

The BiblioFiles

Family, Art and Words: The Legacy of Toni and Slade Morrison's Children's Books

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DANA SHERIDAN: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles. Hi! I'm Dr. Dana, Education and Outreach Coordinator of the Cotsen Children's Library, and welcome to Family, Art and Words: Discussing the Legacy of Toni and Slade Morrison's children's books. I'm here with Dr. Jennifer Garcon, Princeton University Librarian for Modern and Contemporary Special Collections, which includes the extensive and highly researched Toni Morrison Papers.

Today, we are honored to bring together the five artists who have illustrated Toni and Slade's works. In these books, the Morrisons address themes such as individualism, independence of thought, family connection, freedom, imagination, and empowerment of the self. Each book is beautifully, distinctly, and uniquely illustrated by the talented individuals who are joining us today.

I would like to welcome, in alphabetical order by last name: Joe Cepeda, who illustrated *The Tortoise or the Hare* and *Peeny Butter Fudge*. Pascal Lemaître, who illustrated *The Book of Mean People*, as well as the three books in the *Who's Got Game?* series: *The Ant or the Grasshopper*, *The Lion or the Mouse*, and *Poppy or the Snake*. Giselle Potter, who illustrated *The Big Box*. Sean Qualls, who illustrated *Little Cloud and Lady Wind*. And Shadra Strickland, who illustrated *Please, Louise*.

We are so honored to have everyone in this space today, welcome! If you don't mind giving us a quick bio of yourself so the viewers can get to know you. And again, we're going to go in alphabetical order of last name, beginning with Joe.

JOE CEPEDA: Hi! I'm Joe Cepeda. I'm an illustrator/author of children's books for over 20 or so years. I think I've done about 30 or so books. A highlight, of course, is illustrating two books by Toni and Slade Morrison. Certainly, whenever I have an opportunity or I get asked, "what? Who? What authors I've worked with..." I won't deny that name. The Morrison name goes to the top of the list. I'm just thrilled and honored to have a connection to this exhibit.

DANA SHERIDAN: Pascal?

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: Sorry, my English is rusty. I'm French speaking. I'm based in Brussels. I've been working as an illustrator now since maybe 30 years. I did drawings for *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, different magazines and newspapers in America, but also in France. I worked since then in the field of children books in France and America. And now I teach illustration in the National School of Visual Arts in Brussels for 20 years.

DANA SHERIDAN: Giselle?

GISELLE POTTER: I've also worked as an illustrator for about 25 years, and I also started at *The New Yorker* doing illustrations. I did a lot of editorial work and commercial work, and then ended up doing children's books, which I've been doing for long time. I don't know, over 20 years and over 30 books, mostly, just as an illustrator. I've written and illustrated about five that are either about my own childhood or about having my two daughters. I live in the Hudson Valley with my family, and still doing children's books. This book with Toni Morrison, *The Big Box*, was very early in my career. I think it was 1999. So, it's an exciting start to everything.

DANA SHERIDAN: Sean?

SEAN QUALLS: My name is Sean Qualls. I am an artist and illustrator, and soon to be published author. I was born in Cocoa Beach, Florida. I grew up in a small town in New Jersey. I moved to Brooklyn, New York to attend art school and have been here ever since. I've been illustrating children's books since about 2005, so I guess that's about 18 years. And it was definitely a highlight of my career to work with Toni Morrison and Slade Morrison on *Little Cloud and Lady Wind*.

DANA SHERIDAN: Shadra?

SHADRA STRICKLAND: Hi, I'm Shadra Strickland. I've been in the industry for many years, illustrating since around 2007 or so. I also worked as a designer at publishing houses. I am the incoming chair of illustration at Maryland Institute College of Art, and I also now work on the side as an agent where I represent up and coming illustrators. I'm also an author. Recently, my first book was published as author/illustrator this January. So *Please, Louise* was the biggest and most terrifying job that I've gotten to get that call. And it's you know – Toni Morrison and Slade Morrison want you do illustrate a book – it still makes my heart race. But to know that I'm such a part of such a big legacy is so very humbling and thrilling. And I'm eternally grateful, for them and that moment.

DANA SHERIDAN: So, to start the questions... actually Shadra, I'm going keep you up because you have just started on this first question that I'm going to ask. How did each of you come to be paired with your respective books. You mentioned a phone call?

SHADRA STRICKLAND: Sure, I mean I have an agent and my first big book, *Bird*, came out in 2009 and did very well. I won a lot of awards – Ezra Jack Keats Award for illustration, Coretta Scott King Award, the John Steptoe Award. Sean and I were actually at the same awards ceremony that year, and there was a little bit of a spotlight on me. My agent let me know that Paula Wiseman wanted to work with me, and it was *Please, Louise* for Toni Morrison. Talk about knocking your socks off. That's the short story of it.

DANA SHERIDAN: Giselle, do you mind going next? You mentioned that this was way back in your career?

GISELLE POTTER: Yeah.

DANA SHERIDAN: We should add here that your book is the first book that Toni and Slade Morrison released.

GISELLE POTTER: Okay, I didn't even realize that. Yeah, I think it was '99, and so I can't remember all the details. I just I remember being shocked that they chose me to illustrate and I don't really even know how that worked. But I remember at that time it probably was a phone call, because I don't I don't think I even had email at that point. I just remember that it was Andrea Pinkney from *Jump at the Sun* with Hyperion and she got in touch and said that they – I think it seemed, the way the impression I got, was that they chose. They had choices, and they chose my illustrations. Same thing, I was completely shocked and sort of wondered why they chose me, but it was an amazing start because I really had only done, I think at that point, just maybe one other children's book.

DANA SHERIDAN: And Pascal, you were actually... with all the books that you illustrated, probably the most books that have worked with your collaboration and the children's exhibit at Cotsen highlights these correspondences back and forth, you were very involved. Do you mind speaking to how you came paired with Toni and Slade?

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: I think at that time my portfolio was at Hyperion for another project, and Andrea Pinkney, I think she saw my portfolio. I think at that time they wanted to hire William Steig, and he was not available. He was kind of old. So, I was in Brussels and I received by fax two or three pages of the text. So, it was a very short text, and I was very excited, but I panicked. I didn't know I would deal with such a short text from Madame Morrison, and I knew her. I knew she was a monument, and I was scared. And then from there I started thinking about the text, and they were like, maybe 12 lines. So, I showed maybe I could do one double page byline, so I would do have a book of 24 pages. Then, as the main topic was about the misunderstanding between adults and children, I proposed to use rabbits because I didn't want to be involved to draw human stereotypes and with the rabbits I was more focused on the topic and I could play graphically with the ears. I could have fun, and also the title was so scary. *The Book of Mean People*. I thought maybe I could use rabbits because it's soft and sweet, and it could create a balance. Before stopping this description, I'd like to say that I knew Giselle did the first book, and so I thought that the quality was high. So, it was challenging to be after Giselle, and also to work with Toni and Slade Morrison.

DANA SHERIDAN: Sean, the question for you. How did you come to paired with your book?

SEAN QUALLS: I don't remember exactly the conversation that introduced it to me. But it was still very early in my career. I think *Little Cloud and Lady Wind* came out about 2010, so it was probably around that time that Shadra had mentioned where we were both that same award ceremony. I was young in my career, and there were a lot of things happening at once, and it all seemed very sort of surreal. But definitely the icing on the cake was the moment... I believe it probably was my agent that told me that I had been requested to illustrate a book by Toni and her son. And just like everyone else, I really couldn't believe it. When I got the manuscript, I was very excited because it was a different type of story than I illustrated previously and it was also a story that I felt like I could really sort of connect to. And there was enough space for me to

visually sort of like, get into it. I guess later on what I understood the process was that Toni and Paula Wiseman, who is the editor, were meeting and Toni was shown a lot of like stacks and stacks of books and she picked a couple of my books, and I only had a couple at that time. So yeah, it was and still is, very flattering and a meaningful part of my career.

DANA SHERIDAN: So, Joe, you did two books of Toni and Slade's words, and *Peeny Butter Fudge* was actually part of a General Mill's cereal campaign. Did you know that Cheerios is where your book went out in miniature?

JOE CEPEDA: Yeah!

DANA SHERIDAN: In every box of Cheerios!

JOE CEPEDA: You know I had forgotten about that until recently, and I had that Cheerios box in my studio for the longest time. Maybe I got hungry one day and finally broke it open and ate it. But yeah, that was very, very cool, and I forgot about that. I'm going to guess a lot of kids really got to see that little pocket book, or whatever it was. That was terrific. Paula Wiseman was an editor who called me, who I never worked with before. I guess it was the middle of my career. I went most of the first half of my career without representation, so it was a call directly to me, and I remember that when she called me and said, "I'm Paula Wiseman. We haven't worked together. I have a manuscript..." maybe a couple manuscripts, I don't remember but she said, "...I can't tell you who the name of the author is." Or authors, I guess, but it must have been a day or so when I responded back or something if you know, if you have an opening in your schedule, and this and that. It was at a time where it seemed like every person in the entertainment industry was doing a children's book, and it's like, "Come on, guys the pond is small enough." I was thinking it was going to be a celebrity book and I was pretty kind of lukewarm about it. But you know that well, I could certainly use the money or whatever, and I was going to say yes. But once I said, "Yes, take a look at it. I haven't opened my schedule," when Paula says – she said it was Toni Morrison and Slade Morrison. I thought, "Oh, my God! This is so much better, this is so much better." I was thrilled, and I don't know how they came to find me. I really don't. I never worked with Paula before, but obviously it was just terrific to do. Both manuscripts, or the manuscripts are very different with different kind of characters and stuff, so I was really glad for those two different opportunities. It was terrific.

JENNIFER GARCON: I think what's really striking is that it seems that many of you were in this early part of your career when these opportunities kind of came to be which, in hearing this, feels somehow intentional. There was kind of a design on finding new voices working with kind of younger illustrators and what that means for Toni Morrison and Slade's work, so I guess I wanted to invite you to think a little bit about that early part of your career. And where your work with Morrison, where your books fit into kind of your broader trajectory. And I'm hoping someone will volunteer to...

<LAUGHTER>

DANA SHERIDAN: I'm looking at all the faces I'm like, who looks like they've thought the most.

JOE CEPEDA: Yeah, I'll say, you know, it was like automatic legitimacy. You know what I mean? I suppose you know once I was dealing with a manuscript from, heck, a Nobel Prize winner! For someone who is just really starting out or, even I had a few years under my belt and had a couple of books that did okay. But from a personal standpoint I felt, okay, this is what I do for a living, and so you cannot but feel grateful for that opportunity. I never thought of it the way you just mentioned that perhaps it was purposeful to find people, new voices and stuff. As I look at the rest of the group here and hear their stories, it makes sense and I'm just thrilled that I was part of that. Because it really did give me some sort of professional stability, at least from a personal level, at least from where to continue on from, I suppose. I think that, looking back at it, I think that's fair to say.

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: On my part, what I loved is the fact that Madame Morrison was using your name to create, I would say, I don't know if it's the right word, but... like a difficult project, *The Book of Mean People*. It is not an easy title to sell. And I thought, that are our position to create kind of books that makes you think that are not like sweet children, books full of syrup. Those books were challenging intellectually, and were kind of different from what I would see mainly, you know, like the mainstream children's books. And I thought that she was engaged in that intellectual process. In *The Book of Mean People*, as in a lot of books, or the conferences, the speeches she did. She's asking questions about the language. In *The Book of Mean People*, it's the misunderstanding between the adults and the kids, mainly because of the words you use. And in her Nobel Prize speech, it's also about speaking about the language, that the language is in our hands, and also the topic about a person who is not named is also a kind of tool. You know the language as a tool, and being silenced, can also be a mean tool. I thought intellectually she would ask question with Slade about the mainstream ideas. In *Who's Got Game*, once again she's asking questions to the reader, and once again they're asking questions about the Aesop fables, about the mainstream ideas, and they turn it. They look at from another point of view. It's like she did in her theater piece directed by Peter Sellers. Desdemona, in her piece, Othello is a soldier, is a killer, but in her piece, she explained, that he is not a killer because of himself. He is a killer because society made him a killer. So, I loved her way of thinking, and that makes you think, look at the world on another point of view. Like I would say to actually James Baldwin, those very very intelligent people. The process was really moving, deeply, and also working with a historical figure of American literature.

DANA SHERIDAN: I do want to add here that *The Book of Mean People* and *The Big Box*, those two early books, those were actually based on Slade's observations as a child. Even though he was in his thirties when they began to co-author together, it began as his idea. So that was his perception of the world, and *The Book of Mean People* had these rules that somehow apply that seem wrong from a child's perspective. It began with Slade, which I think is just so beautiful.

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: I will say that Slade was looking at the world of children books like I don't know if these are the right words in English, but like syrup. He didn't like the all those pies of syrup, and so he was the guy who was asking question. He said to Madame Morrison, he said, "you know those Aesop's fables doesn't make sense." Those you know, those ending with the

big moral, I don't know if that is the word. I think yes, it was him who gave that impulse to Madame Morrison, but I will let Giselle answer.

GISELLE POTTER: For me that was the experience, too, is to have that be one of my first books is a book that has such intense social commentary. I've never done a book that has as much of that. But, if anybody's not familiar with the story, you know, these children that are in a box and parents just keep giving them material objects to kind of satisfy them and make them think that it's okay to be stuck in a box. Then it juxtaposes with them being free and running in nature. I had done a lot of editorial work, which is always sort of like trying to interpret somebody's bigger thought. And this book was so much more in that vein than what I imagined for children's books. It was more like it could have been interpreted in many different ways visually, but I kind of took it in a literal sense, and actually painted a cardboard box that they live in. I think it did set me off on a track since that was so early in my career to just I kept doing books that weren't just fluffy and light, and much more intense or complicated, and generally, I think, probably for an older picture book crowd than really young readers or listeners. It is interesting that when it's early in your career, it just kind of sets you off on a different track and thinking of, I think I right away started thinking children's books – of them in a different way than I would have if I had started off from sort of like soft sweet stories, you know.

JENNIFER GARCON: Yeah, I think one of the things that's really, I think, interesting and exciting about the way that you both, Pascal and Giselle, are describing the work is that it takes child audiences as serious readers. I think that this is where the syrup comes in, right? There's the work that Morrison does, and kind of seeing her drops in her manuscripts, suggests that she has a way to provide entry to potentially difficult topics in a way that is intentional and meaningful. And kind of like softened in some way without minimizing, which I think sounds a bit like how you both were – were kind of thinking about reckoning with the words that she was producing for a children's book, based on some really difficult topics.

DANA SHERIDAN: Shadra and Sean, the question applies to you as well. You have had plenty of time to think about your answers now.

<LAUGHTER>

SEAN QUALLS: Shadra, would you like to go?

SHADRA STRICKLAND: I was hoping another question would pop up.

<LAUGHTER>

SHADRA STRICKLAND: I think, you know, *Please, Louise* is a bit more – it's a bit simpler in terms of the story, and I would say a bit more saccharine than the other more conceptual stories. What it did do for me, I remember sending over sketch ideas of what the main character would be, and initially I thought it would be like a young Toni. She worked in Lorain at the library in Ohio, and that's not the character she chose. You know the one she chose was – for me, I made it like myself and one of my dearest friends, who's also an illustrator, and said, if we had this beautiful child, what would this child look like? Like this art child, right. My friend and I would not have a child together, but you know I'm just trying to make it authentic. Make it mine, and

that character of Louise was born. What it did for me was give me permission to illustrate outside of my own mirrored image a bit and just kind of think about character's people in a more diverse world. I don't know that I would have gotten there without that book as quickly as I did, so to speak. So, what it's done in terms of the trajectory of my career is now I do think about the wider world and all of the people that inhabit it, and not think about just myself as an African American, and that one single story. So, yeah, it's an interesting question and it was an interesting way for me to kind of think about the project. I was surprised she didn't choose herself as the main character of that book, but rather open viewers up to other possibilities.

SEAN QUALLS: Yeah, you know what I've never thought about this question before. And it's a difficult one. I think it's actually a really difficult question. Often as illustrators, we move on to one project after we finish one, and don't really necessarily have a lot of time to put a lot of thought into it, even if it's, you know, something that as meaningful as working with Toni and Slade. So back to *The Big Box*, I think I was an aspiring illustrator at that point, and I was just thinking I would do more magazine work, and maybe adult book jackets. And so, I remember when that book came out, and I was familiar with Giselle's work as Giselle's work was in *The New Yorker* a lot, and it stood out to me. And so, when that book hit the bookshelves, I saw it and I thought, "wow, so there's a possibility for me to actually do children's books." This is someone who does what I saw as sophisticated work, and she was illustrating a children's book. So then, fast forward to me being asked to illustrate *Little Cloud and Lady Wind* – the story for me is really sort of about the identity of this young cloud who doesn't quite fit in with the other clouds and she's taken on a journey of self-exploration by Lady Wind. I think the theme really is about embracing one's uniqueness, and really sort of coming to terms with that and gaining a sense of confidence about that. And, I think, interestingly enough, I think that really sort of mirrored where I was in my career at the time. I think the offer of the book really helped me to sort of embrace my uniqueness as an illustrator, and to really get a sense of the possibilities of what I could do. It's really interesting listening to everyone else sort of talk about this because there's sort of like these common themes. I was flipping through Instagram this morning and it just so happens that Toni Morrison was on Instagram, and it was the interview with I forget who, and the question was, "do you ever think you'll find yourself in a place where you write about white characters, or at least have them be like the center of your stories?" I'm sure everyone knows that clip, and it's one of the most powerful clips ever, and you get hit by this sense of brilliance and strength of this woman. For me, working with her, you know that's I thought that's what the experience was going to be like, you know, this really sort of powerful person who was going to make the point that this has to be this way and this has to be this way, and so on and so forth. It was like the opposite. When I met with the editor, Paula would say, "well, you know, I was uncomfortable with this part here in your sketches, and I thought this should change. But Toni liked it, and Toni wanted to keep your vision. She wanted your vision to be kept." It's really amazing, you know, the depth of Toni Morrison, and like I said it was – I never really thought about this question, but it the theme of the book really sort of mirrored what was happening in my career as an artist and illustrator. And yeah, thank you. That's really powerful.

DANA SHERIDAN: Well, Sean, if I can keep you on for a moment more because you have actually come to our next question in a way, talking about this back and forth with Toni,

encouraging you and speaking to your art. How much collaboration for all of you did you have with your book or books, and Toni and Slade? If you don't mind, Sean, just talking a little bit more. It sounds like there was some back and forth for you.

SEAN QUALLS: There was, and you know, honestly, I remember that story, and there are a few moments like that that I shared with the editor. I don't remember a lot about it, but I remember the deadline being a very short deadline. I feel like having these moments where Toni was really sort of in favor of me just sort of creating my vision. And sort of like, similar to what Shadra was saying, I did a couple of different sample pieces and each time Toni responded positively to them. So, I feel like with that short timeframe and sort of her permission slip, so to speak, I feel like the book just flowed once I started creating the art. It was like she had given me – she had ordained me with this super power, and I was just able to move through it with this quickness that you know, really surprised me. I don't remember a lot other than sort of like these few, sort of standout moments.

DANA SHERIDAN: Joe, I am going to turn the question over to you.

JOE CEPEDA: Sure! Well, kind of like Sean says – as illustrators, we're always just in the throes of getting work done, and moving from one book to the next. So, a lot of times we don't, or maybe think globally, or think about the larger environment of things. We're kind of entrenched in the story making. My experience was actually minimal in terms of notes and such, and I'm going to consider that a really big win, because there wasn't much need to review a lot. The only thing that I do remember is in *Peeny Butter Fudge*, I think my initial sketches had the grandmother in jeans because she was such an active person and stuff. I think the one note that I got was that Ms. Morrison preferred her in a dress because she would never wear jeans or something like that. That's the only thing I remember because I must have really nailed the design of the book and stuff or both of them, I guess, because I don't remember too much. I almost wish that I had missed a few things, so that I could get more notes or so I could have more interactions. She wrote me a lovely note on a book, the signed copy if you will, and that's it. But it's funny, because just two days ago I was talking to someone that I was going to be on this panel. Sometimes people don't realize that, yeah, I did a picture book for Toni Morrison. People are kind of like, “What, Toni Morrison?” They kind of get thrown by that. I said, “yes, Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize, I worked on two of her books.” I was talking about other experiences I have had with other authors. We all go through this as illustrators, and sometimes, you know, they want their hand in the process a lot. I always want to say, “you know, Toni Morrison only asked me to change jeans.” So, you know you know, check it right there. Check it right there, you know. That's what I want to say. I don't say it, but that's what, hey? There wasn't a lot of interaction, or notes back and forth, but you know I was just really glad from everything that came down. I think it was a pretty smooth process all the way through.

DANA SHERIDAN: Giselle, do you mind answering? And also, before you do – every viewer is probably going to ask you right now, what is the name of your dog?

GISELLE POTTER: Oh, Lottie! That's Lottie. I have terrible memory and this was so long ago, I really don't remember a lot of the details. I more remember how, since it was early in my career,

I didn't really know the whole process very well. I didn't have a lot of examples of how it was going to work with different writers, and since then I always surprised how little, sometimes writers do have input on how you illustrate their story. It's sort of shocking to me like wouldn't you know, if you have the story and you'd imagine in a certain way, you might be sort of shocked by how somebody else interprets it. But I do actually think that with *The Big Box* that instead of it just being the editor coming back with comments, she did check a lot with Toni Morrison and probably Slade, and so that you know I thought that's how it worked. I don't remember what the comments were. I know there was a little bit of back and forth. It's sort of an abstract story that you could interpret in multiple ways. And I, I think, especially the ending is sort of left where you could interpret it multiple ways, and I think I had them stuck in a box at the end. I think they specifically asked, "let's have them breaking out of the box at the very last picture." So, I kind of remember that. But other than that, I really don't remember. But I did know that she had some say in on what I was going to do. My experience after that is it's surprising I really don't have that very often. Sometimes a writer will come back afterwards and say, like they're happier, whatever with it, but I sometimes never even hear from the writer. So, it's a kind of a crazy, separated world where you just, you know, it's not necessarily a collaboration. I never heard directly from Toni or Slade, so I don't know. I mean, hopefully, they were okay with it, but I actually never heard from them. Then going into my own experience of writing, too, I just can't imagine letting somebody else take it on and decide how it was going to look like what you imagined when you're writing it. It's really interesting process.

DANA SHERIDAN: Shadra?

SHADRA STRICKLAND: Outside of the first story, there wasn't a lot of conversation. I was expecting... I was hoping I was hoping for, like Toni Morrison calling me to be like, "can you make this purple instead?" I was hoping for that. That never happened. So, once the initial conversation happened around the character, everything else was similar to how I worked with any other author. I just work, do my part, and at the end hope that they like it. The comment that I did get from my art director was, he sent me a note, I believe, and it just said "my compliments to Miss Strickland." And I was destroyed like, I was a mess on the floor. That's huge, but also like, what does it mean? Like, what does it mean? Does she really like it? Do they really like it? And then we traded books. So, I signed a copy to Toni and Slade, and then they signed a copy to me, and that was huge. It's one of those moments that lifts you all the way up, but it's still shrouded in mystery and questions.

DANA SHERIDAN: So, Pascal, you're going to answer this question last, and what immediately comes to mind thinking about the collaboration... there's actually two things. One is the amazing photograph that you sent me of Toni and Slade, I'm guessing visiting you in Europe. And the second is a fax exchange you had, were written in big, bold letters sent to Toni is, "my wife says you're right. This should be changed." There was a lot of correspondence back and forth. Can you share a little bit about that with us?

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: So, for the first book, *The Book of Mean People*, we had some exchanges by fax, but mainly Andrea Pinkney, the editor, followed the process. Then for *Who's Got Game?*, I received the text and I proposed to adapt them into comic strips. And before, when I received

the text, I think I did two pages: the first page of *The Ant or the Grasshopper* and another page with the panels. Fully comic strip. Then we had the meeting at Simon & Schuster with Carolyn, the big boss, and I was in the office with Carolyn and Holly McGhee, who is my agent, and then Toni Morrison arrived with Slade. My drawings, the ends, and they loved it because Madame Morrison, I think she read comic strips in the '50s, and she liked it. Also, as Sean, I don't sorry I don't pronounce it well, but as Sean explained, there was such a freedom. She respected so much the artists, and Slade was a musician, a painter, and Ford is an architect. So, it was all part of like – a sisterhood, a brotherhood between artists. She made it so easy to have access to her. My English was so bad, but she was very patient with me. I could also feel that she loved words, because the way she was speaking I could understand everything. She was really a story teller. She was such a pleasure to talk and it was a pleasure to work with her. So, because I proposed to do a comic strip, we worked together. I remember we were, you know, in her apartment on the top of Chinatown, in an old police department. She owned an apartment there, and she was smoking cigarettes, and we went through the pages because she reworked some sentences because of the panels. She didn't have to write that it was already in the panels. So, it was really, as you said, for me it was also something about making books. We are illustrators, so it is about a career. But it's also we make books because it's life. To work with Toni Morrison gives you an aspect of life like the horizon can be bigger than you think when you work with someone who has such a wide mind, was so open, so brilliant. For me it was a new way of seeing – what is your work, and what is the purpose of that work? I was very lucky because we went to Italy together for book fairs, and once she came in Paris. She was the curator of that fantastic exhibition at the Louvre. It was about the body, I think the title was *The Foreign Body*, and there was like movies of the choreographer, William Forsythe, there were paintings and stuff like that. And I was very lucky to be able to share some time and conversation with her. I went to her place just after Slade passed away. So, for me it was really intense, and I really had a lot of affection for her.

[Note: the exhibition at the Louvre was titled *The Foreigner's Home*, which Toni guest-curated in 2006. There was a feature-length [documentary](#) film about the exhibition released in 2018.]

JENNIFER GARCON: We're going to transition to a different kind of process, in fact, because the Morrison exhibition, "Sites of Memory," is asking questions about Morrison's creative process. So, looking at the manuscript drafts, looking a bit under the hood, and trying to see how she pieces together these works that we know and love so deeply. And so, I wanted to talk to you guys about your own creative process, right? I'm learning quite a lot about children's picture book publishing just in this conversation. When things come to you, how that seems to happen, piecing the little bits together. But I wanted to get to know from you guys, either thinking about Morrison, your work with Morrison or your work more broadly. You receive these striking words in this case, Slade and Toni Morrison's words, and are tasked with creating striking visuals for them. Can you share a little bit with us about where you start, how you start? How do you determine? What the aesthetics of the illustrations would be? What colors and characters and setting, and I think Pascal talked a little bit about the use of the bunnies as kind of a way to transition into this space. But I'd love to hear from you all, what you remember about that

experience, either working with Morrison's book in particular, or how you just generally start with any work, that would be your creative process.

DANA SHERIDAN: Let's start with Shadra.

SHADRA STRICKLAND: Yeah, I tend to think of myself as a chameleon when it comes to style and material. All of my books take – I take a different approach with all of them. I've worked in watercolor, gouache, mixed media, print making, digital... now back to pen and ink and watercolor. With *Please, Louise*, because the character was so young, I really thought about how to make that character simple, so that the expressions came across pretty impactfully and simply for young readers. I wanted there to be a sense of line, some sensitivity to it. And I also thought a lot about narrative color. So, I haven't talked about what *Please, Louise* is about. *Please, Louise* is about a little girl who is afraid of things in her world until she discovers the library, and once she discovers that knowledge, her whole world opens up. At the beginning of the book, the palette is very gray and washed out, but Louise is in a bright yellow raincoat and we can always find her on the page. She's that little spot of sunshine. Once she does discover the library, the palette changes and things become brighter and more vivid. One of my favorite pieces is the extreme closeup of Louise looking at a book, and on the bookshelf. Sean, your book is on the bookshelf. That's the Easter egg in the book.

SEAN QUALLS: Right!

<LAUGHTER>

SHADRA STRICKLAND: That was really fun for me. I also use crayon, you know, just to kind of connect with my reader and the materials that they might use to make art work. But yeah, it's just a lot of thought about the overall mood and tone, and then lots of like painful conversations with myself in the studio, like “this is Toni Morrison and Slade Morrison, it has to be good. Draw it over.” So, for the library scene, I think I redrew that, or repainted that at least three times before I felt like it had the impact, the emotional impact, that sort of like cleansing after a hard rain. That's one of my favorite scenes where we see Louise in front of the bookshelf, which is also the cover. So yeah, there's just a lot of conversation that goes into how to communicate what materials are going to be best for that, and who the audience is.

DANA SHERIDAN: Giselle?

GISELLE POTTER: Yeah. I've never decided about a style. I guess it just sort of, I don't know I don't know where it comes from, but I just I ended up painting how I paint. That's actually changed over the years a lot. I was looking at *The Big Box* and so long ago that I did it. I mean, it's really quite different – I think maybe it doesn't to other people, but to me it looks so different than what I'm doing now. But I do remember that, you know there were a lot of decisions about how to interpret it. And like I said, I kind of took the very literal route of just painting an actual box with children inside of it, and I think it was a very conscious decision and conversation about race and you know who's represented in the story. There are three characters and I think there were a lot of discussion of having, you know, different races. And you know for me, I usually get a story and I just kind of try it out at first. There are images that just pop right out,

and then you have to kind of work that into the writing, and I usually like to have the writing integrate with the pictures so it's not separated. There are some things that you just know you want to make a picture of. And then there's other things that just need to be made. It's just always balancing all of that. For this book, I remember I was really excited just in my own work of doing collage, and it was really perfect for that, because there's lots of mentioning of different objects and material things that the children are given so I kind of found different things in magazines and old bits of you know things that I've saved to collage into it, and I also have old like stamp set that I was using a lot, so that's what the letters for *The Big Box* are this old stamp set that I had. In the beginning, it's always a lot of going back and forth with editors and I feel like it was pretty quick. Lately, in the last few years I've been finding it excruciatingly slow. You get sketches and you're in this mind frame of doing a book, and then it takes forever to know that you can go ahead and actually make the paintings. When the editors like, "yes, we're ready for you to go ahead." I seem to remember that with this book everything went really quickly, the back and forth aspect of it. I mean that's all I can really remember right now, with this particular book. Everything I'm thinking of now is kind of more recent memories of how it is to make a picture book.

JENNIFER GARCON: It's interesting to hear you talk about the change over time in terms of your own creative process.

GISELLE POTTER: Yeah. It's a little hard, because I have to say that a lot of my older books, I look at them and I'm like, "I wish I could do that again. I would love to do it again." I feel like I would do it really differently. It's just little details, you know. I just I feel like the way I represented people. I feel like sort of cringing to look at it sometimes now, because I feel like I would do it totally differently. And it's never been conscious, I think it's just, you know, something that just happens as you keep painting and painting for 30 years. It's just going to keep changing, no matter what, you keep changing. Your work keeps changing, and you know, sometimes you get little ruts of thinking... this is how you do things. Then you kind of have to stop and like refresh. And we start, and so in those little moments, things kind of change. And yeah, I mean, this was so early that I feel like I just did things really fast and quick without really thinking. I probably might have thought a little longer, and spent a little more time with it now. I was super young and didn't have any much experience, so I was just sort of like, did everything really fast? And I'm much slower these days.

DANA SHERIDAN: Joe?

JOE CEPEDA: Well, I'd echo what Giselle just said about cringing. I literally look, we're looking at the books right now, and I was cringing a little bit and thinking, "oh, I could have done the Morrisons much better here, painted this better here..." That's just the way it is though, that's just the way it is. Actually, once I ship out the artwork - well, back then, I would ship out a lot more artwork. I kind of forget the experience that I have with the book, that's largely when it's in my studio, and then once I ship it out, it's everybody else's experience, and all of that. It belongs to the world. That's kind of just the way it works for me. But yeah, I would change, or you know it looks like a mid-career book, mid-career to early book. But I realize I did enjoy it thoroughly. Each book offered a different thing. One thing that's always kind of basic with me,

or sort of standard thing that I do for myself when I read a manuscript, I generally ask this basic question, which is, “how much does this story exist in gravity?” It’s just my old science background. The basically means for me, is this book a book that's more abstract? Maybe poetic? You know, a poetry book? Or is it a narrative book with the plot going from A to B? You know that way, if it's more abstract, the skies might be rose-colored, or purple, and you know more A to B, then it's green grass and green trees and stuff like that. I just kind of surrender to it. And, like Shadra was saying, though I'm largely a painter and remain a painter, I do shift my painting style hopefully to suit the book, and each one of these was a little different. *Peeny Butter Fudge* was a book in verse, so initially it felt kind of abstract but then it's a backyard story, an at home story. It's a family story with a couple of dream sequences, or a dream sequence, and but playful family stuff. So, it offered that challenge. It was full of rich color and happy backyard scenes, with a grandmother – spending the day with grandma – so I kind of just tried to surrender that as much as possible. *The Tortoise in the Hare* book was a fairy tale, kind of twisted a little bit and it's an event. I think there’s a dog or someone that I created as the news reporter who records the event. I kind of let my pencil work show through the oil paint, kind of like a court reporter kind of sketch, you know. Have it a little looser, more immediate, because I wanted the illustration to be, you know, reflect that sort of recording of that event. Mostly you're just acting as an illustrator. You're just trying to do to serve the story as best you can, and that's kind of what I remember. I'm just glad that they were both really fun stories, you know. There's a lovely, different moral at the end of *The Tortoise and the Hare*, the Aesop fable that the Morrisons did here. It was great, but largely they were fun stories. It was really good to just kind of dance while I was playing those pictures, if you will, while I'm painting those pictures. That's what I remember about it.

DANA SHERIDAN: Joe, you actually you began your academic career as an engineer, correct?

JOE CEPEDA: Yes, I flirted with engineering and science. And actually, I just saw that Toni Morrison went to Cornell, and that's where I had my... she did her graduate work, I guess, at Cornell. That's where I had a little flirtation with engineering and stuff, and got a chance to be bad at calculus and bad at a lot of science. But yeah, but it's served me well, every once in a while, there are Easter eggs of science and engineering in my books.

DANA SHERIDAN: Pascal, the question goes to you.

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: I follow everybody, and you talk better than I do. I would say that to do a book is first to solve a problem. You have to tell a story with the certain number of pages, and then there is a physical relationship with the book. But there is also the physical relationship with the images. So, when Giselle, she did those three characters in a box, you have a physical emotion when you see those people in a box. So, I would say that to create this is to gather information to solve the problem and also, it's to let it go. I don't know how you pronounce this in America, but haiku, like you know the Japanese poem, you let it go. You need your instinct to do the job. I will talk, in short, about *Poppy and the Snake*. *Poppy and the Snake*, so first I proposed to do a comic strip. Second, I wanted to draw Louisiana, because I knew Louisiana a little, and I wanted to draw a truck from the '50s. I found in Belgium a collector of American cars and I went to his place. He has a huge warehouse with a lot of American cars, so I took

pictures of the pickup truck. I had to find documents to be able to draw the story. The colors I proposed to do greenish colors, like the swamps, and that way we would we would have *Poppy and the Snake* in greenish colors. We would have *The Lion or the Mouse* in a very red, yellow, orange colors, and *The Ant or the Grasshopper* in winter, like blue colors. It was all a process of thinking about the three books, and also the physical impression you have with the colors and the characters. The last thing in *Poppy and the Snake*, I added some sequences. So, for example, the old man goes to buy some groceries and he meets a Blues musician who was Robert Johnson. What I proposed is that his philosophy of life would come from the blues of Robert Johnson, so that was all little stuff you add in in a story, with your illustrations. Okay, I will stop here with my bad English.

DANA SHERIDAN: Sean?

SEAN QUALLS: So, yeah, my process tends to be intuitive, and I tried to rely on memory and imagination at least as a starting point and I think it ultimately gives me more freedom in the end. And I think with this story in particular, you know, I had to figure out how to depict a cloud and how to, you know, bring life and character to wind. It really gave me an opportunity to sort of think of things that sort of reminded me of cloud and wind and that sort of thing. I think with this story and... you know it's interesting hearing Giselle talk, because in some ways it has gotten harder for me. The process seemed easier when I was younger. But you know I started, and I think the words are very illustrative, and suggest a lot. So, it really freed me up. In terms of Lady Wind, I thought of this long flowing gown... when I was growing up I watched a lot of Kung-Fu movies from Hong Kong and those characters, there's usually someone who has long flowing gowns.

DANA SHERIDAN: I was not expecting that!

SEAN QUALLS: Yeah! So, but I mean, that's the joy of relying on your memory and imagination is that you get to pick. You know little pieces from your life and put them into the book. So, it just helps me to connect more with the material and just in terms of the depiction of the mother and daughter. I think my daughter had just been born, she's biracial, and her mother is white, so I thought it was a great sort of opportunity to have this sort of mother and daughter relationship between Little Cloud and Lady Wind. I mean, they're not exact depictions of my daughter or her mom, but that was really sort of like the visual sort of like theme that I wanted to bring to it. In terms of making the art, it's all painted by hand. There are some collage elements, not a lot, but some, and then some colored pencil and things like that. I think the manuscript - there's elements of it, it is really sort of cinematic, because there's elements of like storm and thunder and Little Cloud racing and trying to, you know, like she's almost afraid of her own power as a cloud, and she feels threatened by the storm. So, there's really these sort very dark moments, but there are also these moments that have a lot of light and beauty. Those images are just things that came to me immediately when I read the manuscript. Really, when I was looking back at the book over the past couple of days, I see how this is very sort of inspiring to me to be able to go back and forth with that. So, there's some very dark elements, and thunderstorms, and then there's very sort of whimsical and abstract moments, like when Little Cloud is asleep. She's having this dream and Lady Wind comes by and wakes her up. It gave me an opportunity to do

things that weren't necessarily so grounded in reality. I like what you said, Joe, about having figuring out the gravity in a project, that's really fascinating. There was enough reality and enough abstractness in this. That really sort of was a good marriage of the two for me.

DANA SHERIDAN: So, as we're winding up here, in this gathering, I would like to have each of you briefly talk about these books that you created, these books that arrived on your laps that were the results of a phone call that jumped into your life and touched you earlier in your careers or boosted you onward. They gave you this validation of working with, as Pascal mentioned, a Nobel Prize winner and her son. What message from your book or books would you like to share with families who read them, who pick it up and read them, coming from your heart to theirs as the creator of these worlds? Of these books? Could you please tell us, as we end our gathering today, of you amazing five illustrators?

SHADRA STRICKLAND: I'll start. I think there's been so much luck that has happened alongside the hard work, and being able to work on a project like this, certainly is a part of that luck. And I'm just so grateful. Like what Joe said, once this stuff leaves the studio – it's like children. Once you have the kid, it's out in the world, and it does whatever it needs to do. And then on to the next thing in your life – that not that you do that with a child – but you know it is huge. There's this weight to it, and you know, I think personally, I don't get caught up in the idea that I'm an illustrator that illustrated for Toni and Slade Morrison. It really just leaves me in the space of gratitude for every project that has come along, and to be a part of this legacy is nothing that I would have dreamt of as a young illustrator. Just thankfulness.

GISELLE POTTER: I feel the same way. I just I feel like when I was young and starting out, I had a lot of I felt like it was luck, you know. I just felt like so many things happened. It could have not happened, and then I wouldn't have the career that I had afterwards, and I feel like this was just this amazing lucky moment. You know they could have picked so many other people, and they picked me to do it. It really changed my career, and, like you said, validated me. And then, you know, as far as the story going forward, I feel like same thing. I was so young, I didn't totally get the story when I did it. And then, I got old... I had a very wild, free childhood. I wasn't put in a box in any way. I was definitely thrown out into the wild wind, and so then had my own kids and realized what the story meant. It hit me a lot stronger, just like the balance between a kid wanting to be free and a parent wanting to keep them safe. And you know, in this case, maybe a little too extremely. But you know it just meant a lot more to me, once I realized what it meant when I had kids. It's an interesting thing to think about what kids would think reading this book, because I feel like a lot of it is, you know, parents like trying to figure out kids and understand how to let them be wild, but also keep them contained.

DANA SHERIDAN: Joe, you look ready to answer.

JOE CEPEDA: Alright. Okay. Well, yeah, kind of repeating the same thing, you know. I would have never guessed that I would have been selected to illustrate these two books. Don't know how it happened, don't really question it. Just glad and thrilled that it happened, and like Shadra says, utterly grateful for it. I've now been doing this for so long, maybe even can say I have a seasoned career, you know that's just one of those beautiful moments, one of those experiences

that isn't entirely explicable. But who cares? It's wonderful! It's great! And as I'm thinking about it, and as you reminded me about the General Mills thing – *Peeny Butter Fudge* being in the cereal box, I think that's terrifically fitting, because it's a story about spending a day with your grandmother around the kitchen table, frolicking and romping all around the backyard and stuff. Just like you open a box of cereal at home and feel what it's like to be around family. So, you know I was in the middle of family life there. My son was maybe 10 years old, or something like that. Sometimes you're just so lost in it, you're not thinking about it, but now that I look back at it, I'm grateful for every family moment I've had in life, and so I'm grateful that *Peeny Butter Fudge* might be an example of what that feels like. I hope people do look at it. In the other book, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, the sort of moral of that story – rather than slow and steady wins the race, it's about the winning and triumph of friendship. So, I think there's a lot there. I'm usually not there, for most of my career, at the inception of what these stories are, but it's great to be connected to something that has such valuable, intimate, and yet profound moments. So, I'm proud to be part of it.

DANA SHERIDAN: We are down to Pascal and Sean.

<LAUGHTER>

SEAN QUALLS: Pascal, would you like to go?

DANA SHERIDAN: Who would like to be our penultimate?

PASCAL LEMAÎTRE: What I think was important, is important in Toni Morrison's book is to think, or you say that to by yourself, for yourself... you have to create your own thoughts. Don't follow the mainstream, create your own point of view, which is a way of questioning the world. That way you won't be trapped. And also, I think about, I don't know if you've seen these preconceived ideas. So, if you read the books of Toni Morrison, I think it will push the kids to think further, to think another way. I think it's really a main, very important thing about our life and education, and especially these days where we have all the news – fake news, propaganda. I know the use of the media, Internet and do you think, “oh, can you find your own way?” Your own thoughts with so much information, misinformation, etc. I love the way she was thinking, and it's a brilliant example of that mind.

DANA SHERIDAN: Sean, bring us home.

SEAN QUALLS: Well, I love the theme of gratitude and I think it's appropriate. I'm just thinking about the story of *Little Cloud and Lady Wind*. I would say one of the great takeaways is, you know, be grateful for people who see who you are. Be grateful for people who help you to embrace your uniqueness. I think that's one of the greatest gifts. Even in the work that I do, I've learned to really value the relationships of the authors and the editors, and my colleagues and other illustrators and artists and all who just really appreciate the work that I do. So, I think that's really the takeaway I think the book carries and I'd like to suggest for everybody is just to surround yourself with people and things that really help you be who you are and want to be.

DANA SHERIDAN: Thank you so much to each and every one of you for joining us and sharing your thoughts and words, your works, your books, and your hearts with us today. We really appreciate it.

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