

Journeys in the Picture Books of James Rumford

BY JOSEPH STANTON

James Rumford is an internationalist of the picture-book form. His love of the multicultural and international is obviously evident, for instance, in his love of languages. (He has studied twelve.) Rumford's books are frequently about seeking knowledge and journeying. Often the two missions combine so that the journey is on behalf of seeking knowledge. At the heart of many of his books is the consideration of the nature of language and the role played by language in telling and showing what the world is. In his books, words are often also pictures; pictures are often also words. The genius of his best books is commonly fueled by the interrelation of words and images. As important as his linguistic expertise is to the mission of his work, his knack for visual design is often what most contributes to making his books uniquely compelling. This article consists of excerpts from a longer, unfinished essay. In this discussion of Rumford's works, I will consider books dominated by his interest in journeys.

The Island-below-the-Star (1998)

In 1998, when James Rumford developed his book about Polynesian voyaging, he was undertaking to tell a story about the journey-culture of Hawaii, the place that had become his home. In many respects, Polynesian voyaging is among the world's most quintessential travel narratives. Polynesian voyagers, it was sometimes thought in the bad old days of naive speculation about Pacific islanders, had set off into the unknown in bold and surprisingly reckless ways. Now, it is understood that Polynesian voyaging in double-hulled canoes was the product of long-developing expertise in seamanship. As has been repeatedly demonstrated in recent years by the exploits of the modern-day Polynesian Voyaging Society and its reconstructed vessels such as the *Hōkūle'a*, the Polynesians who crossed enormous stretches of ocean were able to do so because of their accumulation of skills and knowledge. Rumford depicts this accumulation in *The Island-below-the-Star* by presenting such a voyage as the achievement of five brothers, each with a different "love" that enables an essential talent:

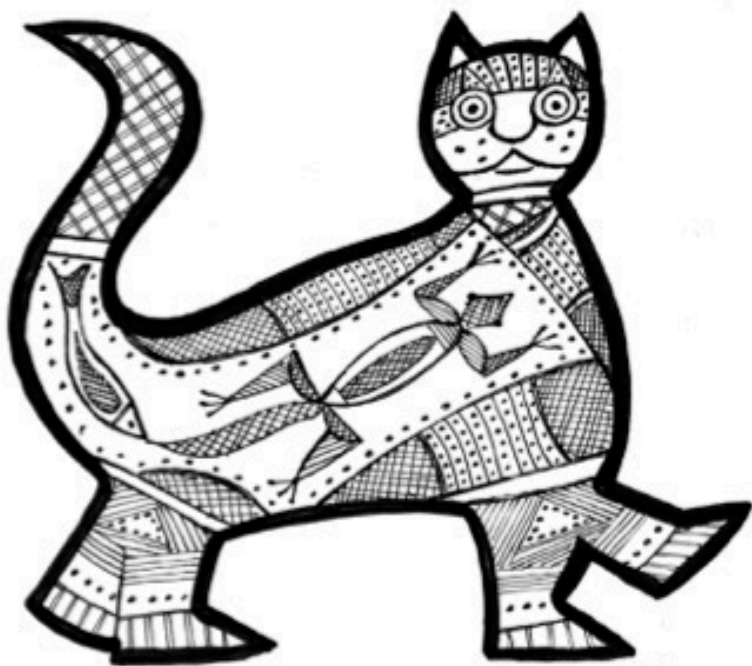
Hoku "loved the sun, the moon, and especially the stars." Naale "loved the sea." Opua "loved clouds." Makani "loved the wind." And little brother Manu "loved birds."

During the voyage, each of the brothers' talents becomes necessary to the success of the voyage. A climax is achieved by having the underappreciated youngest brother clinch the arrival at the new island by means of his understanding the significance of the sighting of birds. Thus, in a classic pattern for Rumford, knowledge informs and enables voyaging even as the voyage itself leads to the discovery of a place previously unknown. In a certain respect, the narrative echoes the classic picture book *The Five Chinese Brothers*; but, in Rumford's reinvention of the brotherhood of talent, it is a historically important set of talents that gets attention rather than the magical displays of the Chinese brothers. Rumford's tale is a fable, but it is a fable based in the facts of voyaging.

Traveling Man: The Journey of Ibru Battuta, 1325-1354 (2001)

There is a certain irony that it was in 2001 when Rumford completed and published a book on a renowned Arabian traveler. He had been planning the book for many years, and he had been writing it for two; but its coming into print one month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks was, he feels, "sadly serendipitous." Rumford had hoped the book would open up dialog between Arab-American children and children of other backgrounds. One hopes it has accomplished something along those lines for many readers. Certainly it provides a gorgeous context for such conversations. The title page of *Traveling Man: The Journey of Ibru Battuta, 1325-1354* declares that the book is "Written, illustrated, and illuminated by James Rumford"; and it is by means of the "illuminations" that the nature of Battuta's journey is especially well captured and appreciated. The illuminations display maps, gorgeous Arabic letterings, depictions of flora and fauna, people of the various regions, ships and their nautical settings, and colorful abstractions that strikingly accent the presented details.

Battuta was a man, much like Rumford, who relished travel and appreciated diverse cultural circumstances. Battuta's 75,000 miles of travel that took him from his home in Morocco to such places as Egypt, Mecca, Egypt, Jerusalem, Delhi, China, Russia, and Tanzania seems all the more remarkable when one considers that he was roaming the world in the fourteenth century, even before the travels of Columbus had demonstrated that the world was round. Battuta was fascinated by maps, and Rumford compellingly depicts maps that chart the comings and goings of Battuta's journeys. Rumford's book employs a path embedded with textual narrative that carries the reader from page to page and the traveler from land to land. Thus, the book operates in a double way. The boxed texts give us more detailed accounts while the words-on-the-path text keeps us attuned to the here-to-there basics of the journey. Battuta



Calabash Cat © James Rumford

encounters many dangers and is wounded by a rebel's arrow at one point, but kindly people tend to him and restore him to health. A basic implication of the book is that a traveler, especially one who is a scholar and a pilgrim, can encounter kindness and welcome. Battuta declares towards the end of the book that traveling "makes you lonely, then gives you a friend."

The genius of Rumford's *Traveling Man* lies in the brilliant freedoms that he takes with the forms he associates with the project, which make it a map as much as a narrative, a collage as much as a book. Gorgeous decorative patterns provided by Rumford's imitations of such things as Arabian and Chinese calligraphies, ancient maps, fabric patterns, and a star-filled night sky—as well as by his employment, at certain points, of abstract splashes and dots of color—serve as backgrounds for the boxed texts and the terrains over which the words-on-the-path text pass. The book is filled to the brim with information, but a child can easily navigate it without being intimidated or overwhelmed because of the basic adventure tale at its heart.

Calabash Cat and His Amazing Journey (2003)

Calabash Cat and His Amazing Journey is a parable that gets to the essence of what travel teaches us about the nature of the world. Although the tale provides a universal message, there is, as usual with Rumford, a specific geographic location to the story. Rumford declares that his protagonist is a West African cat and explains that he was inspired to write the story after his wife purchased a large gourd (or calabash) that was shaped like a cat. The wood-burnt decorations of the Kotoko people of the West African country now known as Chad are the inspiration for the markings on the cat and the various other animal characters in the book. The highly stylized figures are drawn in a firm-edged manner and placed against a mottled-gold background. A single horizontal line, whose color changes from page to page, indicates the progression of Cat's travels. The English text is set off against a translation into the Arabic dialect of Chad. The lovely calligraphy of the Arabic text adds another decorative element to the design.

The simplistic knowledge that the Calabash Cat seeks is indicated at the start of his journey: "One day, he set off down the road to see where the world ended." When the road takes the Cat to "the edge of the great desert," he stops, thinking that he has reached the place where the world ends; however, a camel shows up and refutes that conclusion. The camel carries Cat to "the far side of the desert where the grasslands began" and where the camel declares that they have reached the true end of the world. As the pages turn, one animal after another appears to take Cat to the world's concluding place. First, the horse gallops Cat to the beginning of the jungle; then the tiger takes him to ocean; then the whale takes him to the other side of the ocean; and, finally, the eagle lofts him across multiple more landscapes until Cat is back to his home. Thereby, the eagle with his overview of the endless earth has provided the definitive lesson, teaching Cat that the round world has no end. Calabash Cat set off to seek the answer to a naïve question, but his journey teaches him about the variety of the endlessly round world. The witty equality of all landscapes indicated by the book's sampling of realms underscores Rumford's frequent internationalist message: that no country is better than the others and that the extensive world should be explored in order to make possible mutual understandings.

Chee-Lin: A Giraffe's Journey (2008)

Chee-Lin: A Giraffe's Journey chronicles the journey of a very real creature, while also telling the story of how and why that creature came to be regarded as legendary. Rumford gives the name of the giraffe as Tweega, which is the



Chee-Lin: A Giraffe's Journey ©James Rumford

Swahili word for "giraffe." The Chinese who eventually become the caretakers of the giraffe refer to him as "Chee-lin," because they regard him as a character famous in Chinese mythology, "a horned beast with the body of a deer, the tail of and ox, and the hooves of a horse." The enormous, long-

necked size of the giraffe reinforces for the Chinese the notion that he was a fabulous creature. One of the inspirations for the book was *The Tribute Giraffe with Attendant* by Shen Du, a Chinese painter who lived from 1357 to 1434. That fifteenth-century painting, which belongs to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is displayed in the beginning pages of the book, and the circumstances in which it was painted are explained and illustrated later in the book.

At each stage in the giraffe's journey from Africa to China, Rumford provides plausible dramatizations of how this unusual animal was transported and includes the presence of various human keepers that might well have been involved in the process. Some of these humans are kind and attentive to the giraffe; others are indifferent and negligent. The unexpected nature of journeying is indicated throughout the book by the insertion of comments by his various keepers declaring the end of the giraffe's travels. In each case, Rumford indicates that the commenter "couldn't have been more wrong" as the transported giraffe is taken from the African plains to the East African coast and then to an Arabian port and then to a series of Indian ports and onward to a series of Chinese ports and, at last, ending up in Beijing. One of the little-known historical facts that forms the backbone of this story is the existence of a fifteenth-century Chinese voyaging enterprise that involved huge (480-foot long) ships that had as many as ten masts. As is often the case in Rumford's books, much of the more detailed history is relegated to the concluding appendix of the book so that the historical details do not get in the way of the enjoyment that the book provides to young readers. The point of view throughout the book is often that of the giraffe himself. Children reading this book or having it read to them can connect with the distresses and amazements of travel as experienced by the captured creature. The point of view of humans who encounter the giraffe is also given to us in ways that underscore how surprising an encounter with such an unusual and exotic creature would have been for people in these fifteenth-century places. For Rumford, the giraffe's trip was wondrous for the giraffe and wondrous for the humans who received him. *Chee-lin* was published in 2008 and shows Rumford at the top of his game as an artist, writer, and book designer. ■

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