Storytelling

Combining Words and Pictures / Making It Vivid / Intensifying the Action / Inventing Characters / Recycling Your Doodles / Illustrating Dreams / Working in Sequence

Human beings are natural storytellers. We make stories out of virtually everything, including our own lives. Storytelling is a method we use to make sense of the world, as well as a point of deep access to our imagination. Think about it: As we're rushing to an appointment, we are already arranging a mental narrative about why we're late. We make up stories about why someone failed to speak to us, why the economy is changing, why we like what we like. Even our dreams are stories.

This chapter is an exploration of the close connection between words and images, and of how access to one grants you access to the other. American humorist Mark Twain loved to tell bedtime stories to his grandchildren. Each night he would gather the children together and ask one of them to select a little glass figurine from a shelf of knickknacks. He would then make up a tale using the figurine as the main character. One suspects that even a gifted storyteller like Twain found this little trick a useful creative device. In a sense, the figurine gave him the story.

Picture-Making Tricks

Part of the work of the imagination is to surprise ourselves. We start drawing a character or two, and they begin to tell us a story — we get pulled into a drama of our own making. We look at our picture and wonder what might happen next. So as we create, we are sometimes the storyteller and sometimes the audience. This is a useful strategy, a trick really, for making pictures that tell tales. Here are a few others:

• Stories are told through the orchestration of elements: Establish a hierarchy of importance among the elements in your picture. You make something important in a variety of ways — size, contrast with other elements, degree of sharpness and/or detail, etc.

• A good story leaves some things unexplained. By “unexplained,” I mean using such visual devices as obscuring, distorting, juxtaposing in odd ways, or radical cropping. These devices require the viewer to actively fill in the gaps with his or her own imagination.

• Believable fantasy is grounded in authenticity. Some realism in a drawing allows the viewer to more readily accept the fantastic elements.

• The mood of your characters is conveyed as much through body posture as facial expression. Consider the overall silhouette: Is it slumped? Angular and explosive? Stable and proud? The best way to create an

attitude with body posture is to feel it in your own body.

• Details enrich a story and make it more real. A select few details are crucial to the story, while enrichment details add believability and interest.

• The anticipation of an event is sometimes more intriguing than the event itself. Consider depicting an event at the moment before the main action actually happens.

words and pictures

I like to stress the strong mental connection between words and images. While not exactly interchangeable, these two modes of thought are deeply intertwined. One triggers the other. Imagine two parallel ladders, one labeled “words” and the other “images.” You begin an easy climb on one of them until, at some point, the climbing gets difficult. Now, instead of feeling stuck, you simply cross over to the other ladder. Suddenly the climbing gets easy again.

The creative storyteller learns to move fluidly from words to images and back again. Each of these two modes presents its own inner vocabulary — different, but overlapping and mutually supportive.

These drawings, nearly all taken from my sketchbooks, were drawn with no particular story in mind. Sometime later I added these captions as if they were illustrations of an existing story. Although I haven't yet done so, I feel that I could make up a story out of any one of these pictures. And so could you.

“Ali knew that the old cobra was still dangerous.”

Drawing in Sequence

A sequence is a series of drawings linked by time or logic. Each drawing flows from the preceding one and sets the stage for the next. The transition from one drawing to the next can be extremely simple and obvious or subtle and complex.

Sequence drawing is much like storyboarding a movie scene. Break the action down into discrete steps, often employing "movie thinking": zooms, close-ups, pans and the like.

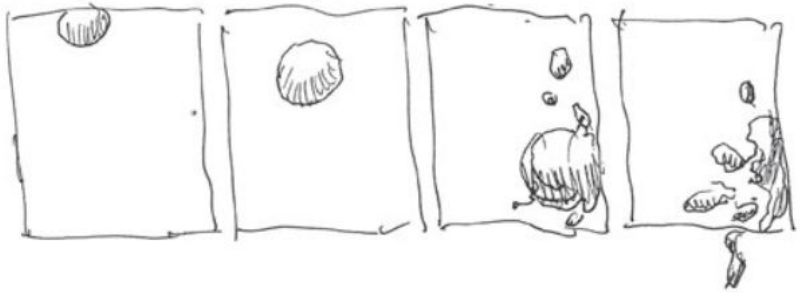
Drawing sequences shift the question of "What shall I draw?"to "What happens next?" In the sequence on the facing page which I call Cat and a Ball, I had no idea where I was going when I did the first drawing. Once I started making the ball bigger, the story began to evolve. I relied on a limited repertoire of film devices and noodling tricks (which are labeled) to move the story along.

exercise 30

Drawing in Sequence

1. Make a row of four panels about 3 inches (8cm) square. Draw an object or person in the first box. In the next three panels, show some progressive change — make something happen. Here are just a few possibilities: collision, deterioration, melt-down, transformation, growth. Strive to make the changes evenly spaced from panel to panel.

2. Divide a large sheet of paper into twelve equally-sized panels. Leave a little space between each panel and a margin all around. This is your storyboard; use it to tell a tale in a sequence of drawings. Think of your story as if it were a movie, with the action advancing from frame to frame. Consider using film-making techniques as well as the doodling techniques described in chapter one.



SPLAT !