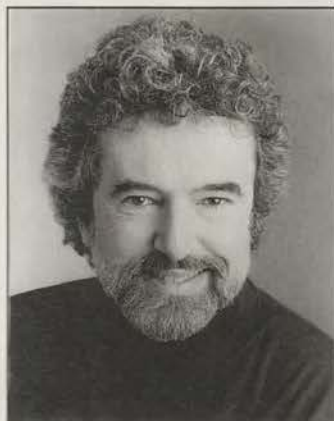


The Art of Gerald McDermott

by Dona Helmer



Misha

Gerald McDermott

Since the discovery of fire, people have gathered around campfires and hearths at night to listen to and enjoy stories. Initially, they told about the day's hunt, but when the stories of the hunt became commonplace, they let their imaginations soar with stories about fantastic creatures in an attempt to explain natural phenomena and the human condition. Storytellers were wordsmiths who could weave the magic of the tale out of air and could create mind-pictures for listeners. Perhaps in order to remember these stories, early humans also began to draw pictures on the walls of caves.

Picture books are a logical extension of this early storytelling and story-drawing experience. Gerald McDermott comes from this old race of storytellers and artists. He is able to write and illustrate tales that represent the cultures of many peoples.

HELMER: The illustrator is an artist who must have a good eye, a vivid imagination, and, generally, years of training in technique. Tell us a little about your background.

McDERMOTT: My art training began during my childhood in Detroit. My parents enrolled me in a Saturday morning program at the city's great museum, the Detroit Institute of Art. I eagerly attended those classes every Saturday from the time I was 4 until I was 14. In the morning, we were taught the rudiments of art, drawing basic shapes and mixing colors. In the afternoon, we were free to explore the galleries of the museum and to do our own sketch versions of the paintings and sculptures. The freedom to wander through the halls of the museum, to be surrounded by beautiful art, had a profound effect on me. It excited my imagination in a deep way. By the time I was 9 years old, I had decided

that I was going to be an artist.

I've only recently come to the realization that not only was I in the presence of great art, I was wandering through a great hall of myth. Virtually every work in that museum was based on a mythological motif. I think that entered into my unconscious, and to this day, my work deals with mythological ideas.

HELMER: How do you go about creating a work?

McDERMOTT: My work is always generated by the power and excitement of the story, a story that I respond to in an instinctive and emotional way. I've been delving into myth and folklore for 30 years and every once in a while a tale leaps off the page and captures my imagination. I might not immediately understand why I am drawn to a particular tale, but time has shown me that the stories I choose have a symbolic and emotional importance for me at that moment in my life. It might be accurate to say that the stories choose me. Then, after I have traced all the variants of the tale and reach an understanding of its basic structure and meaning, but before I put pencil to paper, I talk. I actually walk around my studio talking out loud—declaiming the story until it begins to take on an oral rhythm. When I feel I have the right flow of words, a pleasing cadence, an oral telling that will stand on its own, I begin to commit words to paper. Next, I put the text through a process of refinement, paring down to about half the length of the first draft. This distillation results in a very spare text, just enough words to move the action forward.

HELMER: Do you do a lot of research?

McDERMOTT: That comes next. I start to delve into the symbolism of the culture from which the story comes. I look very closely at the folk art. For example,

now I am working on an Amazonian trickster tale about a character called Jabuti. So I've been looking at the art of the Amazon, getting a sense of color and shape, not to copy anything but to kind of weave it into my own contemporary sense of design and come up with something that is mine—and at the same time has a sense of the place and time where it originated.

HELMER: Critics have said that you have the ability to create a unified world of color in your picture books. Did you have any specialized training in the use of color?

McDERMOTT: My art training in high school, Cass Tech, a very special public high school in Detroit with a curriculum in art and music, confirmed what I vaguely felt as a child artist. Color is an emotional tool. Our course of study was based on Bauhaus principles, and we did many months of formal color experimentation, learning color values, and how the interaction of different colors can enlarge or reduce forms, or create a kind of kinetic energy. The play of color and the tension of opposites in my book illustrations spring from those years of study and experimentation.

HELMER: How do you use specific colors to create effect?

McDERMOTT: *Raven* is an example of color used to create an emotional and dramatic feeling. At the beginning of the story, the formative, dreamtime period, cool hues predominate—dark grays and blues. The ominous, forlorn aspect of the frozen landscape helps to create a mood of foreboding. But once inside the lodge of the Sky Chief, soft warm tones and deep shadows envelop all the characters. There is a divine energy in this space and you should feel embraced by the comforting golden aura. The crisp, bright shapes of Raven stand apart from all this and emphasize his hard-edged spiky otherness.

HELMER: Your Caldecott Honor Book, *Raven*, is a book about a trickster stealing light. How did you show the shift in power when Raven took light from the Sky Chief?

McDERMOTT: The carved and painted box that originally contains the glorious ball of light is a crucial element. As long as it remains the receptacle of light, it glows and is central to the composition. After the theft of light, it becomes dark and small and assumes a minor role on the page. The contrast between the light

carried in Raven's beak, in the upper right of the double-page spread, and the dark angular recesses of the empty box, at the lower left, emphasizes that the power has shifted to Raven.

HELMER: Were there other special considerations in the design of this book?

McDERMOTT: One major consideration was to make sure that the visual source of light within this magical world was consistent. By emphasizing the shadows cast by the characters, the carved roof poles, and the stepped floorboards of the lodge, there is a sense that all light is emanating from that ball in Raven's beak. The ball is the only place in the book where paper shows through—the actual pure white of the paper without a bit of ink on it. Every other part of the book's surface has a tone and texture. As result, that unprinted circle becomes almost luminous.

One of the goals I strove for in illustrating *Raven* was to create a complete world within the covers of the book. I wanted it to be a world with its own inner logic and organic unity. Once you step into that realm, once you open the pages of the book and begin the story, you accept the laws of that imaginary land. The images are pushed off the very edges of the paper so that the colors fill your field of vision and become a portal that opens into this other world.

HELMER: Do you purposely limit your use of the number of colors?

McDERMOTT: Yes, I tend to limit my palette for each book. Using all colors within one painting amounts to using no color at all. One might as well be working in black and white because there is no dominant color force. With so many different colors and no dominant hue, the force of the color is dissipated. I tend to have one dominate color, with subordinate accents to emphasize its power.

HELMER: The book that has, perhaps, the most strongly worked out color scheme is *Arrow to the Sun*, for which you received the Caldecott Medal. The book has a limited palette and is basically orange, brown, and yellow, with touches of black.

McDERMOTT: *Arrow* came at a time when I was formulating a kind of visual vocabulary for my picture books. The world of the Pueblo is invoked with the colors of the desert, corn, and sun. Throughout the story, Boy's journey is symbolized by shifts in color. For exam-



From Gerald McDermott, *Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest*

Coyote: An Illustrator's Notes

One of my goals was to echo Pueblo design and create complexity out of elegant simplicity by repeating and subtly altering the same basic shapes. Coyote's step-design outline links him with traditional Pueblo motifs. His malleable body bends into absurd configurations as he undergoes the tribulations of a vain, undisciplined fool.

To retain the brilliance of the hues, and to prevent one color from bleeding into an adjoining color, I masked the area of Coyote's shape with liquid rubber frisket. Then I brushed in the orange background with broad strokes. When the paint was dry, I peeled off the frisket to expose the white paper. Next, I carefully applied turquoise paint to create the image of Coyote. I also rubbed in dark blue pastel to add design and texture to his form. The color tension between the orange and the blue created a visual vibration that makes the figure of Coyote appear to rise off the printed page.



Last year, on Native Culture Day, the first-graders at Zuni Pueblo, put on a performance of this book. Their parents performed traditional music to accompany them. The little "crows" wore traditional Zuni costumes, while the boy who played Coyote sported a long blue nose and fluffy tail. When it came time to adorn him with plumage, his feathers were attached with Velcro tabs.

*"Coyote had become rude and boastful.
He danced out of step.
He sang off-key."*

I deliberately shaped the text in progressively shorter line lengths and arranged the crows in a gradually descending row to correspond with their diminishing enthusiasm for the foolish Coyote.

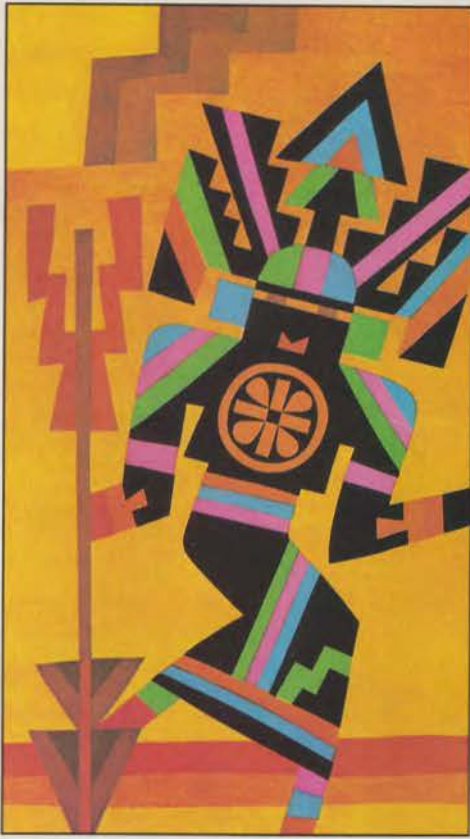
In contrast with Coyote's ragged shape, the crows are compact and rigid---an expression of their balance and control. With limited visual means to portray their moods from spread to spread, I relied on subtle changes in the shape of their brows and the positions of their feet.



The shape of Old Man Crow's pendant is designed to suggest traditional Zuni jewelry of coral, turquoise, jet, and shell. It contains the triangular symbol for thunderclouds and vertical bars to represent rain. In the past, it would have taken hours of library research to check these motifs. However, I was able to fax my sketch to a friend at the Zuni Pueblo crafts cooperative in New Mexico. Within minutes, a verifying fax came in reply.

I rendered my preliminary sketches in transparent watercolor, for its ease of handling and quick-drying properties. For the final illustrations, I used gouache, an opaque water-based paint thick with pigment and rich in hue, to achieve a color intensity that reproduces vividly in print.

--Gerald McDermott



From Gerald McDermott, *Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale*

ple, when Boy is transformed he literally spills out from the rainbow onto the next page. He has made the transit from a monochromatic figure into a supernatural being that contains the colors of creation. Symbolically he is imbued with the colors—and the power—of his father.

Within this double-page spread, the reader revisits other moments in time: the moment at which the Boy is fitted to the bow and shot up to the heavens; his emergence from the kiva of lightning; and then when he is again fitted to the bow after a brief reunion with his father. When Boy finally returns to earth, he becomes the link between the two worlds in much the same way that Raven is the link or courier between the human world and the world of the gods.

HELMER: The last scene in *Arrow* recalls the events of Boy's journey; in *Zomo the Rabbit*, the robes of Sky God seem to fore-

shadow everything.

McDERMOTT: Yes, a whole system of symbols emerged as I put together the small watercolor dummy for *Zomo*. Out of the design of Sky God's robe came all of the design forms that are in the hills and flowers as well as the symbols for Zomo's three impossible tasks. These designs became building blocks for all the elements of Zomo's world. The shapes in the animals, the shapes in Zomo's shirt are simply variations and elaborations on the form of the Sky God who creates the world. The spirit of the Sky God, in effect, permeates every aspect of the composition.

I feel strongly that if the design is conceived in a metaphoric and powerful way the reader/viewer will recognize ideas without necessarily being conscious of them. The child reader will assimilate an idea without it having to be explained in words.

HELMER: You have the ability to create movement and to show the passage of time. You use the technique of dividing a double-page spread into several different panels in order to subtly convey this passage. Does that technique come from your background as a filmmaker?

McDERMOTT: Since I came to books after years of making my own animated

films, it influenced the way I approached the printed page. My use of serial panels or multiple images really began with my first book, *Anansi the Spider*. The idea of a series of images that develop or transform is a very basic part of my visual vocabulary. I've returned to this technique in the *Tricksters*, the series of books that I'm currently working on.

The 32-page picture book format is sometimes limiting and it's necessary to telescope action into one page to keep the story moving. In *Zomo*, for example, I can show Big Fish dancing, his scales falling off, and his embarrassed attempt to cover himself all in one spread.

HELMER: Your later book, *Coyote*, is a trickster tale also set in the Southwest and yet you used a different palette from *Arrow*.

McDERMOTT: *Coyote* is a comic antithesis of the hero. His flight to the sun, like all his adventures, ends in disaster. The colors I used in *Coyote's* tale emphasize his abrasive character. Orange and blue are complementary colors on the color wheel and when put next to each other, vibrate and create a jangling visual tension. The form of Coyote, who is etched in bright turquoise blue, bounces off a brilliant bittersweet orange sky. The resulting battle between the colors practically animates the figure of Coyote; the blue against the orange actually creates a vibration.

HELMER: Were there any surprises in illustrating *Coyote*?

McDERMOTT: The big surprise was the realization, fairly late into the project, that all the action in *Coyote* plays itself out against thin air. *Zomo* and *Raven*, by contrast, were rich in setting and background. In *Raven* there were the expanses of the Pacific Northwest filled with trees and lakes and the rich interior of Sky Chief's lodge. In *Zomo* I had for a stage a highly stylized world of colorful plants and flowers as well as the depths of the sea.

None of those elements were available in *Coyote*. The action plays out on a barren mesa top or in the sky. My solution was to make the sky a "character" in a sense. Great sweeping expanses of broad brushstrokes became a powerful presence. The orange background highlights the silhouettes of Coyote and the crows and gives the entire book a glowing quality.

HELMER: What tales from other cultures are you going to explore in the

Tricksters series?

McDERMOTT: I'm now working on a wonderful Amazonian tale about a tortoise named Jabuti. That will be followed by a Hawaiian folktale, and if I can find the right one, I would love to include a Cambodian or Vietnamese tale.

HELMER: One hears a great deal about changes in the publishing industry. Have new techniques of reproduction affected your work?

McDERMOTT: Advances in technology haven't yet affected the way I work—I still favor brush and paint over computer—but they have increased my confidence that my original art will be reproduced more accurately. The disparity between my original illustrations and what finally appears on the printed page has been reduced to a minimum. Of course, an ace production manager is always essential. Beyond the technical aspects, the diversity and richness of picture books is, for the moment, enormous. We could both think of dozens of examples of new approaches to visual storytelling that are pushing the picture book into new areas. It is quite a wonderful time to be a children's book illustrator.

A Sampling of McDermott

Arrow to the Sun: A Pueblo Indian Tale.

1974. 48p. Viking, \$14.95 (0-670-13369-8); Puffin, paper, \$4.99 (0-14-050211-4).

Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the Southwest. 1994. 32p. Harcourt, \$14.95 (0-15-220724-4).

Papagayo: The Mischief Maker. 1992. 32p. Harcourt, \$16.95 (0-15-259465-5); paper, \$6.95 (0-15-259464-7).

Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest. 1993. 32p. Harcourt, \$14.95 (0-15-265661-8).

Zomo the Rabbit: A Trickster Tale from West Africa. 1992. 32p. Harcourt, \$14.95 (0-15-299967-1).

Audiovisual

The Stonecutter. Weston Woods. 6min. 16mm film, \$195; video, \$60; filmstrip with audiocassette, \$30.

Voyage of Osiris. Weston Woods. Filmstrip, o.p. ■

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