimate and private act of sitting alone in a room and creating. As a result, there was a long fallow period. I was very upset that months, then years were passing and I wasn't producing anything new. When I started to work again, I'm sure I chose ***Osiris*** because I had such empathy with the character as a giver of life, a creator in a certain sense, who is sealed away, bound up, cast away and buried, and then finally re-emerges in a tremendous burst of activity.

Unconscious forces influencing his work were especially strong in his book ***The Knight of the Lion.*** This ninety-six page picture book version of an Arthurian legend was a radical departure for the artist due to the black-and-white illustrations. McDermott's analysis of his work on this project is especially interesting:

> Over the years, in both films and books, the use of vibrant color had become an important tool for me. I became so adept that I knew which strings to pull to achieve an emotional reaction through color alone. I was concerned that I would begin to design by rote, that it would become a formula, that I would start to repeat myself. By doing ***The Knight of the Lion*** in black and white, I was challenging myself to conceive the images in a totally different way. I was consciously denying to myself one of my essential tools. There could be no blithe use of a bright color to cover up a lack of conception. Instead, I was forced to draw spontaneously. It was a great release for me. In fact, it has changed my way of working forever.
>
> Before I saw any of the images for ***The Knight of the Lion,*** I had instead a tactile sensation. It began when I was trying to conjure up a way of approaching the darkness and mystery of this medieval romance. I was sitting in a chair with my eyes closed, trying to envision the setting, and before I *saw* anything I *felt* in my fingertips the texture of granite. From that physical sensation came the image of rough-hewn granite walls, scarred and discolored with age. I then turned to the drawing board, took a piece of very rough water color paper, and started to almost carve away at it with pen and ink—pushing a black crayon over the surface to get

> that same texture that I first felt and then saw. Soon the drawings started to flow. The outpouring of energy for ***The Knight of the Lion*** astonished me. Until then I had always carefully structured and designed the drawings in my books. I drew them, redrew them, traced them, repositioned them. By the time I finished an illustration it might have gone through six to ten phases of preparation. For ***The Knight of the Lion*** I would simply sit each day before a blank piece of paper, my hand would start moving, and then I would draw without any preliminary tracing or sketching. I must have done 150 drawings from which I chose 75 to use in the book.
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> One of the most curious sensations was confronting that blank piece of paper without a preliminary sketch to rely on. I had the same physiological reaction as standing at the edge of a precipice overlooking the sea. It's an attraction-repulsion. You are confronting the void and there's a bit of fear involved. You want to step back from it. At the same time there's a seductive pull that draws you into it. It was that exact sensation, that tightening in the stomach, that I felt every morning when I sat down in front of the drawing board. Sometimes I overcame it in a few minutes or hours. Some days I couldn't overcome it at all. At the moment I did start to draw, however, the sensation vanished and I was free.
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> For me, ***The Knight of the Lion*** was like automatic writing. There was a part of me working that came from such a deep and unconscious place that I wasn't at all aware of it. Even now, when I look at some of the drawings, I'm not quite sure who did them.
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> In a broader sense, I find this process of "taking the leap" occurs each time I begin a new work. Sometimes weeks, even months pass while I stand on the edge, wavering, before plunging in. It's like being a diver and diving deep down inside of yourself.

Because ***The Knight of the Lion*** and ***The Voyage of Osiris*** had such serious themes and "delved into realms that were laden with emotion," McDermott then decided to turn to something bright, happy, and original. Years before, while reading trickster tales in preparation for ***Anansi,*** McDermott had come across the name Papagayo; he never actually found any Papagayo tales suitable for adaption.

> I very much wanted to use the character, though, so I jumped off from the idea of a parrot who is a mischief-maker. An additional source was the widespread folk belief in a monster or fantastic creature who devours the moon. I combined these two ideas and decided to write a tale of my own.

It is not unusual for McDermott to find inspiration for his drawings in sources unrelated to the actual story. "Certainly music is an important element. In my films, for example, the music always comes first and the images are generated by the rhythms of the score."

The impetus for the images in ***Papagayo*** came from a piece of Brazilian jazz the artist was listening to.

> It began with a solo percussion instrument, then other instruments joined in and there was a rhythmic building of sound and of melody that developed into a crescendo. I already had the character Papagayo flying around in my head somewhere, but I didn't have a story written. When I was listening to this music I suddenly saw the jungle, the animals of the rain forest coming awake. First one, then several, and then all of them joining in. That awakening became the central event in the story of Papagayo.

Although McDermott has won numerous awards for his works, there are those who criticize the abstractness of his art. He has never felt the criticisms could be supported, although he does admit to "constantly challenging the perceptions of the viewer." McDermott feels the illustrations speak naturally to children because children

> don't have the layers and layers of perceptual constrictions that adults have acquired.
>
> If anyone feels that the symbols are obscure, it's because they haven't seen the responses of children to the books, the tremendous involvement and identification they have with the characters. . . . I suppose there will always be a handful of people who refuse to acknowledge that something has happened in the visual arts since the turn of the century. I think that viewpoint acts like a dead hand on innovation. It threatens to rob the child audience of some valuable and exciting visual experiences.

There has been an interesting strain in letters from readers that McDermott has received over the years. The letters, written by parents and teachers of exceptional children, state that McDermott's books have reached these children in ways they are not reached even by materials specifically designed for them. For example, in a suburb of Cleveland, a bus brings exceptional children to the library once a week. "I've been told they make a bee-line for my books." McDermott finds this response intriguing. He tells of a particular experience in Fort Wayne:

> The mother of a Down's Syndrome child brought him to meet me and we had a chance to talk before a speech I was about to give. This little boy's favorite book was ***Arrow to the Sun.*** He had never seen my animated film of the same story, so we sat down together in an empty auditorium and screened it. As the film unreeled, he responded to every twist and turn of the plot. He knew what the drama was and what the forces at work were in this very abstract, almost narrationless film. At the point where the Lord of the Sun appears, the little boy leaned over to me and said in a stage whisper, 'That's the Lord of the Sun, but they're just kidding us. He's really God.' (pp. 275-78)

Clearly, McDermott is in the process of becoming. He is writing original stories, illustrating the writings of others, and exploring different visual expressions of mythological symbolism.

> My life and work are inseparably bound up together. If an artist puts himself into his work in the fullest sense—his emotions, his intellect, the symbols from his own psyche—then the work will touch others because it springs directly from the artist's own inner life.

For McDermott, the completion of each book and film has been an "amazement to me, a little miracle. It has been a privilege to do each work, to know it will have an audience, to watch it come to life and fly off on wings of its own." (p. 279)

David E. White, "Profile: Gerald McDermott," in Language Arts, *Vol. 59, No. 3, March, 1982, pp. 273-79.*

***ANANSI THE SPIDER: A TALE FROM THE ASHANTI* (1972)**

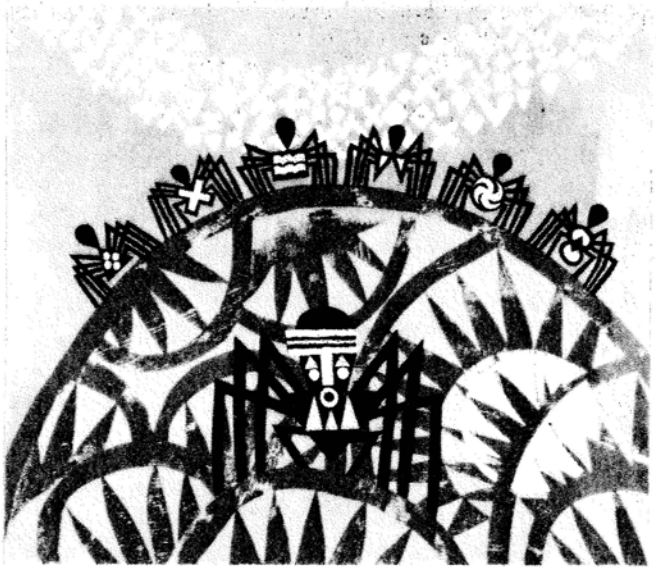
Those already familiar with McDermott's film version of how Anansi put the moon in the sky (an Ashanti tale) will welcome its adaptation to book form. None of the brilliant color, African design, or language pattern have been lost in the transformation.

For those unfamiliar with the film here at last is a vibrant picture book of one of the famous Anansi stories. Perfect for storytelling this book could well spark enthusiasm for the Anansi stories among a younger audience. Don't let it be lost in the folklore collection.

A review of "Anansi the Spider," in Children's Book Review Service, *Vol. 1, No. 1, September, 1972, p. 2.*

There have been many tales of Anansi, but filmmaker McDermott has created a particularly beautiful book, which children will want to hold, to examine, read and hear repeatedly. . . . The rhythm of the Ashanti language has been augmented with fascinating montage illustrations to make a perfect picture book. (p. 86)

Judith B. Rosenfeld, in a review of "Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti," in Childhood Education, *Vol. 49, No. 2 (November, 1972), pp. 85-6.*



From Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti, *adapted and illustrated by Gerald McDermott. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972. Copyright © 1972 by Landmark Production, Incorporated. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Publishers.*

The story is a pleasant vehicle for a graphic explosion of stylized forms, glossy paper, and colors so bright that the book looks as if it would shine in the dark of an African night. This is a handsome book, but by the end I wished that it were not quite so polished a package. (pp. 86-7)

Karla Kuskin, in a review of "Anansi the Spider," in Saturday Review, *Vol. 1, No. 4, April 14, 1973, pp. 86-7.*

Mr. McDermott's profession means that his chief interest is in devising striking illustrations. These . . . seem to be derived from primitive races, and Anansi, the father spider, moves through the pages wearing a witch doctor's mask. The pictures are bold and colourful, but the element of design is so strong that a child may find it difficult to discover what the illustration actually represents, and there is a tendency for the pages to become repetitious. (p. 175)

R. Baines, in a review of "Anansi the Spider," in The Junior Bookshelf, *Vol. 37, No. 3, June, 1973, pp. 174-75.*

Gerald McDermott's **"Prologue"** helps explain the culture which gave rise to the tales of Anansi, and his words reflect the mature theme and symbolism which appear in the story. Like the Ashanti who weave their symbols into their silken fabrics, McDermott weaves their symbols into and throughout his illustrations for the book. His graphic representations of the spider form are evidence of the symbolism contained within the stylized figures.

Within each body of the six sons, an abstract symbol represents the individual's particular skill. Amid geometric landscapes of magenta, turquoise, emerald, and red, the black figures, readily visible, rock across the pages on angular legs.

The white text, highly visible against the brilliant backgrounds, works in and out of the illustrations, adding balance to the compositions on the pages.

Because of the original medium of the tale, the book could well function without a text; accompanied only by the words of an artful storyteller, the illustrations communicate the tale, and though not as artistically cohesive and consistent as . . . [***Arrow to the Sun***], the work demonstrates the range of possibilities that this art form offers. (p. 355)

Linda Kauffman Peterson, "The Caldecott Medal and Honor Books, 1938-1981: 'Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti'," in Newbery and Caldecott Medal and Honor Books: An Annotated Bibliography *by Linda Kauffman Peterson and Marilyn Leathers Solt, G. K. Hall & Co., 1982, pp. 354-55.*

***THE MAGIC TREE: A TALE FROM THE CONGO* (1973)**

Like the similarly spectacular ***Anansi the Spider*** . . . , this is adapted from an animated film and it's difficult not to hear the pulsing jazz music that seems to be visualized on these dynamic, semi-abstract pages, which are distinctly African in patterns and motifs but just as distinctly cinematic in their

vibrant color and kinetic energy. McDermott projects in highly stylized figures and succinctly few words the story of a rejected twin who, by pulling off some leaves, accidentally releases several people including a princess from imprisonment in the magic tree. The princess makes him rich and handsome on the condition that he tell no one the source of his good fortune, and they live together happily until, on a visit to his unloving mother, he forgets his vow and tells her his story. In the end it's a purely visual experience, with Mavunga suddenly remembering his promise, rushing back to his home with the princess, and finding only an empty clearing. A dayglo stunner for the jaded eye.

A review of "The Magic Tree: A Tale from the Congo," in Kirkus Reviews, *Vol. XL, No. 20, October 15, 1972, p. 1187.*

[This book] is far less compelling to the viewer than its movie counterpart. . . . The simplicity and starkness of the shapes and colors, resembling those found in African art, fit the Congo tale perfectly; and the background of the pictures, softer than those of the author's last book, ***Anansi the Spider,*** has given the second book far more aesthetic appeal. Although the book stands as a pleasing entity in itself, in comparison with the author's movie—in which movement, color, form, and music are so perfectly blended—the book seems like only the echo of a vibrant voice. (pp. 586-87)

Anita Silvey, in a review of "The Magic Tree: A Tale from the Congo," in The Horn Book Magazine, *Vol. XLVIII, No. 6, December, 1972, pp. 586-87.*

[This fairy tale from the Congo] is presented with a minimum of text, in highly stylised native-type design on vivid coloured backgrounds. It is very attractive to look at, beautifully suggesting magic and mystery and tangled jungle, but (at any rate on first reading) very difficult to follow. Perhaps this is because it is based on the author's (American) animated film, from which uncaptioned stills are presented as an integral part of the narrative, without explanation, even at climax points like the ending. Once the reader grasps this idea, there is much to enjoy in this novel presentation.

M. Hobbs, in a review of "The Magic Tree," in The Junior Bookshelf, *Vol. 38, No. 6, December, 1974, p. 338.*

[This folk tale] is remarkable for its illustrations. Intense colours—blues and oranges make a background for the formalised, predominantly black patterns and figures which build up the pictures. The style, like the story, is almost aggressively African; strange, but fascinating.

Valerie Alderson, in a review of "The Magic Tree," in Children's Book Review, *Vol. V, No. 1, Spring, 1975, p. 38.*

ARROW TO THE SUN: A PUEBLO INDIAN TALE **(1974)**

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY

I've been on a journey past paper mountains, flying men, foolish spiders, talking trees, and the flaming arrows of the solar fire. It has been a journey of discovery through the bizarre and exotic forms of world mythology. The Rainbow Trail has become a path for my work as an artist.

The riches of myth are usually lost to us in adulthood. . . . But myths have a deep appeal and significance for the human mind, and the task of the artist is to reawaken these images. The purpose of my journey has been to explore and share the evocative qualities of these ancient tales with those still open to the message of myth. (p. 123)

Soon after finishing my first film [***The Stonecutter***], I had the immense good fortune to meet Joseph Campbell. Dr. Campbell has written extensively and eloquently of the relationships between mythology and modern psychology. In his four-volume study, ***The Masks of God,*** he has traced the evolution of myth and its function in world culture. Campbell has shown that the prime function of mythology is to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, "to waken and give guidance to the energies of life." These ideas, illuminated in Campbell's ***The Hero with a Thousand Faces,*** became the basis for all my subsequent work. (p. 125)

In each of [my] films, I was concerned with the circular journey of the individual who sets forth on a quest of self-fulfillment. In psychological terms, he must make a break with the past, overcome obstacles to change, and grow. Ideally, the seeker can then return, his full potential realized, and take his place in society with the "wisdom and power to serve others."

This theme finds its fullest expressions in my book and in my film of ***Arrow to the Sun***—with a significant difference. In previous works, the circle was broken. Through some weakness or failing, or perhaps sheer foolishness, the protagonist fails in his search, and the ultimate boon is lost. In this Pueblo Indian tale, however, the circle is complete, and the questing hero successfully finishes his journey. It is the symbolism of this beautiful myth that I would like to discuss.

Before I do, however, I want to mention one of my personal artistic trials: the transition from film to printed page. This jarring shift from a medium of time to a medium of space posed some special problems. When George Nicholson, now Editorial Director of Viking Junior Books, put forth the idea of book adaptations of my African folklore films, it seemed an easy task. After all, four thousand discarded animated drawings were stacked up in my studio. Why not simply shuffle through them, choose forty, and send them off to the printer? Because the result would be a souvenir program of the film—a totally unacceptable solution.

We returned to the original film storyboard, and I tried to reconceive the visual material in a series of doublepage spreads. It was an unsettling experience because the control I enjoyed as a film director was lost. There was no longer a captive audience in a darkened room, its gaze fixed upon hypnotic flickering shadows. Gone were the music and sound effects and the ability to guide the viewer through a flow of images with a carefully planned progression. Now the reader was in control. The reader could begin at the end of the book or linger for ten minutes over a page or perhaps merely glance at half a dozen others. As an artist, I was challenged to resolve these problems.

When I began my work on ***Arrow to the Sun*** . . . , however, I knew from the outset that the book and the film would be conceived concurrently. With the sensitive and patient collaboration of my editor at Viking, Linda Zuckerman, and my art director, Suzanne Haldane, I sought to solve the problems of continuity and design present in the earlier books. The introduction of large areas of quiet space, filled with solid, rich color, improves the pacing. The use of the Rainbow Trail motif, a multicolored band, helps to guide the reader's eye across the page. The elimination of text from many spreads allows the

images to speak. These are some of the techniques that eased my passage as an artist. Though story line and character design were shared, the book in form, texture, and color took on a life of its own.

In outline and impact, this ancient, pre-Conquest Pueblo Indian tale is a perfect example of the classic motif of the hero quest. The hero of this myth, which is the creation of a solar-oriented culture, is a young boy who must seek his true father. The object of his search, the Lord of the Sun, embodies the constancy and power of life-sustaining solar fire—a symbol that is central to Pueblo ritual. The sun, in Carl Jung's phrase, is "the classic symbol of the unity and divinity of self."

Corn, the staff of life for the people of the pueblos, is an important companion symbol to the sun. The constant, life-sustaining warmth of the sun nurtures the golden ears of corn. In searching for a graphic motif that would unite these two concepts, I slowly turned an ear of corn in my hands, studying the color, texture, and form. Then I broke the ear in half. At that moment, the symbol hidden beneath the surface was revealed—a moment re-created in my film. The cross section of the ear of corn, with its concentric rings and radiating rays of kernels, forms a perfect image of the sun.

If one looks at the tip of an ear of corn—an important ritual article in Pueblo culture—one sees that four kernels come together to form a quadrilateral sign. I took this flowered cross, with its four kernel rays, and bound it by a solar circle. This became the unifying visual element in my retelling of ***Arrow to the Sun.*** It first appears as the spark of life, then as the hero's amulet. It identifies him as he proceeds on his journey through a landscape permeated with the golden hues of sun and corn.

The Boy is a child of the divine world and the world of men. He is the offspring of Sky Father and Earth Mother—a lineage he shares with other great heroes of world mythology. (pp. 126-28)

His questing path is the Rainbow Trail—a multihued border motif that appears in the sand paintings, pottery designs, and weaving of the Southwest. It runs through the pages of my book as well; down through the sky to the pueblo, across the earth, blazing up to the sun, framing the drama of the kivas, and bursting forth at the moment of the hero's assimilation to the sun.

The Arrowmaker is encountered on the Rainbow Trail. He is a *shaman*—a man of magical powers. Only he has an open eye and the inner vision required to perceive the Boy's true heritage. He provides the supernatural aid that enables the Boy to continue his journey. The magical arrow that he fashions releases the Boy from his earthbound state, just as one of wisdom opens the closed mind of another. He sends the Boy on the self-revealing way of the father-seeking hero.

Upon passing through the fiery sun door, the Boy confronts the mighty Lord of the Sun. This is hardly the completion of the journey, however, but the beginning of the true challenge. (pp. 128-29)

The Boy must descend into the abyss of the ceremonial chambers—the four kivas—to prove his heritage. He must face these tests and emerge reborn from the dark womb of the kiva. A true hero, he accepts the challenge, "'Father, . . . I will endure these trials.'" Lions, serpents, and bees await the Boy. In the ensuing confrontations, though threatened by these creatures, he is not destroyed. Significantly, neither does he destroy the animals, for they represent the dark forces of our own unconscious. They are the shadow beings of the dream state, the internal demons that torment us and block our growth. We cannot destroy them, but we can calm them and integrate them with our functions. We can assume their positive qualities and put them at our service.

This interpretation is quite different from the one we might apply to the mythology of the West which is most familiar to us. It represents a kinship and reverence for the natural world that is opposed to Greek and Hebrew tradition. Heracles destroys the titanic snake, the Hydra. He kills the lion, strips it, and wears its skin as a symbol of his dominance. Absolute domination is the message of these myths. But for our Indian hero, the human world and the animal world are reconciled. The Boy assumes the strengths of the lions, even as they become purring kittens at his feet. He overcomes the squirming chaos of the serpents and creates a circle, a symbol of wholeness and unity as is the corn-sustaining sun. (The serpents inhabit the maizefield and devour the corn-destroying rodents.) The bees, which can sting with killing power, instead give the miracle gift of sun-colored honey to the Boy.

The deepest point of the descent into the abyss occurs in the Kiva of Lightning. Here flashes the polar opposite of the constant warmth of the sun. Unpredictable and violent, it shatters the immature form of the Boy. When he emerges from this final crisis, he is reborn and "filled with the power of the sun"—filled with a spiritual awareness born of his trials. If this solar symbolism seems remote, perhaps we should listen to the response of a nine-year-old to ***Arrow to the Sun:*** "I think that the Lord of the Sun knew all along who the Boy really was, but he made the Boy go through the tests anyway, so that the Boy would know who he was."

The journey on the Rainbow Trail is near its end. The Boy, radiant in his new garments, returns to earth bearing the message of his father. He began as an individual searching for his true identity, isolated from his community. He completes the journey as a self-aware messenger of life-sustaining powers, ready to take his place in the community. . . . Surrounded by the people of his village, joined with the Corn Maiden, watched over by Sky Father and Earth Mother, enclosed within the arc of the Rainbow Trail, the hero steps onto the World Center and joins in the Dance of Life.

The Rainbow Trail of the artist has come full circle. It is not an end, but a continuation, an ever-repeated cycle. The challenge is eternal: to descend again and again into the "image-producing abyss" to discover visual evocations of the compelling myths of mankind. (pp. 129-31)

Gerald McDermott, "On the Rainbow Trail," in The Horn Book Magazine, *Vol. LI, No. 2, April, 1975, pp. 123-31.*

Gerald McDermott is a sophisticated artist/filmmaker who, instead of listening for the story's own voice, *uses* ethnic material as a vehicle for his spectacular effects. The theme of the Pueblo Indian legend that shapes his ***Arrow to the Sun*** . . . is familiar to countless diverse cultures and McDermott's clipped text makes it truly anonymous (just as he turns his people into highly stylized dolls—the women might as well be Japanese). Another problem is that McDermott's picture books have their first incarnation as animated films, and though he redoes the drawings for the new format they continue to resemble a series