*The Adventures of Beekle; The Unimaginary Friend* is a vibrant and colorful story of friendship and fate, with beautiful illustrations and hand written lettering covering the pages of the Caldecott award winning book. Dan Santat create alternate universes where the imaginary becomes real. With each brush stroke he painted a world of joy, color, excitement and most of all hope, evident through the character’s surroundings and expressions. While the reader travels on a journey from the improbable to the probable Santat depicts the strange and terrifying realities of our real human world, capturing the stressors and anxieties that are present in everyday life through his use of hues and tones. The ability to illicit emotions so deep as those of hope and worry, through painted illustration, is a talent that I will never be able to fathom possessing. The Asian American author illustrator Santat was awarded the 2015 Caldecott Medal for his exemplary illustrations in a children’s book. I have now taught this book for the past three years within my second grade classrooms. I have used Santat’s motifs and mediums to illicit thought provoking conversations amongst my young learners, hoping that they engage with the illustrations and feel the emotions that I do as I read. It was not until studying the award recipient’s acceptance speech from June 28th, 2015 that I was able to see what I was missing from my teaching when I use this text to mentor young readers.

Santat’s acceptance speech is filled with thank you to those near and dear to him. He thanks his wife, who allowed him to chase his dreams as an illustrator even though more profitable options were present at times. His publisher who spoke kind praise to him and filled him with confidence when he most needed it. His editor who assured him his message would not just be received but be celebrated. His children who fostered a hopeful unconditional love within Santat, and gave him reason to create this award winning story. With this he thanked his peer authors and illustrators as well as many other people he has come into contact through his career. Santat’s speech was glowing with admiration for those around him who have helped him grow both in his career and as a person. The only person Santat fails to acclaim is himself. A central theme of the award winner’s acceptance speech is that of insecurity. “I am… a prisoner to my own insecurities,” Santat says numerous times and through various words throughout this speech. From his uncertainties regarding his ability as an illustrator and author, to his insecurities about fatherhood, to his timidities about winning an award, Santat clearly never considers himself to be good enough.

Not only do I believe that Santat is incorrect in his personal viewpoints, I believe he is an exceptionally creative man with an unconditionally loving mindset. The story, which up until this acceptance speech I was unaware of, is written due on an inspiration drawn from Santat’s son who used the term “Beekle” to describe a bicycle at a young age. This story, a story about fate bringing two strangers together, is in fact the story of Santat’s child’s original birthday, where the father could only imagine the perfect match for himself that his impending child would be. This is beautifully represented through illustration and text as Santat shows the “Beekle” waiting anxiously to be “imagined” and the treacherous and somewhat exciting journey that the interesting creature takes to find it’s mate. Re-reading this text and knowing that it is the story of a father’s excitement and hopefulness to meet his child opened my eyes to entirely new imagery and keys present that I otherwise would have missed.

With this, Santat also shares in his acceptance speech his panic over the ending of his story. He shares he called his editor in a worry in order to gain assurance that the ambiguity present in the story was necessary and appreciated. Alice, the very human character who dreams up Beekle (not human creature) in this story, was a character who, when teaching this story, I did not give enough attention to. Santat shares in his speech that this character is in fact the author of the entire story. Seeing a story within a story, and re-reading the text once more I was astounded to put it bluntly. I had missed imperative clues that show plain as day that Alice in fact was scribing the story of how she met her Beekle. This was beautiful and I almost immediately wanted to reteach this book to my students, eager to share what I have learned. Santat says in his speech that his editor told him “some people would not understand the book, but that was the beauty of the book”, (Santan, 2015). This is me, I am some people.

I wish I had originally known these hidden treasures of this story as I would have initially taught this book in a different way to my students. Dan Santat as a creator, and as a human being, struggles with insecurities and the daunting task of being ‘good enough’. The most beautiful aspect of *Beekle* and the most illuminating aspect of this speech is that despite all insecurities the author felt he is more than capable of creating something “perfect in this world”, (Santat, 2015). I am eager to create a lesson plan using this book as a mentor text for next year. A book formed by the author who still feels like he has something to prove, to the hands of a curious and formidable educator who too shares the same drive, this book presents a unique and exciting challenge to readers and teachers alike. Reading between the lines, searching for implicit meaning, and decoding imagery that beautifully disguises messages or underlying themes. These skills that I pray I am able to teach my students; I too need to master as a lifelong learner. The acceptance speech not only inspired me to reread and deeply analyze numerous books I have gotten comfortable teaching with, but it inspired me to reread text with a purpose of growing as a learner and educator.

References

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