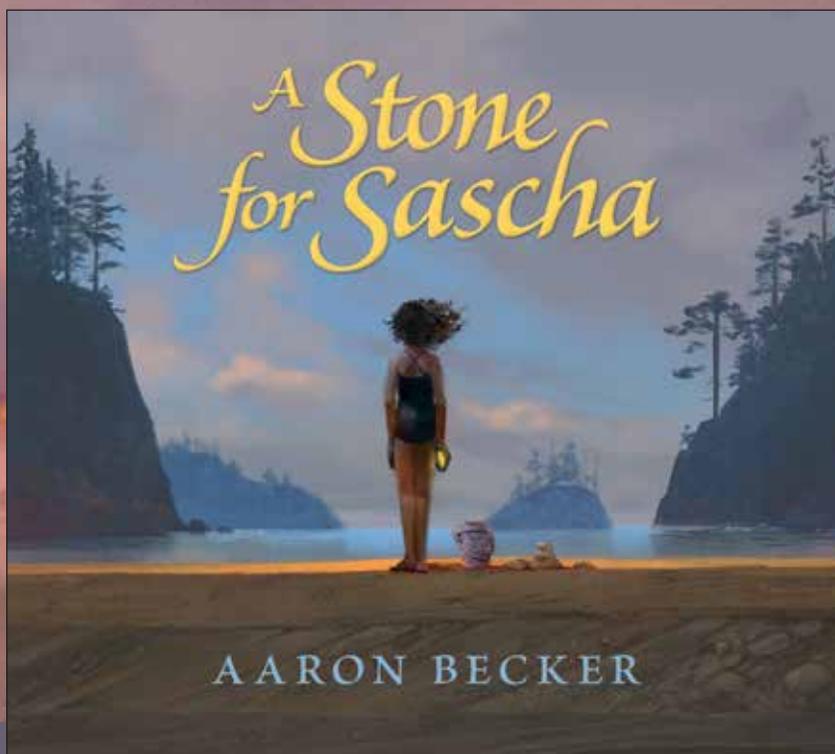


Caldecott Honoree Aaron Becker, creator of the *New York Times* best-selling Journey trilogy, presents a new wordless masterpiece.

A Stone for Sascha

AARON BECKER



HC: 978-0-7636-6596-8 • \$17.99 (\$23.99 CAN) • Ages 5–9 • 48 pages

This year's summer vacation will be very different for a young girl and her family without Sascha, the beloved family dog, along for the ride. But a wistful walk along the beach to gather cool, polished stones becomes a brilliant turning point in the girl's grief. There, at the edge of a vast ocean beneath an infinite sky, she uncovers, alongside the reader, a profound and joyous truth.

In his first picture book following the conclusion of his best-selling Journey trilogy, Aaron Becker achieves a tremendous feat, connecting one child's private, personal loss to a cycle spanning millennia — and delivering a stunningly layered tale that demands to be pored over again and again.

Aaron Becker's *Journey* was named a Caldecott Honor Book by the American Library Association in 2014. He has worked as an artist in the film and animation industry, where he helped define the look and feel of characters and stories and the movies they become a part of. With the Journey trilogy (*Journey*, *Quest*, and *Return*), he created characters and worlds of his very own using traditional materials and techniques. In *A Stone for Sascha*, he drew inspiration from his time living in Granada, Spain, where he learned that the stones from many of the city's churches had at one point been part of mosques and, before that, Roman structures. Aaron Becker lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

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Q&A with Author-Illustrator AARON BECKER



Photo by Darci Palmquist

What inspired *A Stone for Sascha*?

The idea for the book came about while I was working on the *Journey* trilogy and living with my family in Granada, Spain. Each day on the walk to my studio there, I would pass a church. Like most of the city, it was ornate and clearly full of history, so one day I stopped to read the sign out front. It turns out that, hundreds of years ago, the church had once been a mosque, and before that a different church, and even before that an ancient Roman structure. It was hard to stand there in front of the stone church and not think about its history, the grand scale of time that these rocks had witnessed. It made me wonder: What might it be like to watch the rise and fall of empires? Can we learn from a chiseled rock? Or from a polished stone? Somehow all of these ideas came together, and the result is a book with big ideas framed by one that's much smaller and more personal.

How was the inspiration for *A Stone for Sascha* different from that of *Journey*?

Sascha came out of something more philosophical that became more personal as I worked on it, whereas *Journey* came about from something quite personal that evolved into bigger ideas. *Sascha* started out with fairly abstract ideas of history and time. I had to find a way in for myself and the reader, to make us care, which is how the story of the girl and her dog surfaced.

How long did it take you to create *A Stone for Sascha*?

It was about a year and a half in all, but I'd say a bit more if you count the many ideas that never made it past the sketch stage as I tried to find the right story to follow the *Journey* trilogy. The first draft of *Sascha* actually involved a tree. It was an obvious symbol for the passage of time, but after a while, I realized the idea of a rock would allow me to expand the story's narrative possibilities. That said, it's more natural to care about a tree, so my real challenge was finding a way to make the stone have heart. Hopefully I've succeeded on that front!

The *Sascha* illustrations have your distinct imaginative and sweeping style, but there is a definite departure from the world of the *Journey* trilogy. Was this on purpose?

Illustrators traditionally need to stick to a specific style in order to differentiate their style from other artists'. This hasn't been the case for me. I came into children's books from a film background, and to me, the feel of each story dictates its own medium. I learned watercolors to create *Journey* because it felt like the right style — an homage to classic children's literature with lots of pen-and-ink details. But *Sascha* needed something more ethereal and gentle, and the digital pastel look was a technique I landed on after playing around with different ways of making the images.

***A Stone for Sascha* begins as a family buries their beloved dog, Sascha. Readers who have lost a pet will be sure to empathize with the main character's grief. Did this sadness derive from a personal loss?**

First pets can often act as a trial run for starting a family. When my girlfriend (now wife) and I adopted kittens years ago, one of the pair was a bit too curious and was hit by a car when she was about a year old. I had never felt that kind of grief before, and I can still vividly remember that sad day. I dedicated the book to her and her sister. Our daughter was there when the other of the pair was put to sleep at the vet a few years back, and it made me realize that for children, the death of a pet is often their first experience with loss. It felt like a universal theme that was difficult to handle but necessary to tell.

Were you tempted to add text to accompany the illustrations? Do you think you will ever be tempted by words?

At some point, because of the complexity of the story, I thought I might need to add some descriptions to let the reader know what was going on, especially as the story begins to move through ancient history. But I managed to solve this by adding dates and location names to the map on the endpapers — something for the reader to discover on their own. As for other books with words, I'll just say I have some things in the works.

The story depicts so many different cultures from all over the world in various time periods. Did you research each of these cultures before you began illustrating?

Unlike *Journey*, where the research was purely intuitive and open to whatever bits of the world I fancied, I knew *Sascha* had to stick close to history. The first task was to pick an actual route for the rock to travel that was historically feasible, and then, once I had it mapped, to find period-specific architecture and costumes that would match each moment through space and time. There was a lot to explore and investigate! I even went so far as to find breeds of dogs and animals that might have actually existed in these civilizations — a small detail to be sure, but it was important to me that I honor these cultures as best I could. Occasionally, such as in the robes for the Hawaiian chief and his advisors, I had to cheat the facts a bit for the sake of wordless readability (royalty in Hawaii during the mid-nineteenth century would have been more likely to wear Western garb). I also consulted with cosmologists and geologists to make sure the science behind the story was sound wherever possible. (And yes, geologists, I know the fault line on page 17 is quite steep, but hopefully you'll allow me to take some artistic license there for my vertical panels!)

Your ability to create another world (as in the *Journey* trilogy) or delve into another time and place (as in *A Stone for Sascha*) is truly brilliant. Do you find your mind wandering to other worlds and places often?

Just ask my family. They catch me in outer space at the dinner table all the time.

What do you hope readers will get from this book?

I'd like to think that the books I write are open to interpretation. They seem to work best when readers feel free to project their own life experiences onto the emotional and even narrative possibilities of the presented images. So in a sense, I hope every reader transforms *A Stone for Sascha* into a story of their own, whether it's a personal one, an epic one, or, better yet, an amalgam of both.

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