

Talking with R. Gregory Christie

This globe-trotting, boundary-pushing artist discusses what inspires him and describes his approach to his work.

By Dean Schneider

The name of R. Gregory Christie's Web site, Gregarious Art Statements, tells much about his art: pushing the boundaries, stretching the limits, even stretching his characters. Elongated necks, oversize hands and heads, shifting scale and perspective, and abstract backgrounds that emphasize characters typify some of his best-known and celebrated picture books, such as *The Palm of My Heart: Poetry by African American Children* and *Only Passing Through: The Story of Sojourner Truth*, both Coretta Scott King Honor Books. Christie received a third Coretta Scott King Honor Book award in 2006 for *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*.

Christie has an impressive range of work to his credit, and he continues to experiment with style, media, and subject matter, never settling for copying previous successes. Historical subjects include Sojourner Truth, Richard Wright, Muhammad Ali, the Rosenwald schools of the 1920s, and a forthcoming book about Toussaint Louverture, the hero of the Haitian revolution. Preferring not to do only historical works, Christie has also illustrated poetry and picture books about city life and the joy of music.

Christie loves to travel and feels his travels influence his work in important ways. In addition to his work in

children's books, he does freelance illustration, lectures, workshops for artists, portraits, commissions, and murals. I caught up with him at the 2007 American Library Association Annual Conference.

DS: How do your world travels and your art intersect?

CHRISTIE: Everything's intertwined. A few of my books I've done overseas. *Only Passing Through* was done in Berlin, *The Deaf Musicians* was done in Sydney, Australia, and quite a few books were done in Amsterdam. I realize I have a passion for culture. I have a wanderlust inside of me. I like to go and see things and meet people and do different things, almost along the lines of what an anthropologist would do. I go to a certain city and study it and talk to people—different types of people—and these things inspire me and make me want to paint. These things create passion about traveling and about life, and it all reflects back into my art.

DS: How do you research your historical works, your forthcoming book about Toussaint Louverture, for example?

CHRISTIE: The main challenge in that book was trying to get out of the mindset of what I know about American slavery. We're talking about the Caribbean, and I had to do visual research. I use the Internet to get a sense of some of



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the paintings, some of the etchings, and I get a sense of how people lived, the interior of buildings, things about the culture.

But I can't just live on the Internet. Just a couple of weeks ago, I went to Dakar, Senegal, and I met a man who gives tours of Gorée Island, a prison from which 26 million documented Africans left. Some of the buildings there are yellow, some are red, some are white, some are the color of the stone. When the French took over the island, everything was painted yellow, so I asked the tour guide if the French did that in all of their colonies, and he

said they did. I knew for the book I was working on, I should think about the structures that were burned down, so I made quite a few of the buildings this kind of ochre yellow.

DS: *How does the art in the Toussaint book compare with your previous work?*

CHRISTIE: I'm trying to go back to what I did for *Only Passing Through*. I don't like to copy myself as an artist, but there's something in the style of that book that really appeals to me, kind of a folk-art feeling, but with sophistication. You can look at a lot of my books and see different styles. *Brothers in Hope* is very graphic, with just line drawings on top for the facial features. *Only Passing Through* was done in acrylic as opposed to *Brothers in Hope*, done in gouache. If you look at the paintings in *Only Passing Through* there's a technique where you

take splotches of color and almost collage the faces together with lights and darks and different colors. Some of the faces have green in them, and ochre and things like that.

DS: *I love that mix of realism and abstraction and folk-art elements in Only Passing Through—the big hands, long necks, the shifting scale and perspective. How did that all come together?*

CHRISTIE: In art school, sketching the models, I had a tendency to elongate the figures, and I was painting the colors I was seeing and looking deep and imagining and reinterpreting. I think it takes sophistication as an artist to step away from realism. There's a sense of craftsmanship when you're a realistic painter, and you can spend a lifetime just trying to get the tones and the colors—even the dimensions—right, and I have a high respect for that, but I didn't want to choose that path. I want

to break boundaries and do paintings that are uniquely mine.

With *Only Passing Through*, I started one painting and threw it on the floor, thinking I was going to throw it out, and started another, but then I looked down on the floor. It's the painting called "Sojourner's Lesson," the one with her sweeping and with two men in the background, and I had Sojourner as a figure actually going off the page. I realized I wanted to start doing paintings with the whole figure *in* the painting. I didn't want to cut the torso off at the picture plane. So, instead of going straight down with her sweeping, I actually put a slight curve to her, and that opened up the door to the whole book.

DS: *How does this contrast with another early book, Richard Wright and the Library Card?*

CHRISTIE: It's a stark contrast. After *The Palm of My Heart* won a Coretta



R. Gregory Christie mixes realism, abstraction, and folk-art elements in his work, as seen in this image from *Only Passing Through* by Anne Rockwell.

Scott King Honor, I was thrown into the world of children's books, and Lee & Low gave me a contract. I started thinking of some of my heroes like Jerry Pinkney and E. B. Lewis. Tom Feelings is another hero of mine. These are people whose work I knew before I even got into children's books, and I thought if I was doing historical works, I should do something more realistic. So, if you look at the artwork in *Richard Wright*, it's a series of realistic paintings. So I'd say that *Only Passing Through* was my second chance at doing a biography and being myself.

DS: *You had early success in the children's book world. A tendency would be to keep doing the things that brought success. How do you avoid getting pigeonholed into one style of art, one technique, one kind of subject matter?*

CHRISTIE: I do it by just thinking and keeping things interesting for myself. In *The Deaf Musicians*, for example, I got beyond ethnicity. Maybe characters have certain features but they are purple and they're green and they're blue, because I didn't want anyone to look at the book and see a brown person and say, "That's not for my child." I'm making these books universal because history is universal.

In the fantastical world of children's books, you can make anyone any color you want, and you can actually make their hands any way you want. It's your world. I try to be the type of artist that looks at a blank page and looks at a manuscript and just starts to work it in a way that's going to be interesting and unique. So every book is a terror because I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm not the type to just look at the last book and do a copy of it.

DS: *What about the switch you made from acrylics and colored pencil to gouache?*

CHRISTIE: That's another thing I've changed up. Recently, I've also been working in a style where I do a flat plane of color and paint on top of it and draw on top of it. In some of the books I've

used a thing called a painting comb and kind of scratched into the paint alongside the flat painting.

Another way I avoid being pigeonholed is I switch up my subject matter. I love history, but history is so harsh. There is no history you can recount that doesn't have some kind of tragedy in it. To do a book like *Jazz Baby* or *The Deaf Musicians*, these are stories that are upbeat.

DS: *You mentioned Jerry Pinkney, E. B. Lewis, and Tom Feelings. What other artists, contemporary or classic, have influenced you?*

CHRISTIE: I love anybody that warps the figure, changes the body proportions. I'm always amazed when I look at paintings by Lucian Freud, Gerhard Richter, Ben Shahn, William H. Johnson, Romare Bearden, Paul Klee, Egon Schiele. As far as illustration, I really like the work of Chris Raschka. His line work seems so bold. I even like Chris Van Allsburg. He has a way of drawing that's just beautiful. I love Tom Feelings because he was able to take a pencil drawing and make it look like a watercolor that moved, that had life to it.

DS: *You do a lot of school visits, including my school. What do you think makes a good school art program for students?*

CHRISTIE: If I were an art teacher, I would show paintings based on historical events. Every painting has some sort of story connected to it, and the visual is very powerful as a mechanism for remembering things. So that's one way to use art. Another is to get kids away from realism and show them how to look in a certain way, to look in negative and positive shapes, and learn how to incorporate tones from dark to light in their drawings and paintings. One of the key practices of beginning artists is that they tend to make everything the same tone, or they don't reinterpret what they see; they just paint exactly what they see, and if it doesn't look exactly like it, they want to crumple it up.

DS: *Where do you see yourself going now?*

CHRISTIE: I want to work on my private work, stuff on canvas, make handmade books, maybe even try sculpture. I want to be around for a long time. I had a pretty clear plan in art school to get into commercial art. I never planned to go into children's books, but I like it here, and I'm going to keep doing them.

Sampling Christie

Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan. By Mary Williams. 2005. 48p. Lee & Low, \$17.95 (9781584302322). Gr. 3–5.

The Deaf Musicians. By Pete Seeger and Paul Dubois Jacobs. 2006. 32p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399243165). K–Gr. 3.

Dear Mr. Rosenwald. By Carole Boston Weatherford. 2006. 32p. Scholastic, \$16.99 (9780439495226). Gr. 2–5.

Jazz Baby. By Lisa Wheeler. 2007. 40p. Harcourt, \$16 (9780152025229). Preschool–Gr. 2.

Only Passing Through: The Story of Sojourner Truth. By Anne Rockwell. 2000. 40p. Knopf, \$16.95 (9780679891864); Dragonfly, paper, \$6.99 (9780440417668). Gr. 4–8. Also available in an audio edition from Audio Bookshelf.

The Palm of My Heart: Poetry by African American Children. Edited by Davida Adedjouma. 1996. 32p. Lee & Low, \$16.95 (9781880000410); paper, \$7.95 (9781880000762). Gr. 1–4.

Richard Wright and the Library Card. By William Miller. 1997. 32p. Lee & Low, \$16.95 (9781880000571); paper, \$7.95 (9781880000885). Gr. 2–5. Also available in Spanish. 

Dean Schneider teaches seventh- and eighth-grade English at the Ensworth School in Nashville, Tennessee.