

Jonathan Bean Succeeding as an Illustrator

by Howard Richman

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Should you choose a career to earn a living or choose one that you love? A few fortunate people in this world get to do both. One of them is Jonathan Bean, who just 8 years after graduating from homeschooling, is now succeeding as a book illustrator.

Jonathan always loved to draw. During his junior year of high school he made a huge jump in his art ability. While taking weekly group drawing classes from Myron Barnstone at Barnstone Studios, he practiced diligently on his own. He not only worked on big projects, but also worked diligently with exercises to master basic techniques and studied great art works to see their forms. He told me, during our evaluation interview, that he was starting to look at objects differently. For example, he told me that when he looked at a tulip it excited him that he could discover the order in its form.

The drawings and paintings that he completed that year were quite remarkable. I was especially impressed by the watercolor of his house in the dusk, and his watercolor of a local haystack. He did not just jump into these paintings and drawings, but preceded each with preliminary studies and sketches. He told me that he was learning how to plan coincidences in order to put order into the pictures so that the different objects pictured would be related to each other.

During his senior year he continued to attend weekly group classes with Myron Barnstone. Most of that year's work explored use of structure within drawings. I was especially impressed by the value study that he completed in which he drew a plaster cast of a head and brought focus to one of the eyes by use of the lightest light and the darkest dark in that region of the painting. I was also especially impressed by his self portrait which was tightly structured with intricate geometric patterns and radiating lines.

Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Accreditation Agency requires that each student write a 2500-word term paper each year of high school. Jonathan's senior term paper, "An Argument for Order in Art," discussed various forms in art, including the balance found using the golden ratio at various levels, how artists use lines to order to produce tension in their work, and the use of arabesques to create flowing and life throughout pictures. He illustrated his points with examples drawn from Greek, Chinese, Persian, Renaissance, and modern works. For example, he pointed out how N.C. Wyeth, in his illustrations for *Treasure Island* used the same aggressive baroque diagonal that Michelangelo used.

After graduating from high school, Jonathan followed his older sister to Messiah College, where she was preparing for a nursing career. (Jonathan is the second of the four always-homeschooled children of John and Pauline Bean of Fleetwood.) There he majored in fine arts with a concentration in illustration.

There were two professors who especially had a big impact upon him. One was Catherine Prescott who helped him realize that the technical skill he had developed was in some ways cold, that he was seeing things in too analytical a way that did not have enough warmth or light in it. Through her encouragement he began to paint and draw more landscapes because landscape was always personal to him and he was able to draw it with lots of emotion. In this way he learned to always have more of an emotional connection with his work.

Another teacher who encouraged him was Stephen Fieser, who himself illustrated children's books. He taught illustration with a strong narrative content and Jonathan realized that this was something that he really enjoyed, partly since he had always enjoyed children's book illustrations when he was growing up. Jonathan's senior project at Messiah was writing and illustrating a wonderful children's book. He sent out some of those illustrations to 20 different publishing companies, but got very little response. Nobody wanted to take the book, and nobody offered him any work. In 2001, he graduated from Messiah. The professors at Messiah had encouraged him to go to graduate school, but not necessarily right away.

After college he got a job in Reading PA with a company called Dimensions that designs cross-stitch and paint-by-number, and he worked there as a staff artist. His basic job was to take existing art work and reinterpret it into cross-stitch. He added a lot of color and even designed a few needlework projects. In the evenings after work he went back to illustration to do the work he loved. And it was really that work that he used to apply to graduate school.

He was home for two years while working in Reading when he applied to four or five graduate schools. He visited several of them, but he really wanted to go to the School of Visual Arts in New York City, a school located at the center of the publishing industry that only accepts 20 illustration students per year in its masters degree program.

In the fall of 2003, he started graduate school and on May 11, 2005, he graduated. While in New York he would also send publishers postcards of his illustrations, make follow-up calls, and even take in his portfolio personally. Sometimes the publishing companies would tell him which they liked and which they didn't like. He had developed different styles and was able to begin matching style to customer. His first breakthrough was an illustration in the April 2005 issue of *Cricket Magazine*. Then he did a book cover for Scholastic Book Company. Now he has a book contract with Simon and Schuster and another with Henry Holt. Connections between companies helped one job lead to the next. Jonathan explained, "When one company is interested in your work and finds out that another company is offering you work, then they get into competition because they want to develop a relationship with you."

Jonathan advises budding artists to explore a possible career in art before graduation from high school. Find an art teacher who can help you find out if you are good enough to succeed in the field and who can help you put together a portfolio of work which includes what schools are looking for. It was really useful for Jonathan to compare himself with the other students in the classes at Barnstone studios. He realized that he did have a lot of talent and had a good chance to succeed.

Jonathan advises, "Once you think you have the skill and the talent, don't give up. Make the most of every opportunity, of every professor you have, and of every connection. I sent out work for four or five years before I really found work that paid. At first I was just piecing together a living, rather than making a living. I envied some of my fellow students who were employed by others. But if you can stick at it long enough, you can really have something solid. Don't give up. Continue to work away at it." You can see some of Jonathan's illustrations at his website: www.jonathanbean.com.