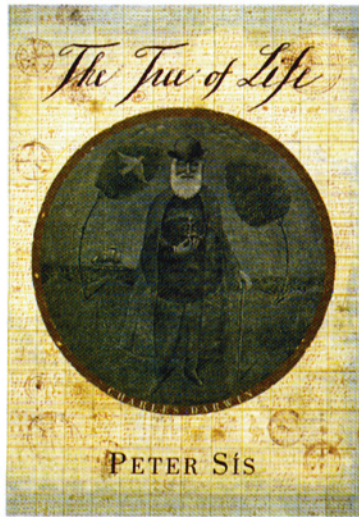


INTERVIEW BY STEVEN HELLER

Peter Sís, 54, is one of only five children's book authors to have won the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, the so-called "genius award," a no-strings-attached grant in support of individuals rather than projects. The award is a testament to Sís's prodigious output since coming to the U.S. from Czechoslovakia in the early 1980s, when he sought a career as a filmmaker of animated features. He turned instead to editorial illustration, ultimately stumbling into children's books. His painstaking technique and surreal sensibility were not immediately understood or accepted, but after adapting his approach to a few works for younger children, Sís found his storytelling métier in books for older readers. Eventually, after he was taken under the wing of then-book editor Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, he

*created detailed and audacious books on grand themes—including Tibet, Prague, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Columbus, and Komodo dragons (his 1998 book *Tibet Through the Red Box*, was recently adapted by the Seattle Children's Theater). Before long, Sís earned some major awards and became a highly regarded and sought-after author, regularly traveling the globe on book tours. Sís produces at least one major book a year—his latest, *The Tree of Life*, on Charles Darwin, shines light on naturalism and evolution theory—and illustrates the work of various other authors. But will attaining the genius grant mean rest and relaxation, or more exploration for this prolific artist? Here, Sís discusses his career and his drive.*



The Tree of Life: Charles Darwin © 2003 by Peter Sís. Used with the permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

HELLER: Could you have imagined, when you came to the U.S. after being an artist/ animator/ radio DJ in Czechoslovakia, that you would become one of America's leading children's book illustrators today?

SÍS: I had no idea. I just wanted to be creative and active—which was impossible in my home country at that time. My father brought me up with a desire to be an artist and to be successful. But he never explained what might be waiting for me along the road. I wonder what would have happened if, instead of books, I stayed with animation, or got into architecture or fine arts. I'll never know.

HELLER: Your early work was imbued with that Eastern European angst. So how, in fact, did your children's book career begin?

SÍS: I did some books back in Prague. When the going got tough in Hollywood [animation work was not available at the time], I was looking for any means of survival. The next step was waiting tables. A lucky circumstance led to an introduction to Maurice Sendak, who called me from the East Coast. When Maurice Sendak calls, you don't tell him, "I'm sorry, sir, I'm not really into children's books." I thought, why not publish one of my film ideas as a book and later turn it into a film. Then came the slow process of breaking into book publishing: black and white, color separations, books for other authors—my own ideas being considered insane—then, finally, full-color interest from Frances Foster [veteran editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux] and my first book as an author/illustrator. Gradually, I fell in love with books and treated them as films. Or objects. What was a wonderful realization was that besides amusing myself and some friends, I could actually try to develop kids' brains.

HELLER: How do you determine *Continued on page 155*

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your subjects for your books?

Sís: The subject changes. I am constantly playing with ideas and let most of them go. I used to bounce everything off my late father, and we had a wonderful time of it. It's interesting that just before he passed away, two years ago, he advised me to stay away from Darwin.

HELLER: It has been fascinating to watch your progress: Your early books were geared toward very young readers, and you graduated to social allegories like *Rainbow Rhino* and more complex and sophisticated books on Leonardo, Prague, Columbus, Galileo—*Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei* won a Caldecott Medal—Tibet, and now Darwin, appealing to both children and adults. Prague seems like an obvious decision for you. But why Tibet? Why Darwin? Are these themes imposed by the publisher or do they satisfy certain needs in yourself?

Sís: *Tibet* is the ultimate tribute to my father. Darwin is a continuation of Galileo. These books are possible with the symbiotic relationship with my editor/publisher. No imposition; they simply satisfy my urges.

HELLER: The Tibet book, which has a strong autobiographical meaning for you, was recently adapted for the Seattle Children's Theater by playwright David Henry Hwang. How did you respond to the adaptation? Can something as personal as this book be fiddled with, without changing your ownership of the work?

Sís: The book can be fiddled with because David Henry Hwang was given permission.

I love the Children's Theater of Seattle. I went to check out David Henry Hwang and liked what I saw. So I said yes to this production.

HELLER: But do you have reservations about the outcome?

Sís: Well, I did not think about it enough before granting permission. The historical and emotional conflicts in the book can be left to the reader to resolve and find the connections. The playwright had to bring things to conclusion, analyze them, focus on them. The boy could not be four to six years old, as in the book, but had to be 12 [because the Children's Theater's audience is that age bracket]. Most of all, and this happens all the time, David Henry Hwang has Russian Red soldiers march through Prague for the sake of the plot. I have written to him that this is absurd because there were no Red Army soldiers to be seen in Prague until 1968. This happens in America a lot; people say, "Poor you; you lived under the Commies, you probably did not have showers and grapefruit juice every day."

HELLER: Did you ultimately see the finished performance?

Sís: I did not see the play. I understand everyone loved it. It is hard enough to face my own demons. But it is much harder to face my own demons interpreted by David Henry Hwang.

HELLER: As a book editor, the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was influential in your career and, more specifically, in uncovering what might be called your "breakthrough" book. How did this happen?

Sís: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was influential because of who she was—her name recognition and position—but also, unfortunately,

because my book about Prague, *The Three Golden Keys*, was the last book she edited. The coincidence that she found my work inspiring when the Iron Curtain came down and she traveled incognito to Prague is too amazing. As far as the "breakthrough" factor goes, she gave me a "claim to fame" because of her name, and we all know what that means in our Madonna/Schwarzenegger cultural milieu. It was also marketed as a serious adult book.

HELLER: Do you think about what audience you want to appeal to?

Sís: I don't think that much about the audience—otherwise I would be doing books about blue elephants. I feel like, let's say Martin Scorsese, who goes from *Kundun* to *Gangs of New York*. Life is just amazing, wherever we look.

HELLER: *The Tree of Life*, your new book on Darwin, looks almost like a medieval manuscript, or like Leonardo's notebooks. What was your intent?

Sís: Formal attributes [of *Tree*] were dictated by the facts of life in Victorian England. I think the colors were, too. In approaching Darwin's life, I was expecting to do something similar to *Starry Messenger*, my book about Galileo. I thought the book would look like a diary. That was before I realized how much information, scrutiny, and facts I would have to deal with. Now I know it is better to deal with the lives of people who lived long ago and [who] we don't know so much about.

HELLER: The amount of research evident in your work is staggering. But you are not a scholar of evolution, nor are

you an astronomy expert. How do you achieve such great detail?

Sís: You're right. I'm neither an expert nor a scholar. If it weren't for my editor and Farrar, Straus and Giroux copy editors and fact-checkers, I couldn't go as deep as I do. I am trying to express my admiration and gratitude for some of our great thinkers. And to the children and readers of my books, I am saying, "This is just to get you hooked. Now go out and learn more." I won't be trying to explain black holes or the theory of relativity.

HELLER: You work at a prodigious rate on your books and other grand projects like murals and even mosaics for a New York City subway station. What governs your output—your chemistry or publisher/client demands?

Sís: I simply followed my father's hopes for me—work hard, be successful—until things got a bit out of hand. I definitely have to scale down. So this is a good time to do that. Some of these projects all happened to crest at the same time.

HELLER: Only four other children's book authors have won the MacArthur prize. Why do you think you received it?

Sís: When I came with my animated films to Los Angeles in 1982, I remember one studio head saying, "You are either insane or a genius." It took me all these years to prove that I'm not insane. Frankly, I have no idea why I received it. I guess all those projects I did throughout the years came together.

HELLER: Has the prize changed you in any way?

Sís: So far, the prize hasn't changed me. I still have to finish what I've been doing. But I am looking forward to the

time when I can just think about what's next.

HELLER: With your Caldecott Medal and other honors, you have a lot of control over your books, probably now more than ever. How do you wield this power? Are you a pain in the ass?

Sis: I promise, I am not a pain in the ass. At least I do not think so. I realize I have more control, more power, more presence. . . . But I'm also older, so I'm not going to use it foolishly.

HELLER: You have helped raise the bar of sophistication in children's books, and your meticulous illustration style promotes curiosity and imaginativeness in children. But what do *you* feel you bring to the children's book genre?

Sis: I do not know—I could try to say something smart—I guess I always remember, as a little boy bedridden after an accident, looking for all the details in illustrations. Of course, there was no TV then.

HELLER: Would you ever like to work in, shall we say, a less fussy or fastidious manner? And if so, how?

Sis: I would, I've tried, I'm still waiting, it might happen. My sketches seem so wonderfully free and flowing, and my style can follow my ideas at the same pace. But when I get into my time-consuming, torturous style, I simply design the picture and then go into weeks of execution, which is mostly mechanical and leaves plenty of time to be bored or to think about plenty of stuff. I have tried a simpler treatment in my truck books. But I still feel that if the publisher is paying me money, I should come up with something extra. Also, it has proved a safe formula over the years: "More work, more books sold." Obviously, it's a com-

plex problem for me.

HELLER: Has your living in the U.S. for over 20 years changed your attitude toward your art?

Sis: Yes, it certainly has. But it might be like someone who lived in '60s San Francisco changing his attitude about life. I still feel caught somewhere in the middle, but I've liberated myself from the Central European formula, and I can appreciate and understand many more things here. I really never liked my art anyway.

HELLER: Are you referring to the conceptual, allegorical formula—the notion that everything has to have additional meanings below the surface? Of course, that is something you do very well. Is that what you don't like about your art?

Sis: The layers of meanings happen to me, and I have gotten used to that. After all, I was trained in the layers of hidden meanings of Prague society, trying to coexist with the communist regime. As the judge who was considering me for jury duty here said, "You are damaged forever." Everything in my growing up had multitudes of meanings. It does not surprise me that it takes so long from conception to finish. I would much rather look at Edward Gorey or Tomi Ungerer and amuse myself.

HELLER: Now that you have this financial cushion from the MacArthur Fellowship, is there a project that has been gnawing at you that you can now accomplish?

Sis: I have been thinking about this a lot lately. No need to prove anything to anybody anymore. If a film, then a special film indeed. If a book, I can take the time to do it right. Perhaps I should try to really enjoy myself.