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New Shoes

A conversation with illustrator Eric Velasquez

Set in the South during the time of segregation, this lushly illustrated picture book brings the civil rights era to life for contemporary readers as two young girls find an inventive way to foil Jim Crow laws.

Eric, what made you decide you'd like to illustrate NEW SHOES?

I fell in love with the story. The entrepreneurial spirit of the girls was really inspiring.

Your illustrations were praised by *Publishers Weekly* as having an “unobtrusive, documentary-style approach.” The reviewer noted you “cleverly combine warm, earth-toned settings with the bright pastel dresses worn by Ella Mae and Charlotte, so that [your] heroines literally and unequivocally shine through.” Can you speak about your creative process for illustrating NEW SHOES?

My intent was to show Ella Mae's inner strength and confidence living in a world that is constantly trying to undo those qualities.

After reading the manuscript several times, I begin doing storyboard sketches of the story. I collect reference photos, books and DVDs. I then go on to create a book dummy.

Next, I find models that best represent the characters in the story. I gather props and costumes and then I shoot all the photo reference. I carefully posed the models to match the sketches I created in the book dummy.

NEW SHOES is set in the 1950s. Did you do any research or special work to make sure your illustrations were accurate according to the time period?

I spent close to two months researching this project, including the clothing, shoe stores, shoes, location, etc.

In the story Ella Mae and her cousin Charlotte use creativity and ingenuity to help others. What do you hope young readers will take away from this story?

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Basically, if you are given lemons, learn to make lemonade. Ella Mae and Charlotte have first empowered themselves, and as a result they are helping and inspiring others.

When did you decide you wanted to become an illustrator?

I have not really thought of being anything else. I decided probably at age eight that I wanted to tell stories with pictures. However, I first thought I would someday become a cartoonist.

What advice would you give to young illustrators?

As an educator (I teach book illustration at the Fashion Institute of Technology), I always tell my students never to give up on their dream. Go beyond the same old, tired norm of dragons and the same old, tired heroes and villains and give the world a new vision, new stories, more personal stories and less status quo. Diversity now.

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Photo credit: Elizabeth Rosario

ERIC VELASQUEZ was born in Spanish Harlem in New York City. The awards he has won include a Pura Belpré and the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award. He lives in New York State with his family.

Praise for *New Shoes*

★ “It isn’t easy to make a story seem as if it’s telling itself, but this gripping piece of historical fiction does just that. Meyer’s prose is vividly precise in its detail; the girls’ optimism and determination is almost palpable.” — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“The tale stands out from other stories of children overcoming obstacles, emphasizing how resistance and transformation can be found in the smallest of actions. . . . Highly recommended; both a revealing glimpse into one aspect of America’s institutionalized racism and inspiration for kids to create this own change.” — *Kirkus Reviews*