



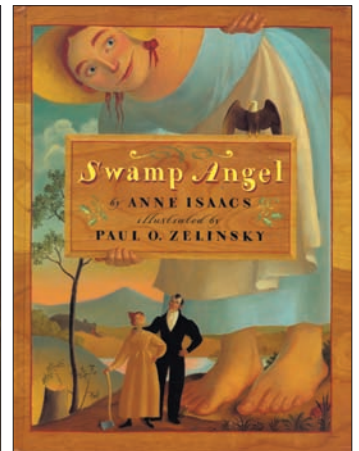
The amazingly versatile illustrator shares the background and process behind some of his most well-known works. **By Monika Schröder**

Placed side by side, the picture books *Swamp Angel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Rapunzel*, and *The Shivers in the Fridge* do not appear to be illustrated by the same artist. Paul O. Zelinsky's artwork is amazingly versatile. He likes the challenge of trying a different technique for each book and works with a variety of media, including pastels, watercolors,

pen and ink, colored pencils, and oil paints. He even experimented with computer-generated graphics in *Doodler Doodling*, in which sketched images shift shapes as if they have a life of their own. "Doodling is my favorite way of drawing," he says. "You never know what happens next."

Zelinsky has illustrated picture books, chapter books, movable books,

poetry, and fairy tales. "To illustrate you have to be a really good reader," he explains. "You need to pick up all the details and see how the text works and how to express the story's emotion." Zelinsky is a master of expressing the emotions of a book through its art. "Making a picture book is a lot like making a movie," he says. "A series of pictures should take you on an





emotional journey. Scale, composition, colors, all express different energy.” According to Zelinsky, one of the most important acts of an illustrator is dividing the text into pages: “This is what sets the pacing, rhythm, and emotional impact of the page. The text has to break just at the right moment.”

Growing up in Wilmette, Illinois, Zelinsky received encouragement for drawing from his mother, a medical illustrator. He attended Yale University, where he took a course with Maurice Sendak, who encouraged him to become a children’s book illustrator. Because he had already planned to become a painter and to support himself by teaching, Zelinsky moved to Philadelphia and got an MFA in painting at the Tyler School of Art. Afterward, he briefly taught art in San Diego but soon realized that teaching was not his calling and moved to New York to peddle his portfolio.

A Fascination with Fairy Tales

The 1985 Caldecott Honor Book *Hansel and Gretel*, retold by Rika Lesser, was the first Brothers Grimm fairy tale Zelinsky illustrated. When

he was a child, a picture of Hansel and Gretel heading toward the witch’s house, painted by his great-grandmother and placed above his crib, evoked a feeling that stayed with him into adulthood. He aimed for this emotion in his own illustration of the scene, which became the cover of the book. Zelinsky’s fascination with Brothers Grimm fairy tales continued. He chose to set the retellings of *Rumpelstiltskin* during the European Renaissance and *Rapunzel*, more specifically, in Italy around 1500. “I wanted to give the reader a sense of a solid, historical world,” he explains. For the illustrations, done in the style of Renaissance paintings, he researched period architecture, furniture, clothing, and hairstyles. Zelinsky discovered that *Rapunzel*’s hand mirror should be silvered, convex glass, as flat mirrored glass was a technical achievement that came later in the sixteenth century. Zelinsky’s research paid off; *Rapunzel* won the Caldecott Medal in 1998.

The Making of *Rumpelstiltskin*

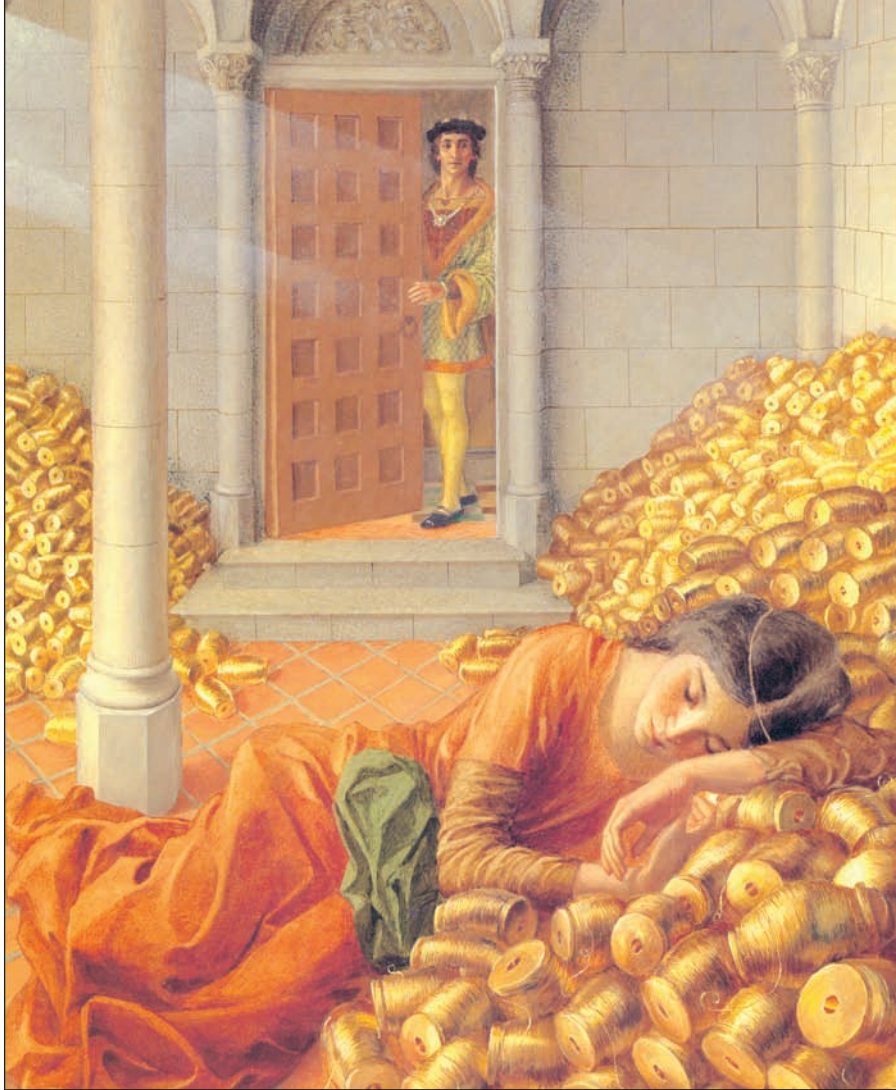
Zelinsky’s affinity for *Rumpelstiltskin*, a 1987 Caldecott Honor Book,

stems from a childhood role as the little gnome in an amateur theater production. Reading various versions of stories published by the



Photo: Rachel Zelinsky

“Doodling is my favorite way of drawing. You never know what happens next.”



To achieve a degree of realism in his illustrations, Zelinsky used models for the king and the miller's daughter in *Rumpelstiltskin*.

Brothers Grimm, Zelinsky realized that there was no “authentic” version of a fairy tale. The brothers rewrote new versions of many of their stories each time they reissued their famous collection *Children's and Household Tales* between 1812 and 1856. “The general trend was to make the tales more gruesomely moralistic,” Zelinsky says, “possibly in response to the way their book was taken from the start as a set of stories for children.” *Rumpelstiltskin*'s ending underwent significant changes. In the first version, the little man simply runs away when the queen calls him by his real name. In the third and subsequent editions, he stamps himself into the ground and tears his leg off in anger. Zelinsky also found a version in which *Rumpelstiltskin* flies away on

a cooking spoon. This unpublished version, which Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm had sent to a friend, provided the ending in Zelinsky's retelling of this German fairy tale.

Zelinsky spent a lot of time and energy on the preliminary work for *Rumpelstiltskin*. The illustrator often uses models when he is looking for a certain degree of realism, and while he wanted models for this book, he resisted using a modeling agency. Riding the subway in New York, Zelinsky saw a man with the dashing looks of a soap opera actor who fit his image of the king, but he didn't have the courage to approach the stranger and lost his chance for a model. Other kings also slipped from his grip. With the help of a friend, he found a professional dancer who, in addition

to his noble looks, had the training to express emotion through movement. Next, he searched for a young woman to model for the miller's daughter. The model “needed to not look modern, as if she just stepped out of a Renaissance painting.” Zelinsky spotted a Yale student who resembled his vision, introduced himself, and convinced her to accept his unusual proposal.

In the illustrator's studio, the dancer and the student posed to match Zelinsky's sketches for each page of the book—the king placing the young woman in rooms full of straw, the miller's daughter weeping and then reacting to *Rumpelstiltskin*'s demand for payment. Zelinsky's young daughter served as the model for the child attendant in the wedding scene. With a mischievous smile, he claims that he also put himself into the book and points to one of the three men, depicted from behind, bowing before the royal couple.

Creating *Knick-Knack Paddywhack!*

Zelinsky's movable books, *Knick-Knack Paddywhack!* and *The Wheels on the Bus* (his most popular book to date), keep children busy opening doors and pulling tabs to uncover surprises on every page. For his adaptation of *Knick-Knack Paddywhack!* Zelinsky worked with paper engineer Andrew Baron. “I had a great time trying my own tabs and pulls, but Baron was the real expert.” The cheerful illustrations are full of surprising details and visual rhymes, such as an apple core and a dinosaur on the floor near the door on which an old man plays four. Each page also hides at least one object repeated the same number of times as the number in the corresponding verse. Some of these rhymes and hidden objects are extremely obscure, and Zelinsky confesses to having forgotten what a lot of them are.

In order to allow for moving parts, art for this book had to be painted

in many pieces, small and large, so that they could be printed and cut out for assembly. Zelinsky's meticulous approach manifested itself in a journey to China, where the book was produced. Because different parts for the same spread needed to be printed on different sheets, Zelinsky wanted to ensure that the colors on each part were correct and fit together. After the sheets of heavy paper with their various parts were printed and cut out by machines, the books were assembled entirely by hand by factory workers.

Picturing *Swamp Angel*

When his editor showed him the manuscript for the 1995 Caldecott Honor Book *Swamp Angel*, a tall tale about a woodswoman in Tennessee, Zelinsky was intrigued. He researched folk paintings of the time and discovered that folk artists sometimes painted on unusual materials. "In the frontier you couldn't go to an art supply store—you'd need to paint on whatever material you could get." He decided to try painting on wood and spent a long time finding the right veneer. Further research helped him depict the plants and animals of the eastern Tennessee woods and the giant Swamp Angel's waistless dress, a fashion of the 1830s. But what would she look like? The laws of physics dictated that such a large body had to stand on thick ankles and substantial feet. Although an imaginary tale doesn't have to be based in reality, Zelinsky believes that the more he can ground

his approach in the real world, the more the fantasy of the story will seem both funny and right.

The text of *Swamp Angel* didn't give much detail about the girl's looks. Doodling is Zelinsky's way of



For Anne Isaacs' *Swamp Angel*, Zelinsky doodled several versions of the giantess before he found the right mix of sweetness and forcefulness in her expression.

developing a character. He doodled in his sketchbook, drawing many possible Swamp Angels, until she finally appeared—round faced, rosy cheeked, and with just the right mix of sweetness and forcefulness in her expression to fit the deeds in the story.

Fun in the Fridge

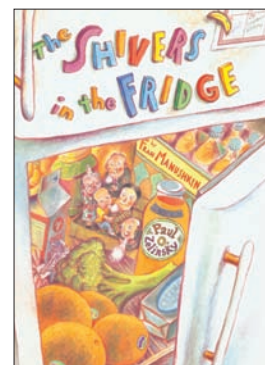
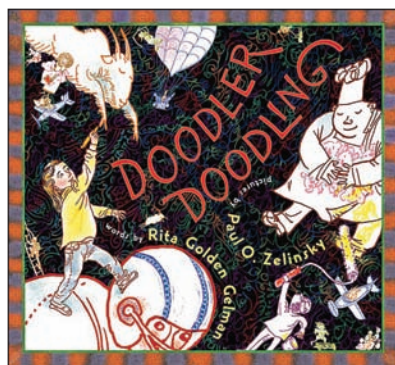
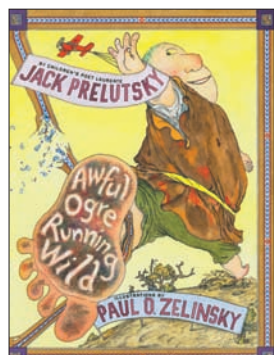
For the book *The Shivers in the*

Fridge, a story about a family of magnets trapped in a refrigerator, Zelinsky worked with author and friend Fran Manushkin. While illustrators and writers usually work separately, Manushkin and Zelinsky

collaborated on his illustration research: they went to the supermarket together and took photographs of different foods, looking for items that could double as food, for the wise reader, and as landscape in the eyes of the unknowing Shivers family. Depictions of Orange Hills, Mount Ketchup, and Buttery Cliff, which were mentioned in the text, were joined by images of asparagus, canned whipped cream, and ground coffee. Zelinsky's illustrations are in pencil and sketchily colored with watercolors and pastels to support the whimsical story. From the endpapers to the numerous details in the drawings, the sophisticated artwork reveals the magnetic identity of the Shivers and excludes the fun the author and the illustrator had in bringing it to life.

What's Next?

Today, Zelinsky works in his Brooklyn studio, which is within walking distance from the apartment he shares with his wife, Deborah, a retired primary teacher. He works best in the evening, accompanied by talk radio or audiobooks. Currently he is working on a sequel to *Swamp Angel*, titled *Dust Devil*, and is still doodling to find the right face for Swamp Angel's nemesis, Backwards Bart.



Sampling Zelinsky

Awful Ogre Running Wild. By Jack Prelutsky. 2008. 40p. Greenwillow, \$17.99 (9780066238661). Preschool–Gr. 3.

Awful Ogre's Awful Day. By Jack Prelutsky. 2001. 40p. Greenwillow, \$15.99 (9780688077785); paper, \$6.99 (9780060774592). Preschool–Gr. 3.

Doodler Doodling. By Rita Golden Gelman. 2004. 24p. Greenwillow, \$15.99 (9780688166458). Gr. 2–4.

Hansel and Gretel. By Rika Lesser. 1984. 40p. Dutton, \$17.99 (9780525461524); Putnam, paper, \$6.99 (9780698114074). Preschool–Gr. 1.

Knick-Knack Paddywhack! A Moving Parts Book. 2002. 8p. Dutton, \$18.99 (9780525469087). Preschool–Gr. 3.

Rapunzel. 1997. 48p. Dutton, \$17.99 (9780525456070); Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780142301937). Gr. 3–5.

Rumpelstiltskin. 1986. 40p. Dutton, \$16.99 (9780525442653); Puffin, paper, \$7.99 (9780140558647). K–Gr. 3.


The Shivers in the Fridge. By Fran Manushkin. 2006. 32p. Dutton, \$16.99 (9780525469438). Preschool–Gr. 1.

Swamp Angel. By Anne Isaacs. 1994. 48p. Dutton, \$17.99 (9780525452713); Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780140559088). K–Gr. 4.

Toy Dance Party: Being the Further Adventures of a Bossyboots Stingray, a Courageous Buffalo, and a Hopeful Round Someone Called Plastic. By Emily Jenkins. 2008. 176p. Random/Schwartz & Wade, \$16.99 (9780375839351). Gr. 1–3.

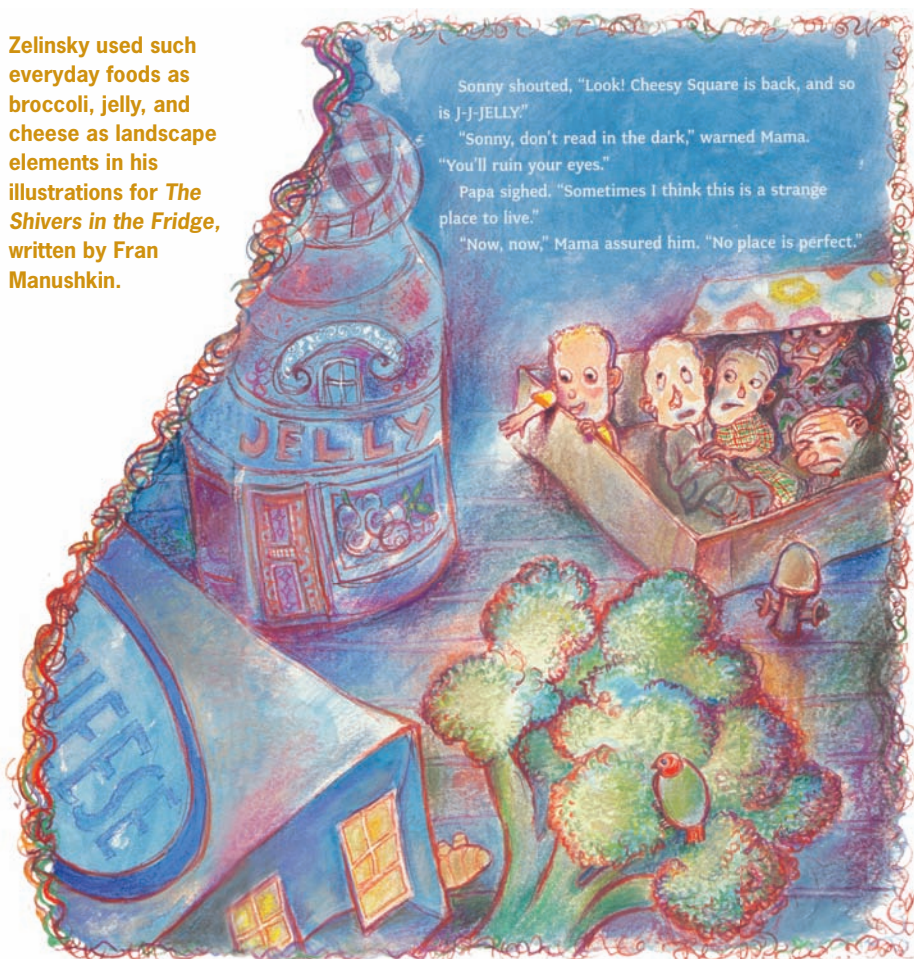
Toys Go Out: Being the Adventures of a Knowledgeable Stingray, a Toughy Little Buffalo, and Someone Called Plastic. By Emily Jenkins. 2006. 128p. Random/Schwartz & Wade,

\$16.95 (9780375836046); Yearling, paper, \$5.99 (9780385736619). Gr. 1–3.

The Wheels on the Bus: A Book with Parts That Move. 1990. 16p. Dutton, \$20.99 (9780525446446). K–Gr. 2. 

Monika Schröder is the elementary-school librarian at the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India. Paul O. Zelinsky visited her school for a week in April 2008.

Zelinsky used such everyday foods as broccoli, jelly, and cheese as landscape elements in his illustrations for *The Shivers in the Fridge*, written by Fran Manushkin.



Sonny shouted, "Look! Cheesy Square is back, and so is J-J-JELLY!"
"Sonny, don't read in the dark," warned Mama. "You'll ruin your eyes."
Papa sighed. "Sometimes I think this is a strange place to live."
"Now, now," Mama assured him. "No place is perfect."