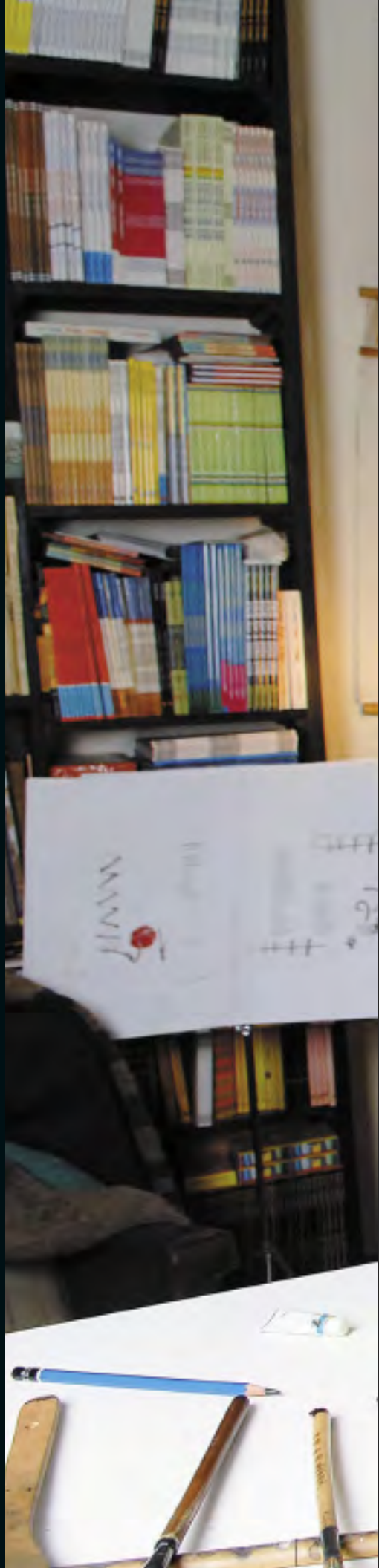


With dozens of children's books under his belt, plus a Caldecott Medal and Caldecott Honor, Chris Raschka '81 continues to push the boundaries of children's literature.

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B e B O P  
L i f e

BY J. TROUT LOWEN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHAEL SOFRONSKI / POLARIS

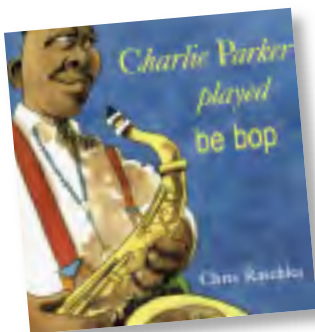




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**S**ome ideas fall flat right out of the box. Like carrying a spaghetti lunch in your pocket, or a house paint called “mud puddle.” Or maybe a picture book for preschoolers about jazz legend Charlie “Yardbird” Parker, one of the most influential saxophonists of the twentieth century.

At least that’s how it seemed when award-winning illustrator and author Chris Raschka ’81 first pitched the Parker idea to friends. It wasn’t just that jazz seemed a mighty grown-up topic for tykes or that Parker’s music was so complex he baffled many jazz fans even in his own time. It was the less savory aspects of Parker’s life — his alcohol and drug abuse — that struck a bad note.



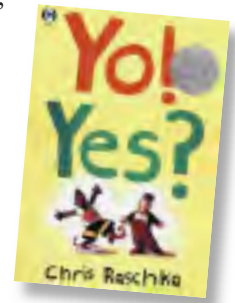
But Raschka persevered. The book he envisioned, and ultimately created, wasn’t as much about the man as about his music. With its swirling wash of colorful, quirky illustrations and scatlike text of phrases and nonsense sounds (*Reeti-footi, reeti-footi, reeti-footi, ree*) that beg to be read aloud, Raschka captured the rhythms of Dizzy Gillespie’s “Night in Tunisia.” Raschka’s book, *Charlie Parker Played be bop*, was nearly as revolutionary as “Bird” himself. *Publisher’s Weekly* noted it as a “sly, joyous exercise in avant-garde that stretches the definition of picture book.”

“At the time *Charlie* was published, there was nothing along these lines,” says Richard Jackson, Raschka’s longtime friend and editor.

But like Charlie Parker’s bebop, not everyone understood. The *School Library Journal* found the illustrations “sometimes confounding,” and Raschka’s repeating text added to the “general confusion.” Even so, *Charlie Parker* caught the attention of the book world, receiving praise and recognition from the American Library Association and American Booksellers Association, and launching Raschka’s career.

Sixteen years later, with more than 30 children’s books under his belt, another two dozen illustration credits, and a Caldecott Medal and Caldecott Honor, Raschka is still pushing the boundaries of children’s literature with inventive, off-beat storytelling and expressive, engaging and imaginative illustrations.

One year after *Charlie Parker*, Raschka’s book *Yo! Yes?*, turned heads with its economical 34-word story of a budding friendship between two boys, one black and one white. The book won a Caldecott Honor, and *School Library Journal* placed it on its 100 Books that Shaped the Century list.



In 1998, Raschka’s book *Arlene Sardine* shocked some in the children’s book community with its depiction of the journey of life and death of Arlene, a brisling fish, from her early days schooling in the fjord with “ten hundred thousand friends” to the packaging plant and a tin-y coffin. Death, a theme to which Raschka recently returned in *The Purple Balloon*, a book for the Children’s Hospice Society of America, seemed a “dubious” subject for the pre-K set. “This has got to be some sort of a bad joke, right?” demanded the indignant staff at *Booklist* of *Arlene Sardine*. Another reviewer described the book as an “acquired taste.”

One reviewer described Raschka's *Arlene Sardine* as an "acquired taste."

But *Arlene*’s rich visual effects and storytelling won converts too. A reviewer in the *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* wrote, “One thing for sure, Raschka’s work always surprises, challenges, and intrigues us one way or another.”

In some ways, Raschka's life has a lot in common with a Charlie Parker composition: fast, loose and filled with intricate, improvised detail and colorful diversions. His father is American, his mother Viennese; the family lived in Germany twice while he was growing up and visited often in between. When he arrived at St. Olaf as a freshman in the fall of 1977, Chris Raschka was Chris Durnbaugh. Raschka is his mother's maiden name. When he and his wife, fellow St. Olaf student Lydie Olson, married, they literally put their parents' four surnames in a hat and picked one.

As a boy growing up in suburban Chicago, Raschka loved to read, draw and play music: first the piano, then the violin, and finally settling — at the pleading of his junior high school music teachers' pained ears — on the viola. But he was also fascinated by animals.



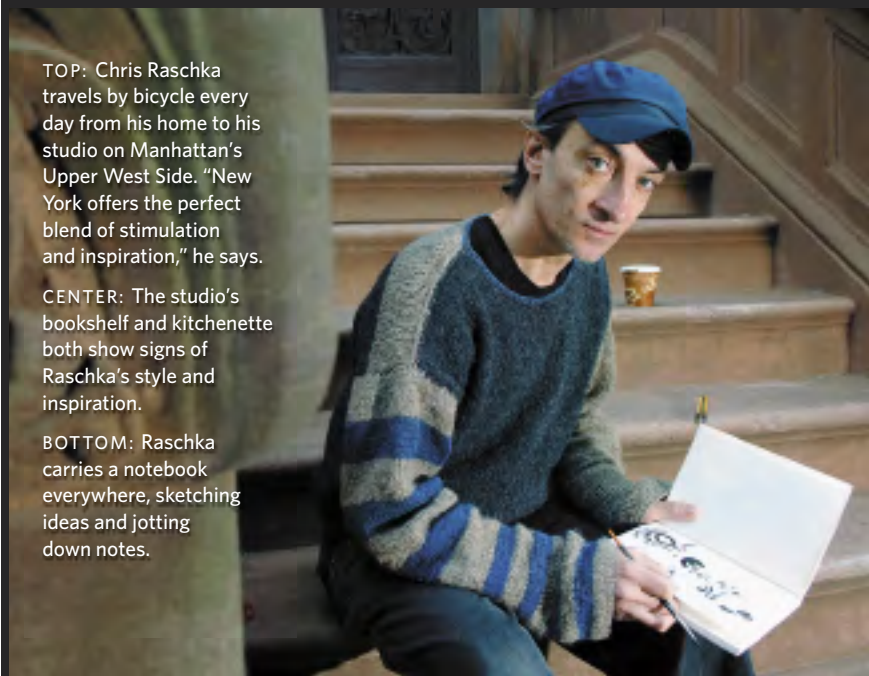
"In high school, I read comparative animal behavior texts as leisure reading," he recalls. Interested in science and music, Raschka and his mother set off one weekend to visit colleges. St. Olaf wasn't on the list. They just stopped by to see a neighbor, a student a few years older than Raschka. She wasn't in, but a friendly admissions counselor found Raschka standing in the old student center. "It had been a long, kind of miserable day looking at schools," he recalls. "St. Olaf was such a warm welcome. It turned my head."

Raschka majored in biology, but he also played in the St. Olaf Orchestra and dabbled in art. "I used to get my major credits taken care of, then slip off to the art department to reward myself ... but it was never anything I expected to pursue in life."

Biology was. And yet, "when I was attending St. Olaf and choosing my courses, I would not have dreamed in a thousand and one years that 25 years hence I would be writing and illustrating children's books," says Raschka. "My education there prepared me perfectly for what I do now."

Raschka says his adviser, Dr. Alice Burton, now a professor emerita of biology, always encouraged him to "let my whims and interests lead me wherever they might, and this idea is something I had to relearn years later as a creative artist."

Walking across Central Park recently with his son, Ingo, bird watching while on their way to the Rudolf Steiner School where Ingo is a seventh grader, Raschka was reminded of a final biology exam with the late professor Arnie Petersen.



TOP: Chris Raschka travels by bicycle every day from his home to his studio on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "New York offers the perfect blend of stimulation and inspiration," he says.

CENTER: The studio's bookshelf and kitchenette both show signs of Raschka's style and inspiration.

BOTTOM: Raschka carries a notebook everywhere, sketching ideas and jotting down notes.

At St. Olaf, Chris Raschka was Chris Durnbaugh. When he and fellow St. Olaf student Lydie Olson married, they put their parents' surnames in a hat and picked one.

The exam was also a walk through the woods. "Dr. Petersen would point to a bird high in a tree and say, 'That's question one,' or he would hear a bird song in a thicket and say, 'That's question two,'" remembers Raschka. "I described this to my son, and he said 'Cool.'"

After he graduated from St. Olaf in 1981, Raschka sought an internship in India with famed crocodile conservationist Rom Whittaker. But Whittaker proved as elusive as his crocs, so Raschka joined his college roommate in Germany volunteering to work at a home for children with serious illnesses.

"That proved be such a moving and life-changing year for me that when I returned from Germany I was no longer as interested in crocodiles as I was in children, basically," he says.

## The road less traveled

Back in the United States, Raschka was at loose ends. When a friend's mother suggested medical school, Raschka thought, "why not?" He applied to the University of Michigan and was accepted. Then, while auditing courses in Ann Arbor in preparation for the fall semester, Raschka says, "something else happened."

That something else was a chance meeting with Lydie Olson, who was pursuing an education major at Eastern Michigan University and living in a cooperative house a couple of blocks from Raschka's kitchenless apartment in Ann Arbor. He began sharing meals there, and not long after, the two married.

Restless, Raschka decided to postpone medical school. He and Lydie applied for the Peace Corps, and in the summer of 1984, they were assigned to Liberia. Before they could take up the post, however, the country turned violent. Instead, they went to work at a Lutheran-run children's home in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"We suddenly were the cottage parents of nine children, ages three through 12, so it was a bit of a shock," Raschka remembers. "We had limited time off every three or four days. That's when we both started painting like crazy, in order to sort of balance ourselves."

They began showing and selling their work — in Raschka's case, Fauve-ish watercolors — through a local gallery run by a woman from New York. It was a turning point. "That was the very first moment that I thought maybe I would, could, actually, pursue a career in art," Raschka says.

At the end of their two years of service in St. Croix, Raschka had lost interest in medical school, but he went ahead with plans to enroll. And then he "jumped off a cliff." Not literally, of course, but it was, he agrees, something of a Wiley Coyote moment.





“Finally, when it came down to it, I couldn’t give up the painting, so on the morning of the first day of orientation at the University of Michigan, I called them up and said I wasn’t coming. That was the beginning of my artistic career in earnest.”



Admittedly scrambling, Raschka opened the classifieds and landed the “first, best-looking part-time job” he could find, which turned out to be for a Michigan attorney. That job led to another, working as an illustrator for the Michigan Bar Association’s journal. Each month he produced all of the illustrations in the magazine, making it look like the work of four or five different artists. It was good training, he says, even if his irreverent style landed him in hot water with his boss. “I would get into lots of fights with him because of not drawing the lawyers with enough gravitas. I would sometimes give them big noses and things like that.”

Inspiration arrived one day while browsing a bookstore. It came in the form of a little picture book called *A Pup Grew Up*, illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky. “I loved that book so much that it dawned on me that this was a direction I could go, into children’s books.”

## Scrapple from the Apple

**I**t was fellow Ole and friend Dan Egan ’80 who put out the welcome mat for the Raschkas in the Big Apple. They had twice visited the city and loved it, finally taking the plunge to move there. Fortuitously, Egan just happened to have a neighbor who was moving out and needed to sublet. The friends still live just a block apart.

In New York, Raschka had hoped to support himself playing music while working on his art. But it was not to be. He put the viola down for good as a result of a change he made that summer in how he held his left arm that resulted in painful tendonitis. Instead, he set up a studio in his apartment and began to work on his art full time. Mornings he worked on ideas for children’s books. Afternoons were spent drawing editorial and commercial illustrations to pay the bills.

While Raschka pursued his dream, Lydie became a Montessori teacher, though she left that to work as a freelance writer when Ingo was born nearly 13 years ago. Today, Lydie is president of “our little tumble-down church on 100th Street, Trinity Lutheran, which was built 100 years ago by hard-working German immigrants, survived a stare down with the mighty Robert Moses in the 1950s when literally every other building around it was torn down, and now may face the wrecking ball after all,” says Raschka.

New York, says Raschka, offers them the perfect blend of stimulation and inspiration. “I’ve always felt supported and energized by New York, and it’s kind of where I found my feet artistically,” he says, adding, “Oddly enough, walking home across Central Park, I’m sometimes reminded of my happiness at St. Olaf, just contemplating the stream of lectures, concerts, art shows, etc.”

New York is also where he found the inspiration for *Charlie Parker*, listening to “Bird Flight,” a long-running radio

## The world according to

In an interview with *Scholastic.com*, Chris Raschka describes his audience: children.

"First of all, I consider them to be very much the same as adults. Which is to say that I consider myself to be very much the same now, and some things are harder. Talking to strangers is a little bit easier today. The entire month of August has improved since I was eight. On the other hand, learning another language is a lot harder now. And I ran much more as a child than I do today, which is too bad. However, I don't feel that the me of thirty years ago is much different from the me of today. I don't recall any single moment of the great change, or many little steps. I just remember a long, gooey flow from the beginnings of my self-awareness to now. This view of my childhood definitely influences my work."

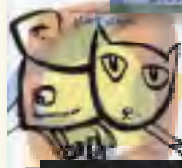
*Chris Raschka*



*Arlene Sardine* by Chris Raschka

*Can't Sleep* by Chris Raschka

*Charlie Parker Played be bop* by Chris Raschka



*Elizabeth Imagined an Iceberg* by Chris Raschka

*Five for a Little One* by Chris Raschka

*John Coltrane's Giant Steps* by Chris Raschka

*Like Likes Like* by Chris Raschka

*Mysterious Thelonious* by Chris Raschka



*New York Is English, Chattanooga Is Creek* by Chris Raschka

*R and (R): A Story about Two Alphabets* by Chris Raschka

*Ring! Yo?* by Chris Raschka

*Simple Gifts: A Shaker Hymn* by Chris Raschka

*Talk to Me about the Alphabet* by Chris Raschka

*The Blushful Hippopotamus* by Chris Raschka

*The Purple Balloon* by Chris Raschka

*Waffle* by Chris Raschka

*Yo! Yes?* by Chris Raschka

*A Child's Christmas in Wales* by Dylan Thomas, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms* by Paul B. Janeczko (Editor), Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*A Poke in the I: A Collection of Concrete Poems* by Paul B. Janeczko (Editor), Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Another Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Armstrong* by Claude Nougano and Maurice Vander, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Be Boy Buzz* by bell hooks, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)



*Frisettes en fête* by bell hooks, Chris Raschka (Author, Illustrator)

*Good Sports: Rhymes about Running, Jumping, Throwing, and More* by Jack Prelutsky, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Granny Torrelli Makes Soup* by Sharon Creech, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Best Shorts: Favorite Short Stories for Sharing* by Avi (Compiler), Chris Raschka (Illustrator), Carolyn Shute (Contributor)

*Boy Meets Girl/Girl Meets Boy* by Chris Raschka, Vladimir Radunsky (Illustrator)

*Fishing in the Air* by Sharon Creech, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)



*Grump Grown Grown* by bell hooks, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Happy to Be Nappy* by bell hooks, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Little Tree* by e. e. cummings, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Movin': Teen Poets Take Voice* by Dave Johnson (Editor), Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*I Pledge Allegiance* by Chris Raschka (Illustrator), Bill Martin, Jr. (Commentaries), Michael Sampson (Commentaries)

*Skin Again* by bell hooks, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*Table Manners* by Chris Raschka, Vladimir Radunsky

*The Four Corners of the Sky: Creation Stories and Cosmologies from Around the World* by Steve Zeitlin, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

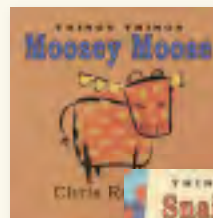
*The Genie in the Jar* by Nikki Giovanni, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*The Grasshopper's Song: An Aesop's Fable Revisited* by Nikki Giovanni, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*The Hello, Goodbye Window* by Norton Juster, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*The Owl and the Tuba* by James H Lehman, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)

*The Saga of Shakespeare Pintlewood and the Great Silver Fountain Pen* by James H. Lehman, Chris Raschka (Illustrator)



### THE "THINGY THING" BOOKS:

*Snaily Snail* by Chris Raschka

*Goosey Goose* by Chris Raschka

*Lamby Lamb* by Chris Raschka

*Whaley Whale* by Chris Raschka

*Moosy Moose* by Chris Raschka

*Doggy Dog* by Chris Raschka

*Wormy Worm* by Chris Raschka

*Sluggy Slug* by Chris Raschka



program devoted to Parker and his music, as he drew. Raschka dedicated the book to the program's host, jazz historian Phil Schaap.

"It was really Schaap's inspiration, that and his basic feeling is that jazz is American classical music that is not being taught as such in American schools," Raschka recalls.

Although he had published one picture book of his own in Michigan, *Charlie Parker* was an audacious risk for a new author. The first editor turned it down. Then a friend suggested Orchard Books Editor Richard Jackson because of his reputation for publishing "weird" books. Raschka sent him the manuscript unsolicited.

"It fell out of the envelope with a little hand-written note," Jackson remembers. "I looked through it, and I went around the corner to my wife — I was working at home — and I said, 'How can I not publish it?'"

With Jackson's blessing, Raschka began to develop the full illustrations for *Charlie Parker*. Much like the musicians he admires, Raschka drew multiple "takes" of each image rather than reworking a single image to completion.

"I knew that I wanted it to be emotional and expressive above all, and sort of fast and loose, because those are the things I liked very much as a child. The kind of painting style of Ludwig Bemelmans's *Madeline* books," says Raschka. "I also wanted it to be in some ways related to a jazz approach of kind of loose and fast and improvised, not terribly rehearsed."

It's a process to which he has stayed true, Raschka says, although his style changes somewhat from book to book. He tries to let the content of the book dictate the style, although he often develops the words and pictures nearly simultaneously.

"The text may come a little bit before, but often I'll do some of the text and then immediately start sketching out ideas, because that will impinge on the text very much," he explains. "I've always tried to make things pretty immediate and fairly flat. I don't use a lot of depth of space in my drawings."

That hasn't lessened their impact, however. In addition to the Caldecott honors, the *New York Times* has named one of Raschka's books among the 10 Best Illustrated children's books of the year four separate times. And in 2001, Saks Fifth Avenue used Raschka's illustrations from his book *Little Tree* as the basis of their holiday window display. The story of a little tree that dreamed of being a "beautiful Christmas tree in a city far away" was inspired by e. e. cummings's tribute to a tiny Christmas tree.

In addition to music and literature, Raschka says he finds inspiration in art — particularly the work of Paul Klee and Pierre Bonnard — and in the world around him. He carries a notebook everywhere, sketching ideas and jotting down notes. A book he's working on now, titled *Black Crow*, started with his observation of crows and their antics and was stimulated, he says, by a conversation he had last summer with Alice Burton in the living room of her home on St. Olaf Avenue.

Each morning, Raschka heads to a favorite local library to write for an hour and a half; then it's off to his studio in a

Raschka's book *Yo! Yes?* won a 1993 Caldecott Honor, and *School Library Journal* placed it on its *100 Books that Shaped the Century* list. His illustrations of Norton Juster's *The Hello, Goodbye Window* won the prestigious Caldecott Medal in 2006.

former art school for an afternoon working on various book projects. Usually, he has several going at once. It takes an average of three years for his picture books to make the journey from idea to publication, Raschka says. In addition to his own books, he has illustrated numerous books for other writers, including Norton Juster, Nikki Giovanni and bell hooks (née Gloria Watkins). Raschka's illustration of Juster's *The Hello, Goodbye Window*, won the prestigious Caldecott Medal in 2006. The American Library Association awards the medal annually to the American artist who has created the most distinguished picture book.

Raschka also has co-written and co-illustrated two books with his good friend Vladimir Radunsky, *Table Manners* (2001) and *Boy Meets Girl, Girl Meets Boy* (2003), and they're working on a third titled *Hip Hop Dog*. In *Table Manners*, Radunsky and Raschka play starring roles as the characters Dundunya and Chester in "the edifying story of two friends whose discovery of good manners promises them a glorious future."

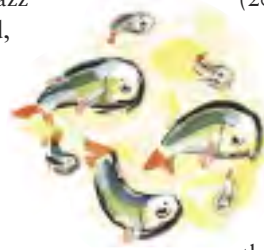
The story may be edifying, but Raschka jokes that the process of collaboration was nearly fatal. "Two illustrators at the same drawing table can be a nightmare."

Radunsky characterizes the collaborators as "like partisans. We get together for one project, strike, and then disappear until the next time," he says. "Or it could be compared to a jam session in musicians' lingo."

Ingo Raschka makes a cameo appearance in the end pages of *Table Manners* and occasionally turns up surreptitiously in other books, along with the family cats. (Before he moved to a separate studio, the cats occasionally made their own contributions, padding across Raschka's wet watercolors.) But with the exception of a series of books Raschka refers to as the thingy things (*Wormy Worm*, *Snaily Snail*, *Whaley Whale*) that he based on little events in his son's life, Raschka says his books are mostly about his own experiences as an eight to 10-year-old boy, although he is currently working on a longer book targeted more toward children his son's current age.

Not long ago, as he was walking his son to school, Ingo asked Raschka what exactly a liberal arts college was. Raschka says, "I tried to explain philosophy, humanities, etc., and what a major was. And then he said, 'Can you major in magic?' 'Possibly, possibly,' I said."

Since *Charlie Parker*, Raschka has twice returned to jazz, writing and illustrating picture books on musical giants







Yo?

I knew a little fish once who wanted to be a sardine.



Don't give me 1,2,3.  
Give me letters!  
Give me ABC!



"Raschka's work always surprises, challenges and intrigues, one way or another."



Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane. In *Mysterious Thelonious* and *John Coltrane's Giant Steps* Raschka translates music into images, using color and form to explain and express both beauty and complexity. In *Mysterious Thelonious*, Raschka weaves together 12 colors in a tighter and tighter pattern as the book progresses, with the 12 values on the color wheel corresponding to the 12 tones on the chromatic scale. The final image is colored tapestry as dense as any Monk composition. Told in syllables, the text leaps across the page in staccato bursts, jumping up and down like notes on a scale. The *New York Times Book Review* selected *Mysterious Thelonious* and *A Poke in the I* among its Best Illustrated Books.

"It's an evocation of the music," says Richard Jackson of *Mysterious Thelonious*.

Raschka's illustration of Dylan Thomas's *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, also earned a spot on the *Times* 10 Best list in 2004. The playful brush and ink drawings on rich, textured paper are filled with vibrant color and bring a contemporary sensibility to the timeless classic.

"Raschka's illustrations are not an illumination of the story so much as a response to it, and perhaps to the music that lies within all of Dylan Thomas's writing," wrote Marigny Dupuy for the *Times Review of Books*. "These fluid, almost abstract pictures are a riff on the story's many aspects, creating an adjoining theme of movement, emotion and atmosphere."

"At the time I was working on the book, I would read through the entire text at a sitting, then create illustrations based on what came to mind from the whole text as well as from my own childhood," says Raschka. "The essence of the story, it seemed to me, was the mishmash of memory."

Raschka has taken a similar approach in an upcoming book reinterpreting the classic story *Peter and the Wolf* in an imaginative new way. "It's a very musical replication of what you hear if you listen to *Peter and the Wolf*," says Jackson. "It's once again a new approach to an old thing."

That's much like how Raschka explains jazz to young listeners on the audio recording of *Charlie Parker Plays be bop*:

Imagine someone telling a story, a story everyone knows pretty well already, like *Little Red Riding Hood*. But now imagine someone new telling the story, but adding new details, new twists, more background, new characters and making the whole thing sound completely new and exciting. That's what Charlie Parker did.

And that's what Chris Raschka does, too. Bird would be proud. 🐦

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