

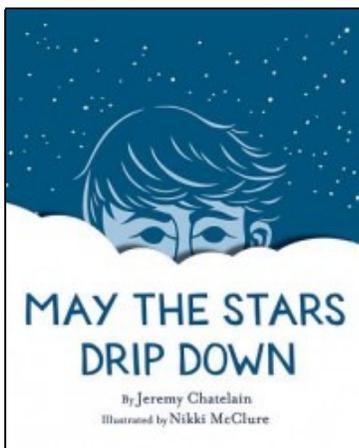
CONVERSATIONS

Light Between the Lines

AN INTERVIEW BY KRISTIANNE HUNTSBERGER



Nikki McClure has deservedly become a well-recognized artist, author and illustrator. Walking down a street near my home I can easily find her books displayed in the window at [Secret Garden Bookstore](#) while prints of her work hang on the wall at the [framing shop next door](#) and are collected in greeting card boxes that are sold at a boutique down the street. Her striking cut paper illustrations of bucolic orchards and fields full of foxes, birds, people and other animals are set to garner more praise this spring with [two shows](#) opening in California and the release of two books: *May the Stars Drip Down*, a new illustrated lullaby with text by Jeremy Chatelain, and a reissue of *Collect Raindrops*. Kristianne Huntsberger connected with Nikki McClure by phone in her studio to discuss light, making books, and playing outdoors.



KH: Could you talk about making your new book, *May the Stars Drip Down*? It's based on song lyrics by Jeremy Chatelain, isn't it?

NM: Yes, and it was presented to me about four years ago as a project. I heard the song and there was such evocative visual imagery and I said I would do it. I didn't mean for it to take so long. So finally, when I sat down to do it, it was as though it was just all kind of ready to go in my brain, because it had been mulling around there. I'd been listening to the song on repeat as I worked, so it had really sunk in to me. It was one of the books that sort of came along much more easily than others. It was nice to just illustrate work rather than

actually provide everything for the book; to work with somebody else's words was a nice bit of a break and I could really just sink into the pictures.

I wanted it to be nighttime, and so instead of the paper element being black, which is what historically I have done, I made it a dark blue with everything else being a light blue. And then the moon could be the white of the paper. It really has this conceptual layer to it too. The moon is the mother, so he's never really alone in this dream land because there is always this moon that's watching over him. Then she becomes the sun in the morning.

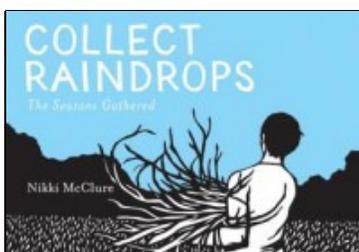
My work often times gets mistaken for woodblock prints. Even in real life, people see it and they can't really see the subtle 3-D of it when they're standing in front of it. The work that most people have seen of mine is this graphic interpretation (in books), which is very flat and there's no shadows. So, I started thinking, what can you do with paper that you can't do with any other media? Well, you could tear it. So, I tore the bottom edge of all the illustrations. They actually link up so that you could have it one continuous tear, which is kind of cool. And the other thing you can do with paper is you can punch through it. One of the things I like about my work is this moment when, if it's a sunny day, I'll just lift it up and there's all these shadows that happen, and it's really fun to play with it. So, I had the first page die-cut so that if you have a light source from the left side light dances across the child's face at night on the next page as you turn it. This is actually creating a special light effect, which I think is kind of cool.

KH: Yeah that's great!

NM: Making light. It just happens as the page is turning, so really only the kid sitting next to you will see it. It will be this magic lantern light show. I'm just excited too that in the book the mother is in bed with the child, which has been shown barely at all in children's books. It is always the *Goodnight Moon* mother way off on the other side of the page, or shutting the door saying, "Goodnight, sleep tight." In my family, that just would not cut it. Having that sense of safety and that style of parenting portrayed is something that I consciously chose to do. You work with what you know.

KH: You are also re-releasing *Collect Raindrops* this month.

NM: I know, there's two! That's exciting because I really loved the first edition. It was my first book with Abrams or with anybody. This one is a bit different. It's smaller size and cheaper price-point, but it has a lot more pages,





and it has the work up to now. It's an honor to have an opportunity to record your work in such a way. I have been making a calendar every year, and this is a collection of those. Not every image from them, but some of my favorites from each of those.

KH: In *Collect Raindrops* you use your famous word meditation that is kind of like instructions or meditations connecting a simple word and image. I know it is like asking a musician whether she writes lyrics or music first, but do you start with a list of words and give them artworks or do you start with art and give it words?

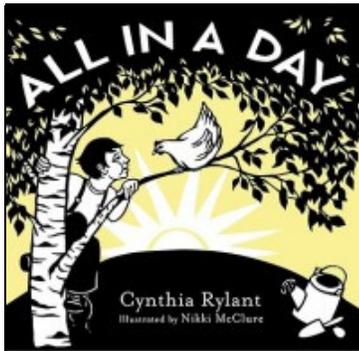
NM: Both. About two days ago I started the 2015 calendar, and the picture came first with this one. I'm just making this image and as I'm making it the words are streaming through my brain, and I'm keeping this running list of possibilities at the bottom, and I run over to the dictionary and look at that word and think about that word or the origin of the word in ancient usage, and then I get led to another word. It's kind of this rabbit hole of words that I get lost in. So this one is an image and the word is being found. But I also have a list on my wall where I scribble down words or ideas of things I want to think about. So I have a list of words, but I also have a list of images. Somehow those two meet up on your kitchen wall. There is a connection, but I try not to use the most obvious words. I like that there is a mystery and a conversation that happens.

KH: Your books are full of really rich natural imagery. They also show people interacting and responding to the pieces of the natural world. Are these images also instructions for how to respond to nature?

NM: I guess so. I always think that we are animals and we shouldn't be inside these boxes all day and all night long. And then to walk outside and only walk on sidewalks and never touch the earth or think about that you're on this spinning planet... To me, a direct connection to the other world outside is a very important part of my life and my child's life. Everybody knows that children don't get to play outside anymore. It's true. But it is so important to get their feet barefoot in the water. It's just so important. The child [in *May the Stars Drip Down*] has dreams or memories of having interactions, just like all your dreams are these restructured moments that you've lived. He has a mobile hanging in his room with all his collected things; like every kid he's a little collector. There's a bone and a moth wing and a sea star. They are things he has collected in his life journey and they are then evoked in the dream. And the mobile has a new element added to it at the end, so there's a question

did that really happen? Having that real connection: finding a feather, seeing the bird fly away and catching the feather. It may be that it is instructional, but in a quiet way. An eagle just flew by my window, by the way. It's beautiful.

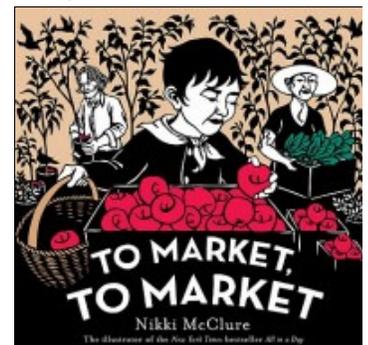
KH: Oh wow! Clearly you're very inspired by natural imagery. It comes up in a lot of your work. Is it because you get to see eagles fly by your window? I don't have that here.



NM: Yeah. I moved and I live in a much more wild place, but even when I lived in the city—my book *All in a Day* is just my backyard at my urban house, but without boundary, without fences and with totally edible landscaping. Now I am in a much more wild environment, and it has influenced my work a lot, but my work stems from natural history. That's what I studied in college. I've always had one eye open to what is going on around me that's not just humans or myself, but chickadee-based or cedar tree-based. I studied it at college and really became aware of the full community that I lived in. I draw from that all the time.

KH: Your experience is a great part of your work. I saw you speak at the PNBA show in Tacoma, and you said you felt like you were primarily an artist who was accepted in books. Of course you're very accepted in books, most recently *To Market, To Market*, won the 2012 Washington State Children's Book Award. How did you begin your path into making books?

NM: My path really started as a scientist, then I realized that I was more of an artist, or on the artist line of scientist. A scientist is really looking at the world and observing it and making discoveries. Then there is the artist who is looking at the world and observing it and making discoveries too; instead of writing a



scientific journal paper, you get to make a wonderful picture. The scientist morphed into an artist, and I was realizing what that was, but I always secretly wanted to make children's books and didn't really know how to begin. So one day, with that book, *Apple*, that I presented there at PNBA, I just sat down and decided to make it. It's just been a progression of permission for myself to do the things that I want to do, without waiting for someone to ask me. I just started making.



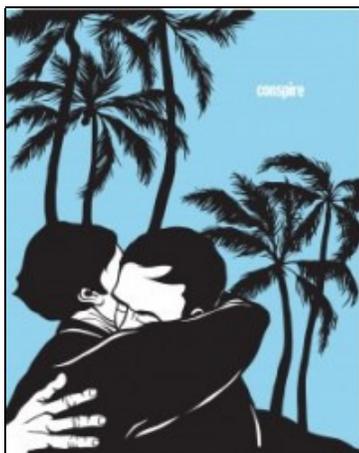
The calendar helped. The calendar started traveling around and people bought it. It was like people buying my portfolio. It was art directors and



people interested in design and then one of them was Steven Malk, who is a children's book agent. He called me up the same week that an editor from Rizzoli called me up to see about doing ***Collect Raindrops***. That editor left Rizzoli and took my book with her to Abrams, which was a great move because Abrams Children's books is just a really nice home for me. So, I hooked up the agent and the editor and they started talking, and it came that it was time to make children's book. That was when ***All in a Day*** was presented to me to do as a book. I did that, and I said, "I also make my own books, too." So they let me do that. They've been very generous and trusting in me. ***To Market, to Market*** was me saying, "I'll make a book about farmer's markets." And they said, "Ok, we'll sign you for that." Total trust. So that's our relationship, which is great for me, creatively.

So, now I'm making books. I just finished the illustrations for one last week. It's called ***In***. It's about a child who only wants to stay inside all day. Which to me is—you need to be outside and get dirty! He eventually gets totally bored with inside and goes out. It's very Margaret Wise Brown. It's very simple and sweet and fun. It's a little more fantastic than I have let myself go. There's no pigs in tutus or anything like that, though I did mull over whether or not to have the main character be an animal. I decided that I work with what I know and what I have around and I don't really have a lot of wombats or anything around. Darn it! My family is in a [wombat](#) craze right now.

KH: With the upcoming books and also two gallery shows coming up, I wondered whether you feel that you create different work for display and for books. Or do they feel pretty connected?



NM: They feel pretty connected. The show I have coming up in April in San Francisco at a place called [Needles and Pens](#), is the illustrations for ***May the Stars Drip Down***. The [show in Santa Cruz](#) has a book section, so there are original illustrations from ***All in a Day***, ***Mama is it Summer Yet***, and ***To Market, To Market***. The thing about that show that is really interesting is that it shows my earliest work to my present work, so it is the whole span of technical skill development, but also shows the story of me, because I work pretty much from my life. So it is a story of a woman becoming a mother, which you don't really see in the museum, you just see one picture, but you don't see the yearning and development and everything that happens.

Shows: [Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History](#), retrospective, March 1st- May

25th. [Needles and Pens](#), San Francisco, [May the Stars Drip Down](#), April 11-
May 6

Nikki's tours will take her around the country, including [Book Passage in San Francisco](#) and [The King's English in Salt Lake City](#). Watch her website to see when Pacific Northwest events get scheduled.

Kristianne Huntsberger is a writer, performer and educator who, when not roaming the world, makes her home in Seattle. She has worked with the Elliott Bay Book Company in various capacities over the past ten years.

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ONE RESPONSE TO "LIGHT BETWEEN THE LINES"



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