

Bruce Foster: Why He is a Paper Magic Master

Isabel Uria

Baltimore, Maryland

Picture a 12 by 12-foot room filled with piles of paper, boxes of books, stacks of envelopes, three distinct desks, a wall of bookcases, and a floor littered with what looks like the remainders of a piñata (if the piñata had been smashed into millions of tiny pieces). It's colorful, but messy. Bookcases are stacked floor to ceiling with collections of pop-ups books of all shapes, colors, sizes, and by a number of different authors. An architectural drafting table is where most of the action takes place: the assembly work. A light box table is subjected to frequent use to transfer drawings made on tissue paper into heavier paper in order for these to be cut out and ready for paper construction. The last table is a desk where the artwork is finalized using a 27-inch Mac.

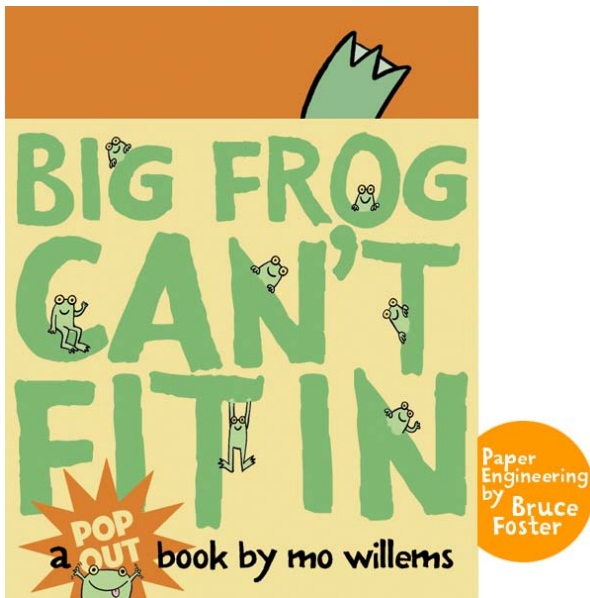


This is Bruce Foster's studio. Welcome to his world of paper magic.



At plain sight, Foster is an average family man, working from his home in Houston, Texas where he lives with his wife and two daughters (one of whom just started college). Yet, in this modest and messy environment, Foster is creating some of the most sophisticated pop-ups around. He is no average Joe, rather, he is a master paper engineer, an extraordinary artist kept in anonymity.

Recently, Foster's name has popped-up (not unlike his work) all over the web. This sudden surge of recognition can be attributed to his prolific output in 2009. In October alone, he published four pop-up books: *Big Frog Can't Fit In*, *Angels*, *Sports Illustrated Kids' Wow! The Pop-Up Book of Sports* and *The Sound of Music*. These works have led people to notice Foster as paper engineer and pop-up master.



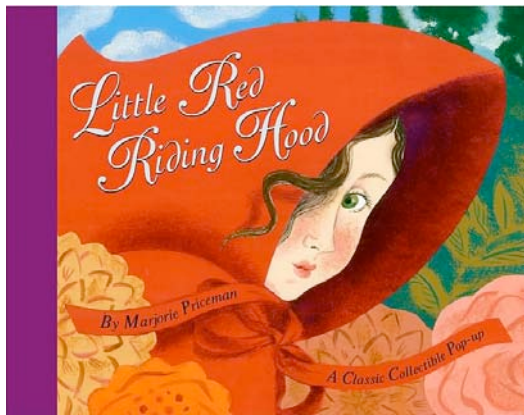
Kyle Olmon, a paper engineer working in Robert Sabuda and Matthew Reinhart's *The Pop-Up Studio* in New York City, summarized the sentiment of many when he wrote on the studio's blog that Foster "is the most prolific paper engineer I have ever met." With awe at his four new publications, Olmon describes Foster as "a pop-up making machine" while also admitting being envious at the efficient and successful flow of his design process. He says that Foster's *Little Red Riding Hood*, published in 2001, has become part of his design pedagogy. "I have been showing it in my introductory paper engineering class at Pratt Institute for years. I think all the pop-ups work very well with the artwork and storyline, with the most memorable designs involve the wolf in disguise. I love how Bruce invites readers to peel back the newspaper to reveal a

hungry wolf licking his lips. It's perfect" he adds.

While Foster has gathered so much press for his recent works, his output is nothing new. Foster mentions he generally releases "three books every fall in one form or another." The four recent publications are simply the product of a difference between his work and other paper engineers' works. Foster describes himself as a "fairly consistent paper engineer;" he is "only doing the paper engineering and the design, not the illustration" of his works. Thus, he acknowledges his respect for other paper engineers, saying "my hat is off to book makers, people like Robert [Sabuda] and David Carter, because they can do it all! And they have that complete package of everything. With me? I've concentrated on honing my paper engineering skills and my thinking process of designing the book." In other words, Foster has taught himself to be a master in his own field.

When asked to describe Foster and his work in one single word, Chuck Fisher decisively says, "Masterful." He would know. Fisher, an illustrator based in New York, has collaborated with Foster in three books: *Christmas Around the World*, *In the Beginning: the Art of Genesis*, and just this past October, *Angels*. "I think the passion that he has for the engineering and the new ideas that he's always coming up with is what really attracted me to Bruce's work, and he really just pushes the bar higher for paper engineering," Fisher says. Meanwhile, Foster references having fun with Chuck's books because they both agree to want the pop-ups "to be as 'wow' as possible." For instance, the acetate spread from *In the Beginning: The Art of Genesis* is unique. "We pushed some real boundaries there," says Foster. At that time, to Foster's knowledge, no one had done a spread almost entirely made out of images printed on acetate before. The pairing remains successful, thus bringing us a new pop-up to be released fall of 2010, their fourth collaborative piece, Charles Dickens', *A Christmas Carol*.





Bruce Foster has been honing his skills for over 20 years now, yet his beginnings started at an unexpected place.

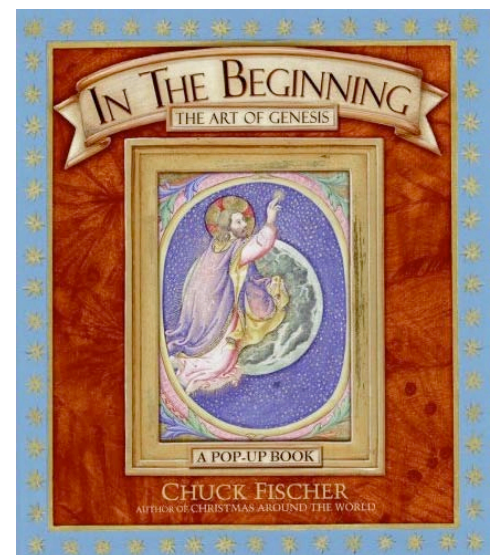
He began by studying pre med at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, but soon discovered his true passion was to be painting and drawing. Once out of college, Foster had multiple jobs in different cities, working mostly as a graphic designer, and later, as an art director. By his mid-30's, he had

the opportunity to create a pop-up promotion for Hi-C juice, his very first pop-up work. "I never had much exposure to pop-ups before," he says, "I don't remember having pop-up books as a child. So when I did this pop up, oh my god! I had this experience as an art director and I know how that process works, and here I can take my flat design and turn it into 3D, which gives me that other layer of design that I always had this craving for."

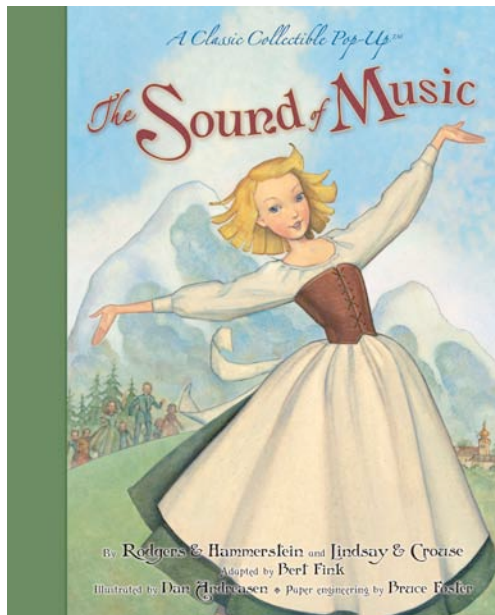
With time, Foster taught himself the trade. He began by learning from the greats. His early influences include **Kees Moerbeek** and **John Strejan**. *Topsy Turvy*, by Moerbeek, was the first pop-up book he owned. While Strejan's National Geographic books helped him learn through dissection (even though he did not become a doctor!). He would slice open the spreads to study the mechanisms behind them and figure out how the pop-ups worked. Soon, different publishers sought him out for freelance work.

Foster met Sabuda (now one of the heads of The Pop-Up Studio in New York City) in 1998, when they were both starting to develop their own bodies of work. Foster remembers him as being one of his strongest influences as well. He recalls Sabuda as "a wunderkind, a master," and feels he has combined his own sensibilities, with those of Sabuda's, and with those of Intervisual Books' artists such as Strejan, to develop his own work and style. As a result, Foster attests that even when he works on children's books, he considers the works more of "an art form that have an adult sensibility" to them. "I think of them more as interactive art books for adults," he asserts. As far as what Sabuda thinks of Foster's work: he describes it with words like "amazing" or "refreshing." Sabuda focuses on Foster's sense of movement. Through a brief e-mail correspondence, he writes: "It's great when a pop-up is very 3-dimensional, but I also like when there is a good sense of movement as the pop-up unfolds. Bruce is an expert at that."

Foster has been busy and hard at work during the past couple of decades. A quick glance at Foster's website reveals a book list of 35 pop-up books published over the span of 15 years, including over 16 different publishers. However, the grand total of his books cannot be tallied, as Foster himself only begins counting the titles he has paper engineered since *Gutenberg's Gift*, published by Harcourt Brace in 1995. He has over seven years worth of pop-up experience before that one book, yet he thinks of those as the "learning years." Foster recounts: "There is a transition period when you're learning this. At first I think it is just a skill you're learning. I mean, you had ABC choice; you ended up doing them, so you just learned skill sets. But at a certain point, as a paper engineer, it becomes an art form. The paper engineering I do is as much the heart of the book as the story and



the illustration. I see the three things as equal partners in a pop-up book. I see them as three equal and independent, but cooperative and collaborative artists, all working together. Yes, I believe paper engineering, when you're crafting the book itself, is an art form."



Elevating his work to an art form has resulted in Foster being chosen for some extraordinary projects. In 2007, Foster collaborated on Disney's blockbuster *Enchanted*, to paper-engineer the multiple spreads used to open and close the film. According to Foster, director Kevin Lima "was adamant that he wanted a pop-up book to be on that stand inside the tower of Disney and for a real pop-up book to open" and thus counted on none other than Foster to help with the job. It was a tough one, indeed. Not only did the spreads have to be engineered accurately to Lima's specific vision, but they had to be finished in less than six months in order for the movie to make its release date. Unfortunately, due to the rush, Foster was unable to convince Disney's book division to launch a pop-up book alongside the movie.

Not thwarted by this minor disappointment, he has embarked once again in a movie-related project. As this is being written, Foster is hard at work in his studio recreating the magic world of Harry Potter. The last two films in the series—*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II*—are set to be released in the fall of 2010 and the summer of 2011 respectively, and Foster's book will be a pop-up retrospective of the movie series. Foster can't reveal too much at present, but does say that the book will include a spread of Hogwarts Castle and another spread featuring magical creatures from the series.

For Foster, this is one challenging book to engineer. As an example, he refers to a spread he is working on of the Hogwarts Castle and grounds, and quotes himself thinking: "This is great! So many things are happening, so much volume." Yet, when he sends it for approval, the filmmakers point out that the tower is not the correct width, proportionally. Now, he has to go back to his tissue-paper drawings and the light box table, back to step one, re-engineering everything. The demands of this project are not only to make each spread a great piece, but for each shape to be accurate and in proportion, "an exact true replica."

The last question remains however, what constitutes a "great piece" in the mind of this paper engineering master? "Volume, movement, surprise, new tech-



niques, or a surprising new twist on or combination of techniques, all in a great composition," Foster says. "Is it true to the magic? Does it evolve into being in a dance of elements?" he adds. For Foster, the ultimate test for a pop-up to be considered "great" is whether it "forms the 'aha' moment, preferably with elements moving in several directions or vectors at once."

Every time Foster reaches for those moments in each of his spreads, his pop-up book followers patiently await the release of his new publication. His prolific work has proved fruitful, the public is noticing him more and more, and he is gaining fans. What is his response to all of this? "I do work hard. I tell you that I work here, out of the house, so it's never a day off," he responds. "I tell kids at presentations that my office often looks like an aftermath of a parade with confetti everywhere, little bits and pieces of paper everywhere. I mean, it's a mess," he also mentions. Adding later that, "there's always something going on. Even if it's just e-mail consultations, there's always something happening daily. I love what I do and I just want to keep going at it and doing more, and more and more of it." Foster asserts, "I'm moving in the direction of trying to make my own books from scratch, like everybody else. It's my next challenge. I wanted to do that for a long time, but I am who I am, and publishers know me as a paper engineer they can rely on so I get a lot of projects from publishers."

Surely, his fans cannot wait for that surprise. Keep on the look-out for Bruce Foster's future works as you never know what magical worlds will soon be popping-up.

Harry Potter designs featured in this article are neither fully approved nor final and are works in progress.