

A Q&A with author-illustrator Chris Van Dusen

The last book that you both wrote and illustrated was published several years ago. Were you anxious to get back to your own storytelling with *Hattie & Hudson*?

I was anxious to get back to my own projects, and I'm excited to make my return with *Hattie & Hudson*. This story's been in me a long time. As a child, I was lucky enough to spend part of each summer at my grandparents' house on Panther Pond in Raymond, Maine. When I was around ten, I imagined a large monster living deep in the lake. I even thought up a story about that monster, and the twist was that the monster was as afraid of people as people were of the monster. So it stayed hidden down below. Of course I was just a kid, and I hadn't even dreamed that one day I'd be writing and illustrating children's books. But sometimes ideas I had as a kid pop back into my head, and I'm sure that's what happened with this one.

Was there any particular inspiration for the setting of the book?

I wanted the story to take place on a lake in Maine because, as I said before, that's probably where I originally conceived the idea. So the inspiration is Panther Pond, but the setting is modeled after Megunticook Lake near my home in midcoast Maine.

Describe your illustration style and color palette. Hudson shimmers on each spread, and you took on the challenge of juxtaposing his and Hattie's worlds above and below water, which creates an amazing perspective.

Hudson needed to be a lovable character, a monster that a young girl could befriend. But I also wanted him to be big and believable, so I created a small clay model of Hudson's head and photographed it from different angles and in different light. That way I could really capture the way sunlight would shine off his green skin. And I wanted the palette to have a summer vacation look to it. That's why I used mostly blues and greens with a bright red canoe that pops off the page.

You often write your picture books in verse. What made you decide to tell this story in prose?

This is the first book I've written in prose, but it actually started out in verse. The original title was *Henry & Hudson*, and it was a rhyming story about a boy (Henry) who becomes friends with a lake monster. I wrote and rewrote it several times, using Henry as the main character, until I realized that the story might work better with a girl in the lead, a first for me. I thought girls would relate and look up to a strong character like Hattie and boys would really like the monster, Hudson. So I changed Henry to Hattie and continued to refine the story's rhymes. But I was struggling with it, more so than with any of my previous books.

One morning I woke up and realized what the problem was: the humorous tone of the verse wasn't conveying the more serious message of compassion in the story. I sent a note to my editor,

Joan Powers, and said, "I don't think this story wants to be a rhyming book." She replied, "Why don't you write a couple of pages in prose and send them to me," so I did. It was much better, but it still needed considerable work. I rewrote the story a few more times until it was right. In fact, the manuscript went through at least nine different versions along the way. I'm thankful Joan didn't give up on me!

What is your favorite illustration in *Hattie & Hudson* and why?

I love the way the cover illustration came out and the way my art director, Ann Stott, designed it. It's fun and bold, and I think it will be eye-catching on a shelf. But if I had to pick one illustration as my favorite, I might go with the spread almost at the end of the book, where Hattie is presenting Hudson to the people on the town landing and pleading his case. Hattie is in Hudson's shadow, and Hudson is big and shiny. People who have seen that picture always comment on how lifelike I painted Hudson. But little things like the texture in the boards on the dock, the rocky lake bottom shining through the waves, and the orange pine needles on the green asphalt roof shingles all add to the illustration, in my opinion.

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Is there anything you were specifically trying to communicate to readers in terms of a message? Not to rush to judgment, for example? Why is it that children are infinitely more capable than adults of living up to that?

The message of this book is simple: don't judge by appearance alone. I used to work in an office where a coworker's husband would often stop by. He was a big man with long hair and a huge beard. He drove a loud motorcycle and wore leather jackets, and at first glance I thought he was a rough character. But he was one of the sweetest, nicest, most creative guys you could ever meet, an absolute teddy bear. He taught me to never rush to judgment. I think acceptance is an important thing to learn, especially in today's richly diverse world.

