

Q&A with Creator Aaron Becker

The world you create in Journey is so imaginative and magical. How did you begin to envision this world, and what was the process of capturing it like?

Creating the world itself was actually the easiest part—it's what comes most naturally for me. As a kid, I would fill up blank pieces of paper with pictures of fantastical places. And as an adult, I've worked in the film industry as a conceptual artist, designing imaginary worlds destined for the silver screen. So it was a very intuitive process to invent the locales in *Journey*. What I found most challenging, however, was finding a compelling character to inhabit that world. Once I figured out the idea of the girl using the red marker to help her on her way, it all came together rather quickly, but not without many revisions and drafts!

Can you describe the steps you take to create your artwork?

The first thing I do is map out the story in thumbnail sketches. As I refine the pacing and plot, the sketches tend to get bigger and more detailed, but ultimately, I try to keep things relatively loose at this stage. Once I have an idea of what needs to be designed, I start my research. This is the most fascinating part of the process for me because it's always fun to learn something new about this universe we inhabit. As an example, for Pallonezia, the waterfall city, I looked for inspiration in the architecture of provincial France, Spain, and Italy. I also try to look into my own past for ideas.

When I was twelve, my family took a vacation to Europe, and I think this had a big impact on the designs in *Journey*, especially the visit we took to Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy. After I've filled my head with these details, I'll actually go into a 3-D program on the computer and build a model of each element: every turret, building, and tower. This is time-consuming, but I wanted the buildings of Pallonezia to have a level of detail that would be very hard to render by hand. Once the models are virtually built, it's time to get back to actual drawing; I use the 3-D model as a starting point and fill out the world with lots more detail in pencil. This then gets transferred onto heavyweight watercolor paper, where I'll redraw the lines in pen and ink. Once the ink has dried, I go right on top with the watercolor. There's no room for error! There was a real learning curve for this approach, but I'm glad I stuck with it, because I think watercolor adds a sense of warmth, immediacy, and magic to the artwork that other media just couldn't have provided.

The art in Journey conveys so much meaning without the use of words. Can you talk about the power of art for young readers?

Pictures have always been very powerful for me. I think this is the case for most kids, but we're so bombarded by imagery these days that it's easy to lose touch with those images that might require a bit more time to digest. Kids, however, can be patient enough to spend the time sifting through a wordless book for hidden details or secondary meanings. While some books are there simply to entertain, others allow children to become fully immersed into their fictions. They encourage us to touch down into something a bit more fundamental within ourselves.

What has the experience of creating your first picture book been like?

When I was little, I wrote and illustrated my own picture books on the reverse sides of my father's unlined work paper. After graduating college, I decided that illustrating books would make a pretty good gig. But that was more than fifteen years ago! The detours of several careers (graphic designer, camp counselor, art teacher, film designer), as well as the time I spent at art school, have all led me to this point where I'm finally doing what I want to do. Needless to say, it's very rewarding. *Journey* has taken over my life for the past several years, and I am absolutely thrilled to share it with everyone. What's even more exciting is that there may be more adventures on the way, but that's all I can say for now.

What kind of journey would your red marker take you on?

Good question. I use my red marker every day. Sometimes I travel deep into the farthest reaches of space. But usually I stick closer to home, at my drafting table, where I use it to doodle ideas for a book that's just beginning to grow.

