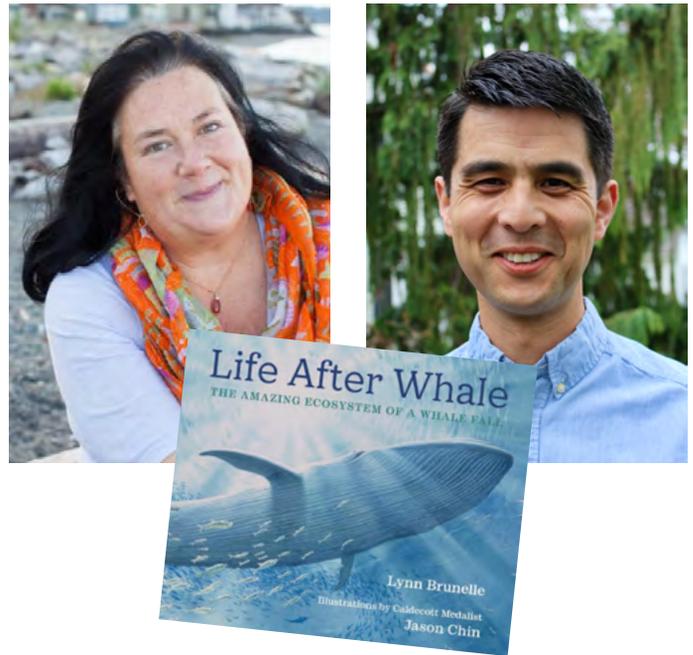


# Sharing the Creative Process

Talking with Lynn Brunelle and Jason Chin

TERRELL YOUNG AND BARBARA WARD



Humans have long marveled at the stunning beauty of whales as they move so gracefully through the water and then suddenly breach with a showy splash. But what happens when those awe-inspiring creatures die and fall to the ocean floor? In *Life After Whale: The Amazing Ecosystem of a Whale Fall* (Holiday House, 2024), author Lynn Brunelle and illustrator Jason Chin provide some answers in this year's Sibert Medal-winning book.

Fans of children's literature know that there are certain pairings that result in books that are stunning in every respect. Such a pairing can be seen in the creative partnership between Brunelle and Chin. In their most recent work, *Life After Whale*, Brunelle calls the watercolor and gouache illustrations filled with a wide variety of blues "breathtaking," claiming that Chin's eye-catching artwork "breathed a whole new layer of life" into the book. After briefly introducing readers to an elderly whale, the book follows her to the bottom of the ocean as her remains provide sustenance for a host of living creatures over several decades.

After finishing the manuscript and seeing it in print along with the resplendent illustrations, Brunelle continues to marvel at the wonders of the natural world, something she wants to share with a young audience. "It's kind of the soapbox I've been standing on my whole life, which is, this stuff is amazing. The world is amazing, whether it is cool poetry, artwork, or science. This is really cool. In order to get through kids' defenses, sometimes you just have to make it accessible and fun. I'm always thinking about how we can get this information across in a way that doesn't feel heavy or beat them over the head with it."

Illustrating a picture book about whale fall attracted Chin—whose work has received multiple awards, including the Caldecott Medal and Honor, Sibert Honor, and Orbis Pictus Award—because he considered the topic interesting and "the text is beautiful." He says he has always found ecosystems fascinating and been interested in the way things work and how different things are connected beneath the surface.

This fascination stemmed from growing up as biologists were "transitioning in a big way from just studying the animal in isolation to the animal in its ecosystem. And ideas like predator/prey dynamics were new.

"When I was in high school or in elementary school, if I learned about them, I didn't know they were new," Chin explains. Since he's always interested in new discoveries, he says, "Here was a brand-new ecosystem that I was aware of, but I did not really know anything about. And whales are so fascinating. Just right off the bat, species in isolation. Whales are fascinating. They're also incredibly important ecosystem engineers. And, of course, this whole cycle of life aspect of this book was really interesting. The topic was just so good, so attractive."



For both Chin and Brunelle, research is a part of their preliminary work, no matter the topic. Before Brunelle begins writing her books, she says she gathers “everything that I think is amazing, and the book can’t hold all of that,” which often forces her to make hard decisions about what to include. In this case, although *Life After Whale* focuses on whale fall, Brunelle wanted to “highlight the circle of things. I wanted to get to know this 90-year-old blue whale who lived this cool life and did not die an awful death.” The whale’s heart just gave out after ninety years, which happens in humans as well.

“That was an interesting thing. How do we handle that? When I told my agent that the whale died, she was, like, ‘Ooh.’ And I said, ‘No, I think it’s good because it really is a beginning. It’s like the end of one, the beginning of another.’”

This is assisted by Chin’s illustrations on that page, which Brunelle says are “so sensitive and beautiful that it doesn’t feel jarring because then you learn that there are all these other things that benefit from the whale fall.” Brunelle says she had to omit several facts about the blue whale but wanted to provide enough “so that we loved her.”

Consequently, she worked hard on paring down the text, asking herself, “What was the key thing?” Adding to her challenges was the fact that whale falls are a “kind of new science. They weren’t even discovered until the 1980s because nobody could see down that far.”

As part of her preparation before writing the text, Brunelle contacted experts familiar with whale fall. “Talking to the scientists who were the first to discover whale fall and then to the scientists who are studying them now was so interesting because science is changing, and what they’re learning is changing. What was hard was trying to find the right information,” she explains. This concern was eased somewhat through working with Chin, since he went to Monterey Bay, which was the source of Brunelle’s information, and he did all his research there, too.

A stickler for accuracy, Chin “wants to make it visually correct,” Brunelle says. “He would pepper me with questions like, ‘Well, at fifty, at sixty-thousand feet, what is the anemone that is living on that rib?’ And I’m like, ‘Well, I don’t know.’ I called my people at Monterey Bay, and they’d tell me that they didn’t know either and would have to look it up. He made it even more accurate. He was better than any copy editor I’ve ever worked with.”

Unfortunately, Chin’s trip to Monterey Bay was at the wrong time for blue whales. “The majority of blue whale research that’s done in the whole world focuses on the population that migrates north and south off the coast of California, down to the coast about the latitude of Costa Rica. You can see it in the book. But that population is the most studied population of blue whales in the world. Naturally, that’s where the blue whale researchers are. Many are in the San Diego area and in Monterey Bay Research Institute,” Chin says.

When Brunelle wrote the book, she had envisioned the blue whale being one of those whales, and she had thought of the book being set in Monterey Bay or in that area, in that part of the coast, and actually separately, according to Chin. “That’s the conclusion I came to as well. I don’t know if it was a conversation we had or someone mentioned that, but I think we independently were envisioning this book taking place there.”

Consequently, that’s where Chin went for research. There he saw a lot of humpbacks, which was “pretty great. I got a feeling for the ocean, the landscape, and scale, which was important,” he says. He also noted some of the other species in the area, including a certain species of seagulls. “There’s an image in the book where the whale first dies, and carrion feeders like birds and sharks are coming along. Those birds were birds I saw on that trip.” Chin also studied an 85-foot-long blue whale that was mounted outdoors in a research lab in Santa Cruz, which guided him as he drew the whale’s bones. According to Chin, only a few blue whale skeletons are on display because their size makes it challenging for museums to house them.

Blue whales aren’t Brunelle’s only interest. She says she works on several book projects at the same time. Although she always has some writing projects in the works, she keeps herself on a strict schedule. “I write every day. I have my morning tea, and I wander in the garden, and I walk the dogs, and then I sit down, and I break the day up,” she said.

Typically, she allows three hours for one project, depending on the project, and three hours for another, working her way through each one with brief stops for walking the dogs, swimming, or even glass fusing, one of her hobbies. All this harks back to her school days when daily schedules included physical education and art as breaks. She says she’s “parked right here in my office for most of the day, and I’m just plugging through things. Sometimes, I’m coming up with new ideas, and I might be drawing those, and I might be just sort of getting those down on paper. Other times, I might have a deadline, and so then they structure it that way.” Naturally, at times, she’s busy responding to an editor’s comments. “It’s just, it’s my job, you know, it’s just, it’s what I do.”

## From Teacher to Writer

Brunelle’s previous experiences as a teacher have aided her in her writing career. Her first assignment involved working with twenty-eight children in grades four through eight who were labeled behavior problems, removed from the mainstream classroom, and put into another entirely different classroom—hers.

“Honestly, even though two of them were kind of scary, most of them were really bright,” she says fondly. Even though others had low expectations for them, sure that they couldn’t sequence this, and they couldn’t do that, Brunelle didn’t find that to be true.

“They were extraordinarily bright and acting out because they didn’t want to look stupid, and they just didn’t learn in the same

way that we expect most kids to learn, which is, ‘I’m going to teach you, and you’re going to tell me back.’” She recalls one fifth grade boy who others said didn’t know how to sequence a story or the beginning, middle, and end. Brunelle says she “didn’t buy it. I watched this kid who was always drawing.”

When she approached him about the pictures and asked him to tell her what was going on in these pictures, he absolutely knew how to sequence, but did so visually. For Brunelle, this was an eye-opening, pivotal moment “in terms of understanding education, understanding that kids are curious and that they’re vulnerable and sensitive, too. And if you don’t meet them halfway, they will act out so that they don’t have to suffer socially.”

Brunelle is convinced that this experience helped her to be better at communicating difficult concepts. From there, she moved to a regular classroom, teaching English and science, and then art, which she enjoyed because “there’s no wrong answer” in an art class. Everything we do in there can back up other things we’re learning. And that was fun.” After that, she moved to New York and got into publishing, eventually moving to Seattle to write for Bill Nye, The Science Guy, and she has been busily writing books ever since. She believes Nye is a great example of what she tried to do in the classroom because “we were trying to be *Saturday Night Live* meets Mister Wizard. I’m all about if you can make it funny; kids will come away remembering why something was funny, but also remembering the concept, which is key. You want to nurture that curiosity.”

Word choice matters to Brunelle, evidenced by some of the child-friendly descriptions such as a four-hundred-pound heart “the size of a golf cart” and vivid words such as “plunges,” “drifts and whirls,” and “sharks and fishes zip to the scene and begin to nibble,” and “bucket loads of slime.” The text even imagines that she would be eight stories high if the whale walked. Her writing stems from “the joy and the vividness of the concept itself and the content,” according to Brunelle.

“I wanted to really paint the picture with the words. And it’s one thing to say something sunk to the bottom, but plunge just brings something new to it, doesn’t it? And hagfish, they’re so gross and cool, and the whole fact that they secrete so much slime in one go, you know, that it gags the gills of anything that tries to eat it. I mean, how do you get that across? With enthusiasm, joy, and exploration. That’s what I’m always trying to shoot for; if somebody reads it, can they feel it? Can they connect with it so that they can close their eyes and see that?”

## Editors Credited with Design

Although Brunelle and Chin are avid admirers of each other’s work, both credit Holiday House’s Jennifer Browne and Neil Porter for the book’s overall design. When the manuscript arrived at Chin’s house, it was not divided into page breaks. According to Chin, the editor had already stripped them out before sending them on for the artwork.

As with his other projects, Chin worked on *Life After Whale* from a studio in his home, shared with his wife, also an author and illustrator. “That’s her desk behind me,” he says. “It’s a small room in our house, maybe a bit too small, but it works. I have a painting desk here and paint watercolors to my right. I’ve got my water, brushes, and reference material over here.” Chin does his Zoom calls from the desk as well. He also has another desk for writing with all the research material in another room in the house and a writing desk that is separate from the painting and drawing area. Chin proudly points to the main feature of the studio—a special desk that is well worn and once belonged to Chin’s mentor, Trina Schart Hyman, a Caldecott Medalist and three-time Caldecott Honor recipient. Chin grew up in her town, and, “When she passed away, her daughter cleaned out her studio and gave me her desk. I’ve inherited Trina’s desk as well as some other stuff, a bin of her old brushes down here, and a huge bottle of ink that I have yet to make a dent in,” he says.

As many illustrators do, Chin has his own approach to his drawing projects as he moves from sketch to finished work. First, he says he needs to get to know the manuscript, and, “When I read the text, images come to mind. I think that’s the way most of us read and start imagining stuff. The first part is those images that come to mind while reading. There will be a period where I’m just kind of sketching those images out roughly, just really relaxed exploring through drawing. And not with much intention, just to get a feel for what a whale looks like in this case.” At that stage, he’s also doing visual and factual research if it’s a book that he hasn’t written, for instance, learning about whale fall, blue whales, and blue whale anatomy. If he has written the book, he’s already done much of the research.

For this book, “Some of the first and most important research I did was looking for images of whales, not just whale falls, but blue whales and blue whale anatomy.” He also drew images of several blue whale skeletons in the early stages of his illustrations. After that initial phase of “trying just to draw what came to mind when I read the manuscript, I started doing more meticulous drawings of the blue whale skeleton to try and learn the anatomy, learn the proportions, really study it in detail, and memorize what a blue whale looks like.”

This was essential since there were so many pictures of the living whale in the book. In addition, there’s the decomposition of the whale, where there’s the internal anatomy on display. “I had to figure out where I was going to learn that and then do the drawings to learn it. That’s kind of the beginning phase. Then, there comes the phase where I start doing storyboards and planning out the book. Before I get into what each page will look like, I start asking the question, ‘What’s going to go on each page? What’s the topic of each page? What will be the subject of the image?’ And that gets back to consideration of pagination and page breaks as well as how everything is going to be paced out.”

For much of *Life After Whale*, all this was straightforward, according to Chin, but there were a few pages where that wasn’t the case. For example, “There’s the scene where the whale dies, and I



Interior from *Life After Whale: The Amazing Ecosystem of a Whale Fall* by Lynn Brunelle, illustrated by Jason Chin. Illustrations © 2024 by Jason Chin. Used with permission from Holiday House Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved.

decided, “Well, this is going to just have one sentence on the page. We’re going to have a nice pause here. This is a big transition. We are going to have one sentence: the whale dies, and there’s the picture, and then we turn the page. That’s an example of paging it out in a really intentional way that wasn’t obvious on the first read,” he says.

Once the storyboard is finished, Chin works on each individual picture as part of a finished illustration. He also creates a variety of thumbnails. “Sometimes I know right away. I’m confident; I shouldn’t say I know right away because it’s hard. There’s no right or wrong answer. It’s not like a fact, but it’s more about being confident in the image or the idea for the image.”

With that particular illustration, Chin says he knew what he wanted for that image—“a very stark image of the whale with the light streaming down.” However, for other images, he had to go through many iterations of trial-and-error thumbnails that were only one inch or two inches in size. When he likes one, he works it up into a larger version and then a larger one. “It goes from small to big. Once I like the full-scale version, I move on to paint it,” he says.

Every painting in *Life After Whale* is layered, which is how Chin captures those underwater atmospheric effects. “I had to be really conscious of light and dark values in the painting,” he says. Since the book has many blues, Chin had to become “very familiar with the different pigments. For the most part, in those underwater

scenes, it was getting the lights and the darks just right to get that ambient effect. For instance, the whale’s tail is less sharp and lighter because there is more water between your eye and the whale. I’d just be very careful in my layers as I would add pigment,” he explains.

Particularly challenging in the illustrations were scale and visualizing something that’s impossible to see because there’s no light down in that zone unless you bring artificial light, according to Chin. “But, of course, the reader needs to see it. For it to be a successful book, they need to see something. My approach there was to do limited color in order to make the contrast between those deep, dark scenes.”

For example, he holds up the page while the sleeper shark is feeding on the whale. “Then there’s all the hagfish, and they’re described in the text as pink, which they are. Sometimes, they’re brown. Sometimes, depending on the light source you’re shining on them, they may look gray because you’re deep underwater and have limited light.” Since the text described them as pink, they were going to be pink in the book. Because everything else is gray, Chin says he tried to make them not too bright pink. “They appear brighter because they’re against that gray.”

Neither Brunelle nor Chin is content to rest on their laurels, with Brunelle immersed in various other writing projects and Chin hard at work on a book about hurricanes. Whatever their next publications are, educators will want to add them to their collections. &