

**Reaction to the Dennis Nolan Lecture
July 16, 2008**

UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD
Limited Residency MFA in Illustration

Paul Zdepski

441 Dickerson Lane Strasburg, VA 22657

8.15.2008

I remember talking with an older artist, my girlfriend's father during my high-school years, and mentioning how much I appreciated the works of the Old Masters, like Van Gogh and Matisse...

He laughed in my face. I realized I didn't know much about art..

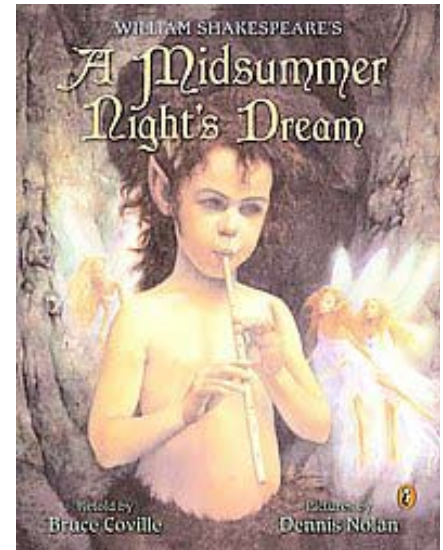
There seemed to be a movement in the from the West Coast in the mid to late seventies full of highly rendered, surrealist illustrations, perhaps as an offshoot from the progressive rock and new philosophies about living that were planted by the 1960s rejection of established institutions.

Looking at the projected work of Dennis Nolan (b.1945) brought me back to the awe I had for his work in print as a teenager in the 1970s. The attention to detail, delicate use of color and strict adherence to reference was everything I wasn't as a kid. My understanding of art was Frank Frazetta (b. 1928) and the cover paintings of the edgier comic books like Creepy, Eerie and Vampirella, as well as covers of Doc Savage and other paperback serials. Dennis seemed to come from a totally different place, devoid of the sweeping confusion and action of the subject, and focusing on the quiet moments and diligent study of the subjects of his work.



Vampirella, Issue #1
by Frank Frazetta 1965

His roots in the Northern California scene of the mid- to late- sixties is a confirmation of the mood reflected in his subjects and image execution. The sluffing off of the chaos inherent in the east-coast, Abstract Expressionist movements of the late 40s and 50s, and a turning inward with a contemplation of the tangible subjects seems to bring the viewer away from the social and political unrest in the daily life surrounding them. Dennis's work had a meditative quality paired with the execution of a surgeon. Qualities appreciated by a generation force fed slick NY ads, Monty Hall's *Let's Make a Deal*, and the Viet Nam War.



A Midsummer Night's Dream
Illustrated by Dennis Nolan
Dial Books, New York, NY 1995

The strong single panel vignettes of Hal Foster are something I have strived to emulate when I have the opportunity.



Prince Valiant Panel, excerpted by BostonBay from the June 14, 1938 Copyright 1938 Hal Foster

I still read "Prince Valiant" in the Sunday Washington Post. I was raised on the "Phantom", "Peanuts" and "Fat Freddy's Cat", each with a different approach to the penwork. I bought a rapidograph set and never achieved the results I saw in those strips. I didn't know about crow quill pens or working with a fine brush.

Nolan's admission that he couldn't bring himself to draw hands, heads or feet showed an artist that started with similar issues suffered by millions of people that pick up a pencil or brush. The difference between Dennis, and those many others is that persistence and practice reveal the form beneath the resistant stone surface.

Studying illustrators like Arthur Rackham (1867 – 1939), Norman Rockwell (1894 – 1978), Winsor McCay (1871-1934) and Harold ("Hal") Foster (1892 -1982) helped Dennis to strive past his shortcomings and develop areas he lacked.

Rackham's sensitivity to watercolor wash, Rockwell's use of photographic reference and the penwork of McCay and Foster fused with an alchemy that was to become Nolan's mature style.



The Two Corbies (or The Two Ravens) "Some British Ballads" 1919 by Arthur Rackham

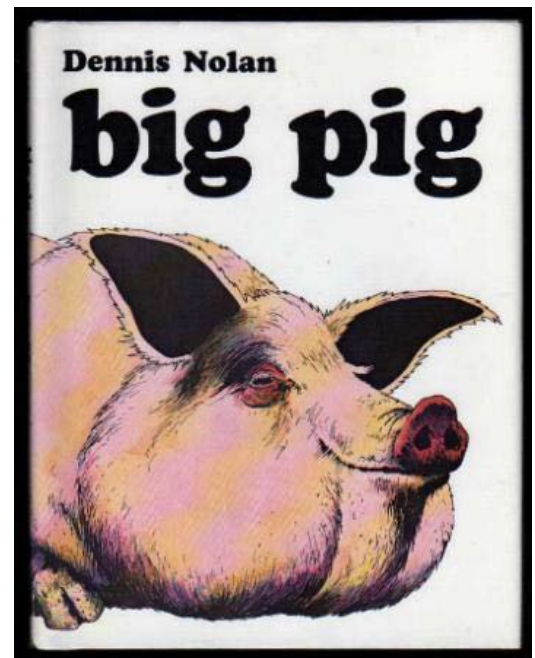
Norman Rockwell was the first illustrator that I knew of, beyond Frazetta. I was in awe of his level of finish. I learned of the use of photography for source reference for illustrations from the book "Norman Rockwell, Illustrator" by Arthur L. Guphill, 1946

The early work dealing with scientific illustrations and natural study laid a foundation of thorough study and measured approach to each subject and it's specific nuance. Dennis seemed to make illustration jobs for the fledgling computer game industry seem exciting and vibrant when the product was a simple 8-bit, 2-D game. He infused life into humble objects like pasture fencing, viewing them as a vehicle for landscape and biological exploration. He was able to begin tailoring his assigned subject matter into journalistic explorations that led him into a more personal line of illustration. His scientific study with the textbook illustration led to a self-assigned book on chicken breeds of the world in *The Joy of Chickens* (nonfiction, Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1981.) while launching into the realm of fantasy and dream in projects like *Monster Bubbles: A Counting Book* (Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1976.) and *Wizard McBean and His Flying Machine* (Prentice-Hall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ), 1977.)

The ability for Nolan to step from hired



Girl Reading The Post
by Norman Rockwell
March 1941 Saturday Evening Post cover
©1941 SEPS: Licensed by Curtis Publishing,
Indianapolis, IN

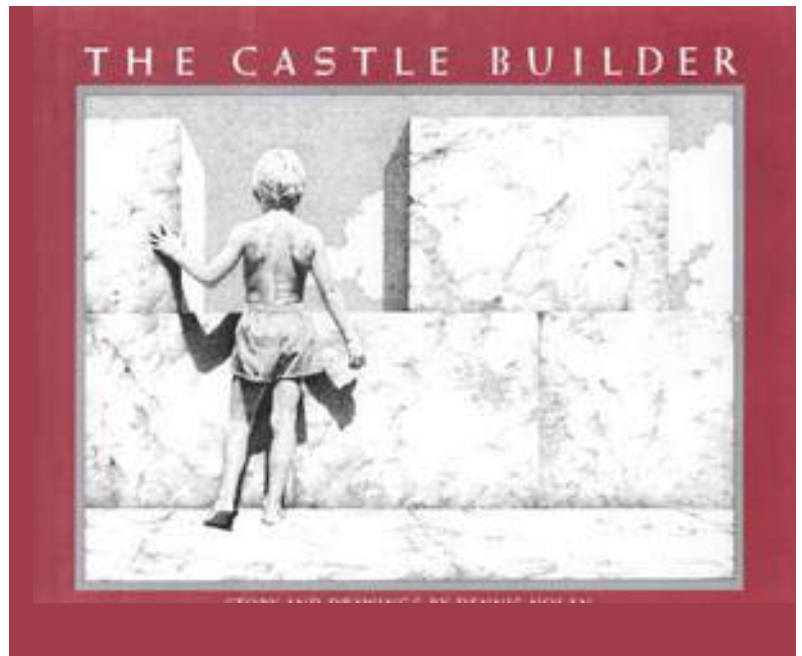


Big Pig
by Dennis Nolan
Prentice-Hall 1976

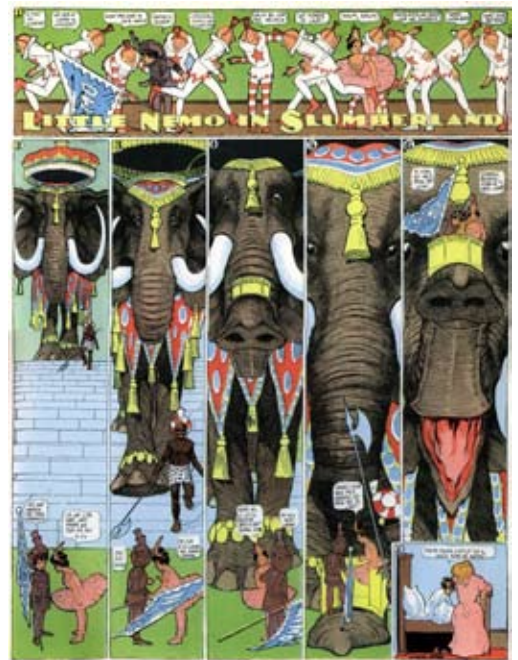
pencil, in the grinding cycle of textbook illustration, to the freedom of author-illustrator reflects a DIY (Do It Yourself) attitude needed to help sustain a career path fraught with job to job cycles that can lead an illustrator away

from their core of influence and artistic center. Dennis was able to begin developing a relationship within the children's book publishing world, both with his editors and readers that fueled the author with the knowledge that he was touching a chord with the readers and viewers of his work that wasn't evident in those previous works dealing with product sales or computer game boxes.

Nolan's fascination with the process of creating detailed work has brought him full circle, back to the roots of his influences in early development. The standards of finish evident in Rackham and McCay are



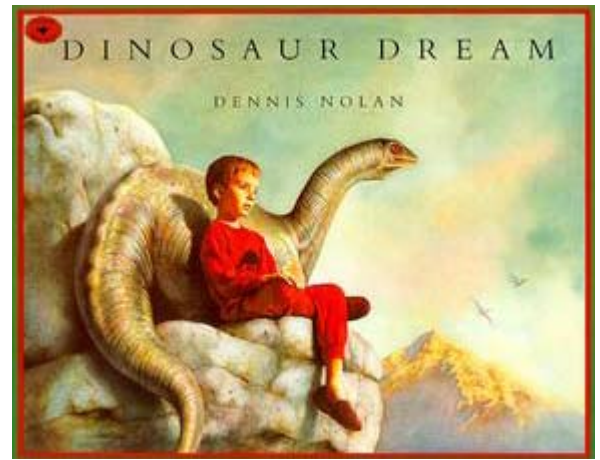
The Castle Builder
by Dennis Nolan
Macmillan, New York, NY 1987



"Little Nemo in Slumberland - Elephant"
by Winsor McCay 1905-1914

I was pleasantly surprised to hear Dennis talk about sculpting his reference models for illustrations. I have been doing this for a number of years, and feel less obsessive with Dennis doing the same thing.

balanced with a freshness of the moment that can be stunted by strict adherence to photo reference. The merger Nolan's focus on the natural form has merged with to places only visited by the imagination. Dennis is able to piece items from various reference shots into a seamless tapestry lit and living within the same light and atmosphere. When photo reference of an object is impractical to attain, either through logistics or physical impossibility, as his paleontological study of a wayward baby dinosaur in "Dinosaur Dream", Dennis builds accurate models from clay, Sculpy® or Plastilina®. He researched the bone and muscle structures to create as accurate a model as possible by looking at specimens in natural history museum collections and making measured drawings with calipers. Nolan could have "fudged" the details, creating a beast from his imagination and photo reference from modern day lizards, but his commitment to his work, his craft and his audience dictated his exacting approach.



Dinosaur Dream
by Dennis Nolan
Macmillan New York, NY 1990

I have witnessed this same philosophy from other masters in other crafts, and am always awestruck. True masters of a craft have a calling to excellence that goes beyond the finished item, it's the reverence for the path that is most important. The determination to strive for accuracy may not be respected by the casual inspection, but it leaves the informed viewer with a deeper appreciation for the final piece, as well as the artist. After listening to his lecture, Dennis Nolan has stirred that sense of appreciation in me.