Within children’s literature genre abound. One of the most interesting is the picture book genre. The weaving of illustrations and words excite not only children but adults as well. The critical component of a picture book is the story, but most importantly the illustrations that support the narrative. Flotsam, written by David Wiesner, is a Caldecott Medal Winner for illustration as well as many other honors, most notably the New York Times Best Illustrated Book Award. David Wiesner has a keen ability to create a story without words; his illustrations lead the reader into the incredible world under the sea, up on shore and back in time. This book is evocative of journeys that we all take. In Flotsam there is the journey of a young boy as he discovers the world through his magnifying glass, his microscope and the camera that he finds. However, it is also a story of the camera’s journey throughout the world and throughout time. With a discerning eye, the wonder created by Mr. Wiesner can be analyzed into his use of color, perspective, and his playful use of opposites.

The medium used to create the images found in Flotsam were done in watercolor, and rightly so. The initial images, which begin the book recall the seashore, blues of all different hues, sea foam greens, pale sunlit yellows and quiet sandcastle beige. The world above the sea is pale in comparison to the marvels below. Wiesner changes it up when the camera reveals what it has seen in the depths of the ocean. Brilliant reds, deep jewel-tone indigos, vibrant greens, and playful orange bring to life the creatures and their creature comforts under the surface. This is one of many opposing themes found in the illustrations of Flotsam.

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Another play on opposites is found in the chosen font type set. The type set of Flotsam was done in Regula and Escrita. After looking through font catalogs further searching shows that the fonts, to be more precise are Regula Old Face Set and Escrita Principal fonts. The Regula font is a historic font known for its irregular edges and bold strokes. Regula is more formal as block text as opposed to fluid wave-like motion of Escrita Principal font. It is a curious use of font style and causes wonder at the purpose.

David Wiesner's artistic style also crosses over boundaries. Flotsam is a mixture of meticulously rendered realistic portrayals above water and surreal creations below. The separation is obvious and creates a fantastic sense of awe and amazement for the world at the ocean’s bottom. Here are a few examples:

The book opens with these two images. Note the colors, perspective and the (mostly) realistic images. The enlarged eye is an attempt to pull the reader into the world the boy is experiencing. Then there is the discovery. A camera washes up on shore, as flotsam, with film still in it. The boy has the film developed and to his joy this is what he sees.

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Wiesner very wisely uses a broad black border around the images that came from the camera, as if you were there and looking at these pictures with the boy.

Flotsam, as noted before is about journeys, the journey of the camera but also a journey through time. What is so compelling about Flotsam is Wiesner’s brilliant picture within a picture journey with the boy and perhaps the reader being participants. One image from the camera reveals a young Asian girl holding a picture of a young Norwegian boy holding a picture of a young blonde boy holding a picture of...

You get the idea. The boy begins with his magnifying glass to see further into the picture and then resorts to his microscope. 10, 25, 40, 55, 70x magnification and about one-hundred years earlier he sees the first boy who took his picture which now through time and distance includes this young boy. As a reader of this book, who sat down with my six-year old daughter, it was mesmerizing to watch her look closer and closer at the pictures to see what she could find. This use of perspective literally pulls you into the illustrations, into the story, and into David Wiesner’s world of Flotsam.

A narrative supports the majority of picture books, not so with Flotsam. Flotsam is truly a picture book and is considered cinematic in nature because there is no supportive narrative. The image of the first young boy, perhaps from the early 1900s brings to mind silent movies and that is exactly what David Wiesner has done. He presents the images to you and you make your story from his visual cues. Flotsam’s creation involves an eclectic mix of techniques pulled from across the picture book discipline. It is an artistic achievement well worthy of the awards and accolades.

*As an aside there are additional images on the next page for you enjoyment.

Loretta Veers
Caldecott Analysis Paper

Flotsam by David Wiesner

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