Matt Phelan, graphic novelist extraordinaire, presents a rollicking tribute to vaudeville, small-town dreams, and Buster Keaton as a boy.

In the summer of 1908, in Muskegon, Michigan, a visiting troupe of vaudeville performers is about the most exciting thing since baseball. They’re summering in nearby Bluffton, so Henry has a few months to watch the elephant and the zebra, the tightrope walkers and — lo and behold — a slapstick actor his own age named Buster Keaton. The show folks say that Buster is indestructible; his father throws him around as part of the act and the audience roars, while Buster never cracks a smile. Henry longs to learn to take a fall like Buster, “the human mop,” but Buster just wants to play ball with Henry and his friends. With signature nostalgia, Scott O’Dell Award-winning graphic novelist Matt Phelan visualizes a bygone era with lustrous color, dynamic lines, and flawless dramatic pacing.

Matt Phelan is the author-illustrator of the award-winning graphic novels The Storm in the Barn and Around the World. He is also the illustrator of Always and I’ll Be There by Ann Stott and The Higher Power of Lucky by Susan Patron, winner of the Newbery Medal. He lives in Philadelphia.

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What first drew you to Muskegon, Michigan and the vaudevillian performers?

I read about the actors’ colony in Buster Keaton’s autobiography, My Wonderful World of Slapstick. His description of those carefree summer days in Bluffton really stood out to me, especially in contrast to the fact that he had been a professional performer since the time he could walk. I had always loved Buster Keaton, and I felt that by focusing on this one small aspect of his life I could get to the heart of him. Vaudeville was an amazing institution. When you think of all the performers who came out of it and then went on to film and television careers, you can really see its influence on twentieth-century entertainment and beyond. If I had a time machine, I would definitely catch some shows in the great vaudeville theaters.

In the book, Henry, a boy growing up in Muskegon, is fascinated by the visiting troupe and befriends the young Buster Keaton. If you had to describe their friendship in two or three sentences, what would you say?

Each boy sees the other as having a life that is enviable in many ways. Henry realizes this from his perspective, but he can’t imagine how an “ordinary” life would appeal to a star like Buster. But basically, they are two boys who genuinely like each other and have fun hanging out.

You traveled to Muskegon as part of your research for Bluffton. What was the experience like? Were you able to envision what the summer of 1908 might have been like?

Absolutely. Bluffton has changed over the years, but it retains the character of those days. The baseball field is still there. The old trolley tracks are still in the street. The trolley line doesn’t exist anymore, but the residents refuse to let the city repave the road. They have a quiet pride about their neighborhood’s colorful past. I was given a walking tour by local historian Ron Pesch, who knows more about the actors’ colony than anyone. Through Ron, I met the current owner of the property where the Keaton home used to be. He showed me a cement wall in the back where Buster’s father, Joe Keaton, carved his name. I rented a small house a block away from the baseball field (and the former site of Pascoe’s). I spent many days wandering the streets and sitting by the lake, just getting a feel for the place. It was easy to see the appeal.

Your illustrations bring to life the nostalgia of small-town America in the early 1900s. What medium did you use to capture this strong sense of time and place?

I chose watercolor for this book primarily because it is a great medium for rendering sunlight. The masterful watercolors of Carl Larsson and Winslow Homer were very inspirational. They both captured that summer mood in beautiful ways. To get a feel for the time and place, I pored over photographs from that era (including photos of young Buster and his family). I used the same method for The Storm in the Barn. If you stare at photographs long enough, a strange emotional osmosis can occur.

Is there anything else you’d like readers to take away from the book?

If this book inspires a reader to watch a Buster Keaton movie for the first time, I would be very happy indeed. All of his silent films can easily be seen on DVD or streaming over the Internet. I recommend all of them.

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