

Chatting with Paul Fleischman and Kevin Hawkes about a Civilization As You've Never Seen It!

For anyone who has ever felt left out and friendless, a wonderfully inventive new picture book promises relief. A celebration of the triumph of imagination and initiative over that most humble of evils—conformity—*Weslandia*, written by Paul Fleischman, illustrated by Kevin Hawkes, and published by Candlewick Press, introduces an elementary school misfit named Wesley who develops a crop-based civilization, creating an alternate world in his own back yard.

THE LURE OF A HIDDEN WORLD

Newbery-winner Fleischman says that the story has been germinating for fifteen years. “In notebook after notebook, I played with the idea of a farmer who plows the earth but lets the wind seed his crop—as Wesley does—thrilled to ‘open his land to chance, to invite the unknown.’”

The author of such award-winning books as *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* and *Graven Images*, Fleischman believes homeschooling his two sons also inspired him. “It added elements of nonconformity and discovery to the story.” And his own education, in many ways, took place at home. “We had a printing press, a telescope. We printed our own books, and my father [writer Sid Fleischman] read his works-in-progress aloud.”

“The lure of *Weslandia* for kids is this notion of a hidden world,” says Fleischman. “It’s a variation on the tree house, a complex culture apart from the mainstream.” Illustrator Kevin Hawkes affectionately likens Wesley to “Robinson Crusoe on his island.” Hawkes, who has illustrated numerous children’s books, including award-winners like *Marven of the Great North Woods* by Kathryn Lasky and *By the Light of the Halloween Moon* by Caroline Stutson, says the text of *Weslandia* spoke to him “immediately, on every level.”

ALWAYS THE NEW KID

“I grew up in a military family,” Hawkes says, “and we moved all the time. I was always the new kid, always a bit apart. On one base in Virginia, I took great satisfaction in roaming the nearby woods.

I spent hours alone hiking, exploring, constructing forts and towers, tracking animals. And at home, my Dad’s garage was a builder-and-inventor’s heaven . . . with everything from bowling-ball wax to World War I gas masks.” He hopes *Weslandia* will encourage young people to be resourceful, roam outdoors, invent games, and connect with nature.

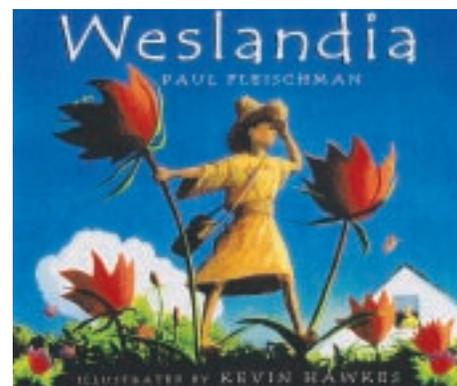
Hawkes says there was no particular frame of reference for the book’s illustrations. “They all came out of my head.” He loved the idea of “a whole world coming into play. Suddenly,” he says, “as a result of Wesley’s innovations, you have suburban raccoons adapting to a peculiar new environment. You have African storks cropping up, giant tortoises . . .”

He even incorporated a secret message into the book’s end-papers, using Wesley’s principle of a novel alphabet. “Paul and his sons came up with the symbols, and I assigned a letter value to each, resulting in a sort of code.” And what does this message say? He laughs. “I just thanked Paul for giving me the opportunity to work on such a great book.”

While many of Fleischman’s books contain autobiographical elements, he says they tend to draw less on his youthful past than on the present. His childhood neighborhood in Santa Monica, for example, ten blocks from the beach, little resembles Wesley’s rigid suburban world with its two styles of housing: “garage on the left and garage on the right.”

And while Fleischman and friends did invent games like “skrugby”—football played with the banana-shaped fruit of a local plant—and produced an underground newspaper, he was no outcast. He endured “Chronic Stature Deficiency” (“I was the smallest boy in the entire first grade—likewise, in the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades”) but used brains and wit as a defense against teasing. The sports he and his friends made up, “with their arcane names for maneuvers, cryptic signals, and elaborate scoring systems,” were a way of parodying the mainstream jock culture.

Unlike Wesley, Fleischman was popular *because* he was smart. *And* he was funny, which didn’t hurt either. “All said, I wasn’t even necessarily the sort of kid



who would come to Wesley’s defense, which is enormously difficult to do at that age. But as an adult, you admire such people.”

AN OUTSIDER TODAY

While Hawkes empathized with his child subject, it’s the adult Fleischman who best identifies with Wesley’s status as an outsider. Because he has written and championed difficult-to-classify books like *Dateline: Troy*—and by extension invented new genres—Fleischman has struggled at times to have his more innovative work accepted by the publishing industry. For all the acclaim his books have received, he’s more of an outsider today, he says, than he was at Wesley’s age. “In that way, we are alike.”

Luckily, both Paul Fleischman and Kevin Hawkes share with Wesley the gift and passion for creating alternate worlds—stories, novels, poems, and illustrations bearing bright and curious fruit. *Weslandia* is a world that kids, in their infinite wisdom, will eagerly inhabit—and that no reader will soon forget.



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