

Paper Engineering - Chicken Soup For The Soul?

By Ray Marshall

There's something very magical about the way a scene unfolds from between the pages of a pop-up book. It seems to enchant both children and adults. I don't remember ever having a pop-up book as a child but the day I encountered Jan Pienkoski's "Haunted House" I was hooked. I was twenty something and working as an art director in London. When I saw the gorilla's arm sweep down or the bat wings flap open I knew I had to make one of my own. It lit a fire in me. Of course I had no idea how to go about it and there was no one to show me, but something inside me told me I could do it.

I'm not alone in this fascination; pop-up books have a huge following. So why are so many people fascinated by this medium, either as artists or collectors?

From my perspective it's the satisfaction I get from making a three-dimensional scene appear from out of almost nowhere. I enjoy the challenge of solving a problem. I can spend hours fiddling about with pieces of paper trying to make something look or work the way I want it to - more hours than I ever get paid for. I'm like the illustrator that chooses the very complex style over the quicker to execute style. I'm also looking for the opportunity to create that same emotion I experienced when opening "Haunted House," to make people go "oooooh, aaah!" Another fascination of mine is animation and I've always seen pop-up books fitting into that category, consequently I'm always looking for the opportunity to "animate" something.

From the buyer or collectors' perspective I think it's a fascination with the seemingly impossible, "I can't imagine ever being able to do that." Or it's just the sheer enjoyment of endlessly opening and closing the spreads and watching the basic physics take over and put things into motion. From a child's perspective it's just the sheer magic of these scenes appearing from a turn of the page.

People are also drawn to the medium itself. It's wonderfully versatile, surprisingly strong, weighs nothing, and is quite cheap compared to other building materials. We can cut it into elaborate shapes and fold them up to create simple mechanics that can embellish a story or teach a subject. If we fold it with the grain it has the strength to lift and support larger shapes or power other mechanics. Bend it with the grain, and it can create graceful curves. We can use it thick or thin depending upon our needs and the end results can be very effective - buildings, bugs, jungle scenes, even carousels that fold away neatly. That's pretty amazing.

It's refreshing that in this digital age pop-up books are not only surviving, but thriving. It seems like everyone wants to make one! Once there were only a handful of paper engineers and it was truly a small industry (it still is by most industry standards), but now pop-ups are being taught in schools, art colleges, even museums. I've conducted a number of workshops and talks at these venues on the subject. I love watching the look on kids' faces as they grapple with the cutting and gluing but are ultimately rewarded when they open their pop-ups for the first time. They can't wait to run off and

show it to someone! Kids can write code to animate robots or computer games, but the simple art of paper mechanics still seems to have a nice mystique to it.

I think everyone should give this very tactile craft a try because it's so satisfying. If you've never made a pop-up before why not have a go? Here are some suggestions to get started. Start with the basic stand-up pop-up and experiment with gluing on the pop-up at different angles or changing the tab angles to see what works and what doesn't. Then try adding other pieces to them. See how far you can go before they stick out the page and then cut them back accordingly. Then try to use that mechanic to move another, and so on. Take a look at some of the simpler mechanisms you see in cards and books. It may not work perfectly the first time but with some experimentation you'll get better results and have fun trying, you'll also get that satisfaction when you succeed. If you're a parent or you work with children, get them involved, they love it. Make sure you create plenty of mess, it's part of the fun!

The great thing about paper engineering is that you don't even need to be able to draw to create pop-ups. Not only are the shapes you cut out interesting in themselves but you can use different colored or textured papers to enhance those shapes. You can also cut out anything that takes your fancy from cereal boxes, cartons or magazines. You can use postcards, the junk that comes in the mail, or your own photographs. Glue in some aluminum foil, feathers, springs, or popsicle sticks! In fact, anything that lays flat will work.

Why not make a card for a friend or create a school classroom project? It's fun trying to organize a room full of kids with scissors and glue! Who knows, you might even come up with a great idea for a book while doing so.

Sometimes we're reluctant to try something new for fear of embarrassing ourselves. You'll hear people say "Oh, I'm not creative, I can't do that." It doesn't matter, the important thing is just to do it and have fun doing it. I recently played with a group of friends in our first "rock band" appearance. At first I was apprehensive about being pulled out of my comfort zone but after our performance I was hooked! I realized that I didn't need to be a brilliant musician to have fun and "Get Some Satisfaction."

Having spent many years cutting and gluing bits of paper I'm still in awe of the process. I sit there opening and closing the spread watching with satisfaction as the mechanics open and close - just like a flower.... oooo, now there's an idea!