

Robert Sabuda's remarks at Atha Tehon Memorial - October 17, 2014

Many years ago, when I was a junior at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, I woke up late one morning on a very important day. Pratt felt strongly about the merits of internships. "Experience through work" was one of their unwritten mottos. And on that important day, we were to select our internships at the Guidance counselor's office. On that day, one of the very few days I might add... I overslept.

By the time I arrived at the Guidance Counselor's office, her Rolodex of available internships had grown sadly thin, a Charlie Brown Christmas Tree of available positions for aspiring artists.

I'd always thought that when I graduated from college I would be a Corporate Graphic Designer, wearing a suit and tie, rushing to the office and overseeing important ad campaigns about the latest groundbreaking laundry detergent. This was the kind of internship I wanted, hustle and bustle and stylishly dressed people murmuring and nodded smartly at stunningly drawn storyboards.

But fate would not have it. I sat in the Guidance Counselor's office and stared at the two remaining cards in the Rolodex. I don't recall the first card, which must have been truly terrible for me to forget. The second card read "Dial Books for Young Readers." I had no idea what that meant but envisioned a place which made children's books shaped like telephones, a plastic rotary cover of numbers to spin with a finger.

"Well...?" my Guidance Counselor asked, clearly bored and utterly unsympathetic.

The following week I walked through the doors of Dial Books for Young Readers and was ushered into an office, which, surprisingly, looked, almost exactly like my dorm room. It was a mess. There were mountains of books stacked on every available

surface. There were papers strewn all over the floor, a giant jigsaw puzzle that I would soon learn to delicately navigate, because the woman whose office this was, knew the contents of each piece of paper and where it belonged.

That woman was Atha Tehon and as soon as I stepped into her office I knew I was home. I had no idea who she was and only over the course of that semester did I come to understand the magnitude of her contributions to a field, which would one day become mine. Her hair was a shock of white and her clothes loose and billowy, like a kindly grandmother one expected to turn around with a plate of freshly baked cookies. She was simply wonderful.

Two times a week I arrived at Atha's office and immersed myself in the world of children's books. I knew absolutely nothing about children's publishing although I'd been an avid reader since before I could remember. Atha's tasks for me were simple, but looking back, profoundly illuminating for the young artist I was.

She had me cut and paste type, by hand, in different sizes, on mock-ups of the books she was designing (this was just before computers came on the scene so everything was mocked-up by hand). Sometimes she would have me set up the cover choices, with my cut out type pasted down, on a frightfully small, carefully cleared section of a table. We'd stand back and look at them. Of course *she* was trying to determine which type looked best, but why include the lowly intern in the process? In the beginning I was silent when she was making these creative decisions but eventually I just couldn't help blurting out my thoughts (which, knowing Atha, is probably what she wanted!). With Atha one learned how to actually "SEE" art not just critique it. She could point out subtleties in illustration and type I would have never noticed. Nothing escaped her eye. In the whirlwind of her little office she was a laser.

Under Atha's guidance I gained an enormous understanding of what it meant to be a children's book illustrator. When original artwork arrived, on the two days I was

there, she made sure I was in her office for the package opening. Paintings by Barbara Cooney, pen and watercolors by James Marshall and so many others spilled out of the packages. Usually I was one of the first people to see these works unveiled. For larger artwork, packed in big wooden crates, Atha would send me to the mailroom with a crow bar, with the quip "get cracking." I will never forget breaking open a crate big enough to house a tiger and unloading Thomas Locker's original paintings. My dreams of working on laundry soap ads quickly faded. Atha made me understand that a crate full of gorgeous paintings arriving at a children's book publishing house was the same as if that crate had arrived at a museum. Except, through Dial Books, A LOT more people were going to get to see those paintings.

For two years I interned for Atha and those years were, by far, two of the greatest in my life. When it was time for me to graduate from Pratt she offered me a position as a designer at Dial Books. For days I wrestled with how to tell her that I had set my goals in a different direction from being a designer. I wanted to become a children's book illustrator. Finally I got up the nerve to tell her my decision. She looked at me, surrounded by her mountains of paper and books and smiled.

"Yes, I suppose that was to be expected," she said and turned back to her work.

I've always been a believer that there are times in our lives when "the stars truly align" pointing us in a good direction and down a shiny path so we can leap off confidently into the unknown. I'm so lucky that Atha has been such a star in my life, a bright point for me to look up to and be eternally grateful for knowing.

Robert Sabuda