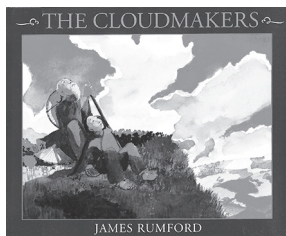


Knowledge in the Picture Books of James Rumford: The Second Part of an Essay in Progress

BY JOSEPH STANTON

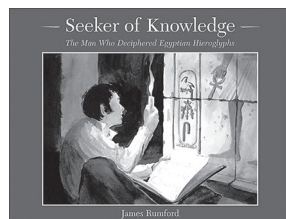
James Rumford is an internationalist of the picture-book form. His love of the multicultural and international is obviously evident, for instance, in his love of languages. (He has studied twelve.) Rumford's books are frequently about seeking knowledge and journeying. Often, the two missions combine so that the journey is in 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 knowledge.



***The Cloudmakers* (1996)**

The Cloudmakers (1996), one of the first of the Rumford books to address the value of knowledge, differs from his later such books by not showing us a character who is seeking knowledge. The knowledge in *The Cloudmakers* is already possessed by a Chinese grandfather, and the plot has to do with the arrival of a need to demonstrate that knowledge. Rumford places the grandfather and grandson in the year 751 A.D. and has them captured by the Great Sultan of Samarkand. The pair avoid being sold into slavery by means of the grandfather's demonstration of his talents as a "cloudmaker." What the story refers to with gentle wit as "clouds" is, in fact, one of the greatest of all Chinese inventions, rice paper. The Arab captors are so impressed with the old man's skill and its product that the grandfather and grandson are asked to provide training in the precious art of cloudmaking and then "the Sultan gave them their freedom and filled their pockets with gold."

The gentleness of this transaction and the somewhat stereotyped character of the grandfather mean that this book is a fairy-tale-like story whose fictional demeanor somewhat differs from subsequent Rumford books about knowledge, which are more explicitly and extensively tied into historical details. Nevertheless, this well-told tale with its lovely watercolor illustrations is both eloquent and elegant. It beautifully reveals to its audiences of children and their parents that paper, something we so much take for granted, was once an innovation and a product that developed in a particular cultural context and was subsequently and gradually shared with the larger world.

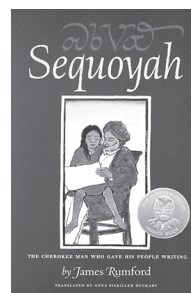


***Seeker of Knowledge: The Man Who Deciphered Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (2000)**

Among Rumford's most compelling books about seeking knowledge declares his theme in its title, *Seeker of Knowledge: The Man Who Deciphered*

Egyptian Hieroglyphs (2000). This book tells the story of Jean-Francois Champollion, the man most responsible for the solving of the mystery of the Rosetta Stone, who thereby unlocked the key to deciphering ancient Egyptian writings. This astonishing picture book manages to convey intricacies of a very highly specialized linguistic topic in such a way as to convey the excitements of an historically important investigation in a kid-friendly manner. The key to the power of this book is that Rumford gets the reader to identify with the enthusiasm and curiosity of his young protagonist. Above and beyond the extent to which the children reading this book can fully comprehend the nature of Champollion's achievement, there is, in these pages, a capturing of the worthiness of the ambition to learn and a demonstration that even a child can aspire to making important discoveries. In the center of the book, when young Champollion is turned away by adult scholars who do not feel that a mere boy can be of any help to their studies, Rumford declares that these old guys were failing to appreciate how much a young person can accomplish: "They did not see the fire burning in his eyes. They did not recognize the genius who had already learned all the known languages. They did not know that he was a seeker of knowledge, one who would not rest until he had found the answer."

Among the delights of *Seeker of Knowledge* is the scattering, throughout the text, of little lessons in the meanings of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Rumford enhances the fun of these pictures-that-are-also-words by subtly and gently teaching the reader to understand them. He tells the reader that we can all understand this; and, by the time we reach the end of the book, we find, to our surprise, that we can. This rare book makes the history of knowledge and the knowledge itself fun to consider. The watercolor illustrations well illustrate the developing narrative, while line drawings of the hieroglyphs sometimes appear in the borders of the text, sometimes are sprinkled in the text itself. *Seeker of Knowledge* encourages receptive young people to dream big dreams about trying to solve the puzzles of the world.

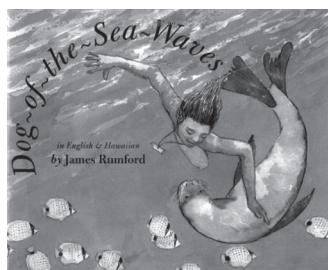


***Sequoyah: The Cherokee Man Who Gave His People Writing* (2004)**

In 2004, Rumford published another remarkable consideration of knowledge and language in *Sequoyah: The Cherokee Man Who Gave His People Writing*. As with *Seeker of Knowledge*, we have a person determined to address a seemingly impossible task of knowledge, and, once again—because of the protagonist's dedication, hard work, and the arrival of key insights—the difficult

goal is reached. Among the striking contributions of this book is the inclusion of translations of the text into the Cherokee language that are presented underneath the English. To accomplish that, Anna Sixkiller Huckaby served as translator. Once again, the graphic appearance of the Cherokee translations and their placements on the pages contribute to the graphically effective book design. The prominent size Rumford gives to the non-English lettering in his books is a declaration of equality. He asserts by book design that all languages are equally important and that the language that the reader is less familiar with is actually all the more fascinating *because* it is less familiar.

In a note at the front of the book, Rumford comments on the technique of his woodblock-print-looking illustrations. “The illustrations were done with ink, watercolor, pastel, and pencil on drawing paper adhered to a rough piece of wood, the texture of which was brought out with each pass of chalk and colored pencil.” He cites two contemporary artists (one Native American and one Chinese) as influences on the style of these pictures. He also mentions that the example of ukiyo-e woodcuts by Hiroshige were helpful with regard to the handling of a tall, narrow format. Clearly, Rumford was seeking a stylized, woodgrain look for these attractive pictures. Indeed, this format and style combine to communicate his story simply and clearly. As with many of the best picture-book makers, Rumford effectively adapts his picture-making style from book to book to achieve results attuned to the nature of each project. His images as well as his words are nets to capture knowledge.

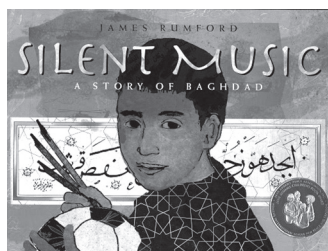


Dog-of-the-Sea-Waves (2004)

Another book Rumford published in 2004, *Dog-of-the-Sea-Waves*, presents knowledge in another sort of way. This book is, on one level, a sequel to his 1998 book *The Island-below-the-Star* in that it involves the same five Polynesian brothers presented in the earlier

book, but this time the story is not about journeying; it is, rather, about a witnessing of the flora and fauna of the Hawaiian islands that the voyaging brothers encounter upon their arrival. While the plot of the book primarily concerns the friendship of the youngest brother with a native-to-Hawai‘i species of seal, Rumford uses the book as a whole to present many of Hawai‘i’s native flora and fauna. Some of the Hawaiian species—such as the ‘ō‘ō‘ā bird, the milletseed butterflyfish, the ‘i‘iwi bird, the nene goose, and the ‘io hawk—are shown in action in their environment, while numerous others are depicted and labeled in the margins and corners of the text. Altogether twenty-two species are included. In the concluding pages of the book, Rumford catalogs these living things and provides details about their past and/or present situations in Hawai‘i. His appendix also provides a map of the Hawaiian islands, which features not only the major inhabited islands but also the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, those dozen or so small masses of land that are seldom noted in books about Hawai‘i but that are crucial environments for some of the species Rumford is telling us about.

Although Rumford has jam-packed this book with information, the simple charm of the plot and the loveliness of the watercolor illustrations make it a book of knowledge that young readers can easily enjoy. A subtitle of the book indicates that it is “in English and Hawaiian,” and this promise is fulfilled by a double-page-spread complete translation of the text into Hawaiian that is provided at the back of the book. With the translation in hand, a parent, teacher, or elder who wanted to read the entire book out loud in Hawaiian while showing the pictures to children would be able to do so.



Silent Music: A Story of Baghdad (2008)

Silent Music: A Story of Baghdad could be James Rumford’s most beautiful book thus far. I am tempted to call it his masterpiece, but perhaps that is premature; no doubt, he has

many other masterful pieces up his sleeve that will be forthcoming in the future. The excellence of this book is difficult to describe. It needs to be seen to be appreciated.

In this book, Rumford’s talents that we have seen in others of his books—his use of collage, his knack for color and design, and his genius for presenting language as graphic form—all come together to great advantage. The “silent music” of the title is the calligraphic writing of the Arabic language lovingly practiced by a young boy in emulation of Yakut, an ancient Afghanistani scholar. Knowledge resides in this book in references to Yakut and in demonstrations of the art of calligraphy, but the knowledge is quietly blended with the everyday life of a boy who loves to practice the striking movements of both calligraphy and soccer. Actions involving the visualization of both these activities sing across Rumford’s pages as calligraphic marks and soccer-game movements. In this book Rumford wonderfully manages the visual possibilities of collage. The collaging of calligraphy, fabric patterns, pieces of currency, soccer cards, advertising pictures, and so forth blend and weave in the fabric of this gorgeously rich but, nonetheless, easy-to-enjoy book.

This book has more strong points than can be easily cataloged. One nicely ironic point is made when the boy demonstrates for the reader that the calligraphy for the word for war, *harb*, is dangerously easy to write, while the word for peace, *salam*, is a challenge to the calligrapher. The pervasiveness of war in Baghdad in recent years and the unavailability of peace is a sad fact that the book regretfully illustrates in several beautiful ways. We have here a celebration of calligraphy and boyhood that is also a lament for the seeming inescapability of war and its ravages.

Conclusion: Journeys to Knowledge

For Rumford, knowledge is a much-celebrated good thing, and a journey is both a way to gain knowledge and a fine thing in its own right. He understands the world to be wide, diverse, and full of puzzling matters that require intellectual effort to solve. The challenges of knowledge are not, however, for Rumford, concerns to be feared or avoided. For his characters, every complication to be grasped is an opportunity to be welcomed. There is an exhilaration available to Rumford’s characters in their difficult circumstances that drives his narratives. We can readily identify with his questing characters because Rumford so clearly and compellingly tells their stories and so beautifully illustrates them. ■

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