

NOMINATION FOR THE HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARDS 2012  
BY THE NATIONAL SECTION IBBY OF CZECH REPUBLIC / PRESENTATION OF CANDIDATE



**PETER SÍS** is an internationally acclaimed author, illustrator, filmmaker, and painter. He was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1949 and grew up in Prague. He studied painting and filmmaking at the Academy of Applied Arts in Prague and the Royal College of Art in London. His animated work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Peter Sís is the author of more than twenty-five books and is the seven-time winner of *The New York Times Book Review* Best Illustrated Book of the Year and three-time winner of the Caldecott Honor. His many distinguished books include *Starry Messenger – Galileo Galilei*, *Tibet Through the Red Box*, *Madlenka*, *Rainbow Rhino*, *The Tree of Life – Charles Darwin*, and *The Three Golden Keys*. Most recently, in 2007, he published *The Wall – Growing up Behind the Iron Curtain*, which was awarded the Robert F. Sibert Medal and was also named a Caldecott Honor Book. Peter Sís was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2003. In 2011 he released his new book *The Conference of the Birds*, inspired by the classic twelfth-century Sufi epic poem.





## BIOGRAPHY OF ARTIST-AUTHOR: PETER SÍS

Peter Sis was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in the middle of Europe, in the middle of 20th century (1949). His father was a filmmaker and his mother was an artist. Peter spent his early years responding to the world around him by painting everyday events and stories to resemble fantastical creatures, and using his pencils to transform the mundane into the re-imagined. He created his first picture book when he was five. His mother sewed the pages together.

Going to school in the newly communist country taught him a different perspective of the world. Peter joined the Young Pioneers, and was obligated to learn Russian and celebrate the Soviet leaders and holidays. At school, he drew what he was told. Luckily, his creativity and individuality were encouraged at home, where he was exposed to the rich Czechoslovak tradition of illustrated children's books. There he could draw what inspired him.

The Czechoslovakia of Peter's youth was a monolithic and grey totalitarian society, isolated from the free world by invisible and visible boundaries. 1968 brought hope and the promise of change as the "Prague Spring" opened this world to music, literature, theater, arts, and most of all travel. Peter hitchhiked around Europe. The subsequent Soviet invasion came as a shock. Borders were closed once again and censorship was restored. Peter and his family considered leaving Czechoslovakia at that time, but Peter had been chosen as a student of the noted artist, illustrator and filmmaker Jiří Trnka at the Academy of Applied Arts, and that was a dream come true. Sadly, Trnka died a year later.

Peter graduated in 1974, having completed his first animated film *Mimikry*, at a time when the choices for an artist were political, limited and few. He was offered a position as professor at the Academy, where

communist party membership was required, but he decided to focus on his own work instead. Around this time, he illustrated his first book, *Hansel & Gretel by the Brothers Grimm* (1975, Albatros, Prague), and animated *The Island of 6,000 Alarm Clocks*, a film based on a story by M. Macourek. The film was about an alarm clock that incites a rebellion against human abuse, convincing 5,999 other alarm clocks to join him and depart for an island where they can ring as much as they please. This parable was not officially censored, but it was put "on the shelf" and kept from distribution. However, Czech film authorities were eager to learn about computer animation, and Peter was permitted to spend a year at The Royal College of Art in London, where he studied with Quentin Blake.

He put his new experience to use illustrating *The Baltic Fairy Tales* published by Artia Prague in French, German and English.

Peter's next film *Hlavy* (Heads), made its way to the West Berlin Film Festival, where it won The Golden Bear Award in 1980. This recognition was welcomed by the Communist government and opened the door for Sis to the larger world. He was "loaned" (for a fee paid to the Czechoslovak government) to Switzerland and England to make animated films. In 1982, the Czechoslovak authorities permitted him to go to Los Angeles to create animation for the upcoming 1984 Olympic Games. Peter was working on the film when the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc countries decided to boycott the games. He was ordered to return home immediately. He declined and stayed in America to finish the film. This was deemed unacceptable by the communist government, and Peter could not return for fear of punishment. Now he was without a country, cut off from his family who remained in Czechoslovakia.

As Peter struggled to find a place for his art beyond the film world, he was recognized by Maurice Sendak, renowned U.S. author and illustrator, who introduced him to the American children's book industry. In 1984 Sis illustrated *Bean Boy* by George Shannon, followed by *The Whipping Boy* by Sid Fleischman, which was awarded the 1986 Newbery Medal. In 1987 *Rainbow Rhino*, the first book Peter wrote as well as illustrated, was published. He was establishing his place in children's books.

Then came "Perestroika" and 1989. On November 9 of that year, citizens from East Germany and West Germany began breaking down the Berlin Wall. Czechoslovakia after the "velvet" revolution became a free country, and Peter could go home once again. The world watched as the structure that had separated

the people for decades crumbled—creating a passage between two separate worlds that were united by common themes.

Peter's life and work exemplify the dissonance between the world of his childhood and the freedom of expression he has experienced since. His books serve as a personal reflection of his life as child, artist, son, father, emigrant and dreamer. He strives to create a legacy for his children and the broader world community. In *The Three Golden Keys*, a magical recreation of his childhood Prague, Sis includes a letter to his young daughter in the forward. He writes: "You are free."

His first book in free Czechoslovakia was *The Three Golden Keys* (Tři zlaté klíče), his memories of Prague, followed by *Starry Messenger* (Hvězdný posel) about Galileo Galilei, and *A Small Tall Tale From The Far Far North* (Podivuhodný příběh Eskymo Welzla očima Petra Sise) about Jan Welzl, the Czech folk hero who lived up in the frozen north during the early 20th century. Peter was back home, and celebrated as an ambassador to children all over the world.

Since then he has created more exquisite books about explorers and dreamers: *The Tree of Life* (Strom života) about Charles Darwin was followed by the very personal *Tibet Through The Red Box* (Tibet / Tajemství červené krabičky) about his father's journey to Tibet and the effect his absence had on the young Peter. *Play, Mozart, Play!* (Hrej, Mozarte, hrej) dealt with the childhood of Mozart, and then Peter explored his own childhood in *The Wall – Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (Zed'). His next book, which will be published in the fall of 2011, is *The Conference of the Birds* (Ptačí sněm), inspired by the timeless Sufi poem of the 12th century Persian poet Al Fattar.

His versatility as an artist enables him to employ layouts, designs and techniques that are uniquely suited to each individual project. His use of oil paints, water colors, pen-and-ink drawing, collage, cross-hatching, pointillism and stippling compose an intricate visual language that beckons the reader to join his explorations of real and imagined worlds. Handwritten text, antique end papers, fold-outs, maps, and other graphic elements enhance the uniqueness of each spellbinding universe that Sis creates. In each of these entities, Sis cultivates the victorious imagination and the inner freedom of humankind. Each of his books contains marvelous surprises. When asked what message he sends to children through his work, Sis replied: "Believe in yourselves. Believe in your dreams and follow them."



Peter Sis' work includes 26 animated films and shorts, more than 60 books, poster designs (including several for Amnesty International), book and CD covers, stage designs, murals, fine art and three-dimensional objects. He has illustrated books for other authors, among them Jack Prelutsky, Sid Fleischman, and Pamela Muñoz Ryan. He has contributed approximately one thousand drawings to *The New York Times Book Review*. His editorial illustrations have also appeared in *Time magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Nation*, *Le Monde*, and many other magazines in the United States and abroad. His books have been published in 30 countries and translated into 20 languages.

Sis won the New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year seven times. His books were awarded the Society of Illustrators Gold Medal in 1993 and in 2003. He has won three Caldecott Honors: for *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei* in 1997; for *Tibet through the Red Box* in 1999; and for *The Wall – Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* in 2008. He won the Robert F. Sibert Gold Medal for *The Wall* in 2008.

His books have also won a number of awards in Europe. He has been awarded the Bologna Ragazzi Award twice: for *The Tree of Life – Charles Darwin* in 2004 and *The Wall – Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* in 2008. The *Three Golden Keys* earned Best Translated Children's Book in France in 1995 and was nominated for Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis in 1996. *A Small Tall Tale from the Far Far North* was awarded Best Illustrated Book of the Year and Best Book for



Children and Young Adults at the Prague Book Fair in 1996. *Tibet through the Red Box* was awarded the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis in 1996.

His work has been exhibited in Prague, London, Zurich, Paris, Hamburg, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York in both group and one-man shows. In addition, Peter Sís is the first children's book illustrator to win the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, awarded to individuals who „show exceptional merit and promise for continued and enhanced creative work.” A whole generation still remembers the magical Christmas exhibition “Follow Your Dream” in the Riding School of Prague Castle in 1998.

His public art projects continue to grow. He designed a permanent “Travels around the World” mural for the Washington/Baltimore Airport. In 2001, The New York Metropolitan Transport Authorities commissioned him to create a poster to decorate New York City subways. His “Subway Whale” gave people hope on many trains throughout the city. Sís also created a collection of four permanent mosaic murals entitled “Happy City” in 2004. These works of art can be viewed at the 86th Street/Lexington Avenue Subway Station in Manhattan. In 2005 he created “The Pieces For Peace Mosaic With Youth From Around the World” at the Jacob Shiff Park in Harlem, New York, a CITYarts project. In 2003, his art comprised the “Exploring the World with Peter Sís” exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Sís travels widely and is a frequent speaker at schools and professional conferences. His work was on exhibit at the 50th anniversary of the Zlín Film Festival in the Czech Republic in May 2010 – a major showcase of children's and youth films and media from around the world. The same month he gave a lecture in the Israeli National museum in Jerusalem, and more recently he has spoken in Delhi, India. He has been chosen to deliver the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture for the Association for Library Service to Children in April 2012. The man whose work was once censored in his home country is now an invited guest at important political events to promote Czech-US-World Partnership and to address the importance of education and books for young readers all over the world. Throughout his illustrious career, Peter Sís has continually reminded readers that physical, intellectual and spiritual freedoms are treasures to be promoted and cherished... that “Children Are The Future Of This World.”

## BOOKS WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY PETER SÍS

### Madlenka Soccer Star

2010

### Zed' – Jak jsem vyrůstal za železnou oponou The Wall – Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain

2007

Awards:

*International Bologna Children's Book Fair Ragazzi Award; American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults; American Library Association Notable Children's Books; Caldecott Honor Book; IRA Notable Books for a Global Society; Boston Globe – Horn Book Award; New York Times Book Review Best Illustrated Books of the Year; Orbis Pictus; Amazon.com Top 10 Editors' Picks: Children; Bank Street Best Children's Book of the Year; CCBC Choice (Univ. of WI); Children's Books: 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing, New York Public Library; Eisner Award Nominee; Parents' Choice Award Winner; NCSS-CBC Notable Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies; Booklinks Lasting Connection; Booklist Editors' Choice; Booklist Top 10 Biographies for Youth; Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon Award; Horn Book Magazine Fanfare List; Kirkus Reviews Editor's Choice; Publishers Weekly Best Children's Books of the Year; School Library Journal Best Books of the Year; VOYA's Nonfiction Honor List; Robert F. Sibert Award – Medal; Capitol Choices Noteworthy Titles for Children and Teens; Illinois Read for a Lifetime Award Master List; Michigan Great Lakes Great Books Award Master List; New Mexico Battle of the Books Master List; North Dakota Flicker Tale Children's Award Master List; Utah Beehive Book Award Master List*  
Czech and English edition  
Translations: Danish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Spanish



### Hrej, Mozarte, hrej

### Play, Mozart, Play!

2006

Awards:

*New York Public Library's „One Hundred Titles for Reading and Sharing“, School Library Journal Best Book*



### The Train of States

2004

Awards:

*Book Links Lasting Connection, ALA Notable Children's Book, Parents' Choice Gold Award, New York Public Library's “One Hundred Titles for Reading and Sharing“, White Ravens Special Mention*

### Strom života – Charles Darwin

### The Tree of Life – A book depicting the life of Charles Darwin

2003

Awards:

*International Bologna Children's Book Fair Ragazzi Award; American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults; American Library Association Notable Children's Books; New York Times Book Review Best Illustrated Books of the Year; Amazon.com Top 10 Editors' Picks: Children; Parents' Choice Award Winner; John Burroughs List of Nature Books for Young; National Science Teacher's Association-CBC, Outstanding Science Trade Books for Children; Horn Book Magazine Fanfare List; Kirkus Reviews Editor's Choice; Publishers Weekly Best Children's Books of the Year; School Library Journal Best Books of the Year*  
Czech and English edition  
Translations: Danish, Finnish, German, Greek, Dutch, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish

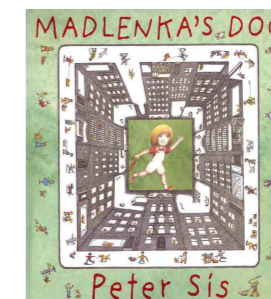


### Madlenka's Dog

2002

Awards:

*American Library Association Notable Children's Books; Child Magazine Best Books of the Year; New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Books of the Year; Parents Magazine, Best Children's Books of the Year; Bank Street Best Children's Book of the Year; Booklist Editors' Choice*



### Ballerina!

2001

Award:

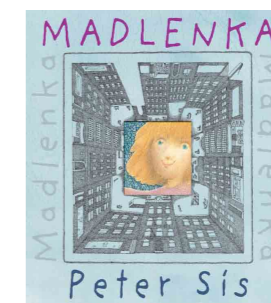
*New York Public Library's „One Hundred Titles for Reading and Sharing“; Parents' Choice Silver Honor Award*

### Madlenka

2000

Awards:

*New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Books of the Year; Booklinks Lasting Connection; Horn Book Magazine Fanfare List; Publishers Weekly Best Children's Books of the Year*  
Translations: Danish, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese



### Dinosaur!

2000

### Ship Ahoy!

1999

### Trucks Trucks Trucks

1999



### Tibet – Tajemství červené krabičky

#### Tibet Through the Red Box

1998

Awards:

American Library Association Notable Children's Books; Caldecott Honor Book; Boston Globe – Horn Book Award, Special Citation for Excellence; Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis (German Youth literature prize)

Czech and English edition

Translations: Dutch, French, German, Dutch, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Russian

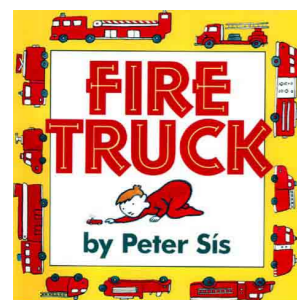


### Fire Truck

1998

Awards:

American Library Association Notable Children's Books; Horn Book Magazine Fanfare List



### Hvězdný posel – Galileo Galilei

#### Starry Messenger – Galileo Galilei

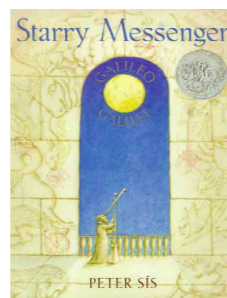
1996

Awards:

Caldecott Honor Book; IBBY Honor Books; Scientific American Young Readers Book Award; School Library Journal Best Books of the Year

Czech and English edition

Translations: French, German, Greek, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish



### Tři zlaté klíče

#### The Three Golden Keys

1994, 2001

Awards: Society of Illustrators Silver Medal; New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year

Czech and English edition

Translations: French, German, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin Chinese



### Podivuhodný příběh Eskymo Welzla

#### A Small Tall Tale from the Far Far North

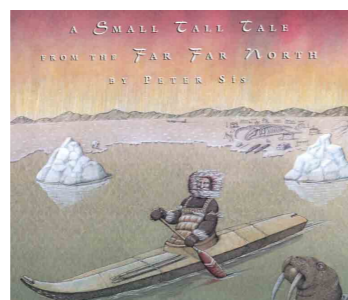
1993, 2001

Czech and English edition

Awards:

Boston Globe - Horn Book Award; New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year; Parents' Choice Silver Award

Translations: French, German



### Komodo!

1993

Awards:

Boston Globe–Horn Book Award Honor Book; Bulletin Blue Ribbon (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books); ALA Booklist Editors' Choice; Horn Book Fanfare; New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year; Society of Illustrators Gold Medal; Parents' Choice Gold Award

### An Ocean World

1992

Award:

Parents' Choice Gold Award

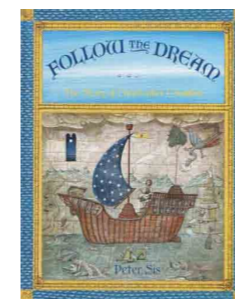
### Follow the Dream – The Story of Christopher Columbus

1991

Awards:

Horn Book Fanfare; New York Times Best Illustrated Book; New York Times Notable Book; Library of Congress Children's Books of the Year; School Library Journal Best Book of the Year; Parents' Choice Gold Award

Translations: Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Swedish



### Beach Ball

1990

Award:

New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year

### Going Up!

1989

### Waving: A Counting Book

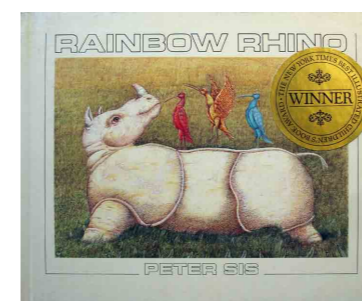
1988

### Rainbow Rhino

1987

Award:

New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year



## BOOKS ILLUSTRATED BY PETER SÍS

The Dream Stealer by Sid Fleischman, 2009

The Dreamer: The Childhood of Pablo Neruda by Pam Muñoz Ryan, 2009

Awards: Pura Belpré Author Award; Boston Globe – Horn Book Award Honor Book

The House of Paper by Carlos Maria Dominguez, 2005

The Book of Imaginary Beings by Jorge Luis Borges, 2005

The Wicked, Wicked Ladies in the Haunted House by Mary Chase, 2003

Animal Sense by Diane Ackerman, 2003

Scranimals by Jack Prelutsky, 2002

Awards: School Library Journal Best Book; Kentucky Bluegrass Award

The Tale of the Unknown Island by Jose Saramago, 1999

Faust by Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Anniversary edition with complete text

Munich Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999, 2000

The Gargoyle on the Roof by Jack Prelutsky, 1999

Award: Utah Book Award

Deep Play by Diane Ackerman, 1999

Sleep Safe, Little Whale by Miriam Schlein, 1997

Award: Parents' Choice Gold Award

Le Marchand d'Ailes – The Little Wing Giver by Jacques Taravant, 1997, 2001

Award: White Ravens Special Mention

Monday's Troll by Jack Prelutsky, 1996

Award: White Ravens Special Mention

The 13th Floor – A Ghost Story by Sid Fleischman, 1995

Awards: California Young Reader Medal; Charlie May Simon Book Award (Arkansas); Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Award; Parents' Choice Gold Award

Rumpelstiltskin retold by Christopher Noël, 1995

Award: Chicago International Film Festival Certificate of Merit



Still More Stories to Solve by George Shannon, 1994

The Dragons are Singing Tonight by Jack Prelutsky, 1993  
*Awards: ALA Booklist Editors' Choice; Horn Book Fanfare*

More Stories to Solve by George Shannon, 1991

The Algonquin Literary Quiz Book  
Compiled by Louis D. Rubin, jr., 1990

The Midnight Horse by Sid Fleischman, 1990  
*Awards: ALA Notable book; School Library Journal Best Books; Parent's Choice Gold Award*

The Ghost in the Noonday Sun by Sid Fleischman, 1989

Halloween — Stories and Poems  
Edited by Caroline Feller Bauer, 1989

Alphabet Soup by Kate Banks, 1988  
*Award: North Carolina Children's Book Award*

The Scarebird by Sid Fleischman, 1988  
*Award: Redbook Children's Picturebook Award*

City Night by Eve Rice, 1987

After Good-Night by Monica Mayper, 1987

Jed and the Space Bandits by Jean and Claudio Marzollo, 1987

Higgledy-Piggledy by Myra Cohn Livingston, 1986

Three Yellow Dogs by Caron Lee Cohen, 1986

Oaf by Julia Cunningham, 1986

The Whipping Boy by Sid Fleischman, 1986  
*Awards: Newbery Medal; ALA Notable Book; School Library Journal Best Books; Parents' Choice Silver Honor Book*

Stories to Solve by George Shannon, 1985

Bean Boy by George Shannon, 1984  
*Award: Parents' Choice Silver Honor Book*

Eine Zwergengeschichte — „The Little Singer“ by Max Bolliger, 1983

The Happy Troll by Max Bolliger, 2005

Kuže na zip — Poetry by Bedrich Stehno, 1982

O Paleckovi — „Thumbling“  
Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm, 1981

Baltische Märchen; Baltic Fairy Tales retold  
by Milos Maly, 1981

Žižkovské romance —“Romances from Zizkov“  
Short Stories by Vladimír Kalina, 1980

Die Hexe Lakritze und Rino Rhinoceros  
„The Licorice Witch and Rhino Rhinoceros“  
by Eveline Hasler, 1979

Der Buchstabenkönig und die Hexe Lakritze  
„The King of Letters and the Licorice Witch“  
by Eveline Hasler, 1977

Jeníček a Mařenka — „Hansel and Gretel“  
Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm, 1977



## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS BY PETER SÍS

Created a mosaic mural on display at the 86th Street Lexington Avenue subway station in New York City

“Exploring the World with Peter Sís” exhibition  
at the Art Institute of Chicago, 2003

Designed “Travels around the World” mural for  
the Baltimore-Washington International Airport

Created “Whale” poster for New York City’s  
Metropolitan Transit Authority, on view in subway  
cars throughout New York City

Designed mural for the entrance hall of the new  
Gateway Building at the University of Minnesota  
in Minneapolis

## AN INTERVIEW BY LEONARD S. MARCUS

*Asked about the first pictures that captivated him, Peter Sís recalls: “When I was a little boy, I saw Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of a rhinoceros, ... [probably] in a museum in Prague. ... This picture was pure magic. Mysterious and beautiful. It was everything I found, and still find, inspiring about art. ... In that [Communist controlled] society, where everyone was carefully guarding against showing any true feelings, that rhino became a perfect symbol of the tender soul and heart, protected from the outside world by its thick skin.” Sís had the benefit of artist parents who fed his love of drawing and protected him from some of the harsher aspects of life under Cold War era Communist rule. He studied art and emerged a skilled animator and illustrator with a well-developed talent for expressing his thoughts and emotions in powerful, dreamlike images ranging in atmosphere from haunting to droll. After coming to the United States for a visit and deciding to remain there, he found work as an illustrator for the New York Times and other newspapers and magazines. He wanted to immerse himself in more personal—and more ambitious—projects as well, and in the many picture books he has created since that time, Sís has shown a gift not only for distilling immensely complex bodies of information—the life of Charles Darwin, the history of the Cold War—but also for depicting a seemingly ordinary corner of the world through the lens of a young child’s kaleidoscopic imagination.*

**Leonard S. Marcus:** I read that when you were growing up, your parents not only encouraged you to draw and paint but that they even gave you assignments and deadlines.

**Peter Sís:** My father did that. I didn’t appreciate it that much at the time. He would say, “I want to see by Saturday how you would deal with ... and we would agree on some subject. He was very pushy and loud! I didn’t do this with my own children, and now I sort of regret that. It was also a great advantage for me that my father traveled a lot and was open to books and art from all over the world. He would tell me that the world was a big place. Czechoslovakia at the time was a closed society. People were xenophobic and didn’t see the big picture.

Both my parents were artists. Other parents didn’t approve of their children wanting to be an artist. You know, You’d better get a serious job, become a dentist or lawyer. But my parents were very encouraging. I remember my father saying, “One day when you will be in New York ...” At the time it sounded like an impossibility. He loved jazz and had wanted to move to New York himself but had not been able to find a way.

When I was 10 or 12, my father brought home the first books by Saul Steinberg. I grew up with them. I admired the fact that Steinberg seemed to enjoy himself so much as an artist. That was the feeling

I got from looking at his drawings. And it was through Steinberg’s art that I also felt I had some connection to New York, though I couldn’t imagine ever getting there.

**LSM:** Was it clear early on that you had the talent to be an artist?

**PS:** Supposedly.

**LSM:** What about school?

**PS:** For much of my early life, I did not get much encouragement from school, where art like everything else was taught from rigid rules. Let’s say we would be drawing a stuffed duck and I would want to make something funny out of it. That sort of thing wasn’t appreciated at school. My father was always there to defend me. A few times he went to school and argued with the teacher. In high school, I was in a special art school. But even there I had conflicts. I was a teenager then of course. The teachers didn’t appreciate rock ‘n roll. When one of them asked who among us planned to be professional artists, I raised my hand, and the response was, “You! You can’t even draw properly!” I was 17 and they put me down to the point that I was devastated. I got home and I remember my father went to school right away, and after a few hours of major arguments—he was a film director and a big personality—they agreed to leave me alone. He created that space for me. If I hadn’t had a father like that ... it was really quite awful.

It’s so easy now to say it was all political. But the school was also following the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of classical art education. You learned to draw from plaster models of hands and heads and if you changed the formula the teachers were not tolerant. From there I went to the Academy of Applied Arts and had a wonderful teacher, who was very understanding. He built me up. It’s amazing how much the right teacher can change you as an artist, as a person. That’s why it’s very difficult for me to teach. I don’t want to have to critique a student. I would rather not have to say I don’t like their work because I know how damaging that can sometimes be, how I almost didn’t survive that. I think it’s much more important to be an inspiration.

**LSM:** Was traditional art encouraged by the regime in order, indirectly, to discourage original thought in general?

**PS:** It’s so hard to explain in America. Things in Czechoslovakia were gradually changing during the 1960s. It didn’t happen overnight. For example, Merce Cunningham visited Czechoslovakia during those years, along with Robert Rauschenberg. It was unbelievably exciting for us. We thought that everyone in America was dancing! My father was opportunistic in that he took advantage of the regime to make his films and write his books, and at the same time he was also open, in an underground sort of way, to what



was happening in the arts in other parts of the world. There was a great hunger for information from the West. Somehow we knew about songs and TV shows and sometimes we didn't stop to think too much about what was good artistically and wasn't. We felt that everything that lay beyond the Iron Curtain was magical. It took me some time to realize that that wasn't so.

**LSM:** Your father made documentaries?

**PS:** Yes, and he was sent by the government to Tibet for an assignment that changed his life as well as our whole family's lives. Eventually he made feature films, including some comedies. He came just before the Czech New Wave, led by Milos Forman. They all knew him.

**LSM:** What kind of art did your mother make?

**PS:** She drew very well and made ornaments you might wear on your lapel. But the expectation was that after a woman had children she would no longer work, and my mother followed that pattern. She would always draw with my sister and me when we were stuck in a waiting room or some other situation. She would decorate our clothes hangers, make them look like monkeys. She was always doing things like that.

**LSM:** Tell me about Tibet.

**PS:** My father was there for 19 months though as a child I had thought he was gone for many, many years. He was 28 when he was drafted into the Czech army and the tradition was that if you were a filmmaker, you made films—if you were lucky. His film unit was sent to Communist China to teach them how to make films. It was all very exotic to him, he knew very little about where he was going. They had crates and crates of equipment, and it was freezing, and they were shooting a film about building a road to Tibet, which they were told was ruled by a diabolical leader. Somehow he got ahead of the construction crew and reached Tibet first, where he met the Dalai Lama, who was then 18 or 19 years old. My father realized that the Dalai Lama was not anything like what he had been told to expect. This caused a fundamental change inside him. In a way, it opened his eyes about the Communist regime. Then my father came down with a terrible illness, and then he returned home. We loved hearing his stories, which he gradually perfected. As teenagers, my sister and I finally got sick of them! My father wrote a very popular cookbook, *The Counting of the Noodles in the Spring Soup*, which also included some of the stories he had brought back from Tibet.

When I first began illustrating here, the editors I met gave me other people's stories to illustrate. They didn't trust my own stories. But then my father, who was by then retired, visited me here, and said, "I know how you will become successful in America." He suggested that I too write a cookbook with Chinese recipes and stories from Tibet and call it a "secret diary of my

father." I made sketches for the whole book, and I showed it to editors. But no one could quite decide what kind of book it was. Of course the book I did years later about Tibet is a version of that original idea.

Photographs of Tibet for me had become all mixed up with my father's fantastic stories, and with the mandalas and other religious art. When I met the Dalai Lama myself it was hard to realize he was a real person and not something out of a dream.

**LSM:** How did you get into making picture books?

**PS:** It's so strange. Both my father and that wonderful professor I spoke about earlier taught me that "anything goes" in art but I started as a filmmaker because making animated films was, in a sense, a comparatively safe thing to do under the regime, and not only because my father was a well-known filmmaker. The action in animation would move along, and it would be harder for a censor to pinpoint the intended meaning or context of a given image or moment. And when I would be asked—as all artists were asked—just where in the animation I was going to have an image that showed my loyalty to the regime, I could always say it was coming in one of the next frames, and that I simply hadn't gotten around to drawing it yet. In contrast, if I had put my art down as individual images on paper, or as illustrations for a book, it would have been easier for someone to get hold of it, and judge it—possibly condemn me for what I had done. It was like staying one step ahead of the sheriff. It was all about disguising one's true thoughts and beliefs. Thinking that way was exhausting but it was the art of survival. During that time, it never occurred to me to illustrate books.

I came to the United States to make a Czech-government sponsored film, and then I decided to stay and was without means in Los Angeles. A museum director I met there sent samples of my work to Maurice Sendak. I knew nothing about what a portfolio should be like, and nothing about publishing. When Maurice called me, one of his first questions was, "What are you doing in Los Angeles? It's the worst place in America." It helped that I was in Los Angeles while I was still deciding whether or not to go back to Czechoslovakia. It was a very hard decision. But the palm trees and crazy California irrationality made the contrast much clearer than it would have seemed had I already been in New York. When I came to Los Angeles I was invited to all sorts of parties. I met Loretta Young, King Vidor. I knew it wasn't true but I wanted to believe that all of America was just like a Raymond Chandler novel. But then people in L.A. started telling me my art was too kooky. I tried teaching in an art school but didn't know how to teach and lost most of my students. I was decorating eggs for \$100. That's when Maurice Sendak called and said, "So you want to be in children's books."

That wasn't really my plan but I knew I was lucky he called and decided to go along. He said, "I will be in Los Angeles," and offered to meet me. I knew nothing almost about children's book art. I knew about Maurice Sendak and I knew Tomi Ungerer's work from *Graphis*, the Swiss design magazine. In Europe, the only American art for children that was talked about was Disney. And there I was in Los Angeles, where the art all seemed that way, even in the galleries where I saw paintings of sunsets and whales. Maurice and I met and he sent me to the American Library Association convention, which is what he was in town for, with a little note of introduction. He told me which editors to go see. I got lucky again because while I was waiting on the convention floor to introduce myself to Greenwillow's publisher, Susan Hirschman, I somehow got into a conversation with her art director, Ava Weiss, who had grown up in Czechoslovakia. She said, "I will look at your portfolio." She did and said she was definitely interested in my work. I naively thought that after I illustrated my first book, *Bean Boy* by George Shannon, that I was set, that Greenwillow would simply take care of me from then on. I had no idea how things worked in America. When I moved to New York, I went to see the people at Greenwillow and said, "Here I am." And they said, "So, here you are."

I arrived in New York with a very long story about a rhinoceros and showed it to lots of editors. Everyone disliked it. Some editors just said, "This is stupid!" and I was done in one second. Others were very kind and spent hours telling me why it was no good. To pay the rent, I did a great many illustrations for the *New York Times*. Until then, it hadn't occurred to me to be an editorial illustrator either. The *Times* loved my work right away. I thought, This is great. I came with the idea to draw with dots. Nobody else was drawing that way and I wanted my work to be different. It was a very time-consuming way to draw, but soon everybody wanted it—just as I had hoped. So all of a sudden I was working day and night, living in this little apartment in the Village. I was getting into *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and was sometimes paid very well. It's surprising that I stayed with the books, which didn't pay nearly as well. I think it was because of my editors, with whom I enjoyed working and because it was satisfying work that had a chance of lasting. My second book was Sid Fleischman's *The Whipping Boy*, which was fortunate for me because it won the Newbery Medal. Then Frances Foster helped me shape the story that became *Rainbow Rhino*, which was the first book I wrote myself. I had also begun to realize that editorial illustrators have their moment and are then replaced by someone new. There seemed to be more of a future in making books.

It evolved that I began to bring my simpler, more cheerful stories to Greenwillow and my more complex

ones to Frances and Knopf. I enjoyed the excitement of New York but it was also a lonely place for me at first. One day I was walking on Eighth Avenue and suddenly there was this woman who was waving at me, and I thought, Finally I've met someone! Then I realized she was hailing a cab. I clipped a similar story that appeared in the *New York Times* about a busload of tourists who had all started waving back to another woman—or maybe it was the same one!—who had also been waving not at them, but to hail a cab. So, from those two stories came *Waving*. I had the joke and Susan saw right away that it could be a counting book. The pictures I did for that book and two others from the same time were related to my film work. You could place the pictures side by side and they would flow from one to the next as in a storyboard.

**LSM:** Is being simple hard for you?

**PS:** I think I tend to overdo things in my illustrations. I admire Tomi Ungerer's work so much because it seems to be so simple. Of course, that doesn't mean it is simple for him. In London I had as a tutor Quentin Blake. His work looks simple but he would go through many attempts to get the exact effect he wanted. It was a great challenge for me to do a book like *Fire Truck*. What helped was that my son was the right age for a book like that—just as my daughter was the right age when I did *Madlenka*. I did those books for them. I still have a dream of doing a very simple book, but now the children are teenagers, so it's not the same. I think all my books look best in the first sketches I do for them, even before I make the dummy. Sometimes I joke and say that because they pay me money I feel I have to do that much more work. It's as if I'm afraid that people might say, "It's too simple." It takes a lot of daring to be simple and I always have the intention to do things simply.

The story of *Komodo* was very different at first. Susan reshuffled the pictures and moved bits and pieces of the story. She did it so quickly. She had the idea to use the same picture twice, once as reality the other time as a dream [check]. I was stunned when she suggested that.

**LSM:** Did the Czech government try, during the years you were growing up under Communism, to suppress stories about the legendary—but the nonetheless historical—figure Jan Welzl, the hero of your book *A Small Tall Tale from the Far, Far North*. Welzl was such a free spirit.

**PS:** Because Welzl was such a great folk hero, he was too big for them to contain, so they didn't even try. His story is amazing and of course no one had even heard of him here so I had to tell a very compressed version of his adventures. I think it's one of my best books in terms of art but that I couldn't do him enough justice. He was such a romantic hero. He showed me, and I think my father and many other



Czechs, that it was possible to venture out into the wider world. The really sad thing is that although he was a great hero and adventurer, when he returned to Czechoslovakia he was treated as something of a clown. People would invite him to a bar and he would tell them his seemingly far-fetched stories about the gold rush and eating bear paws and watching the sunset with the Eskimos—and they would make fun of him even though all of it was absolutely true. My father adored him. He must have identified with him to some extent.

There was this big movement in Central Europe called “Tramping,” which started when Buffalo Bill visited Europe with his traveling show. I think my grandfather saw him. People became fascinated with the Wild West and even now, every Sunday, they dress up in what they consider Wild West outfits and take the train out the city, and build a fire and camp and sing cowboy songs. They sleep in the open and drink beer. They did it under the Nazis. They did it under the Communists, even though it wasn’t encouraged. It’s a very romantic movement. This was their Shangri-La. I think Welzl was part of it and that in a way my father and his Tibet stories were part of it.

**LSM:** How did you come to terms with the story of Charles Darwin in all its complexity?

**PS:** My editor Frances Foster always says in her quiet way, “Another ambitious project!” I had boxes and boxes of material. Darwin fascinated me not only because he was a great thinker but also because he understood the society he was dealing with. He knew that not everyone would accept his ideas and he knew how to hold his cards close to his vest. One of the challenges of making a book about his life was that his voyage on the Beagle was relatively brief and that his life was a very long one, and that he spent much of his life thinking. It was hard to find a way to show that in the flow of a book. That’s why in one of the illustrations I put him in a greenhouse, surrounded by growing things.

**LSM:** You put maps in your illustrations, and mazes and fantasy structures, and mysterious floating symbols. It’s like a private pictorial language. Where does all that come from?

**PS:** I look at a lot of things. Maybe my tendency to take on ambitious projects comes from a wish to prove something to my father, even though he’s not here not anymore. But also I enjoy it. And I think it comes from the things we hide in our mind, and the way we can see things in terms of different layers. I enjoy it when someone looking at one of my books discovers something he or she hadn’t seen before, or even something that I hadn’t intended to be there, but is. It’s like a book within a book.

The Wall took a long time because it was a difficult story and I still wasn’t able to tell it fully. I might hear

a Beatles song that I love and think, This is so simple! How did my books get so complex? Not only do kids here not know about the history of the Cold War, but even children today in the Czech Republic and Poland and Hungary don’t know because their parents don’t want to talk about it.

**LSM:** One of the last images in the book—the one showing an aerial view of the land on either side of the wall, with areas on one side marked with names like “Happiness” and “Liberty,” and on the other side with “Terror” and “Lies”—reminds me of Saul Steinberg’s drawing of America, which from his New Yorker’s point of view was about 95% Manhattan.

**PS:** I had a chance to meet him once. Our work was being exhibited together at a bookshop gallery in New York. I thought, I will finally meet my hero! But he must have been in a very bad mood that day, as I could tell by what I heard him say to the person just in front of me. So I never spoke to him.

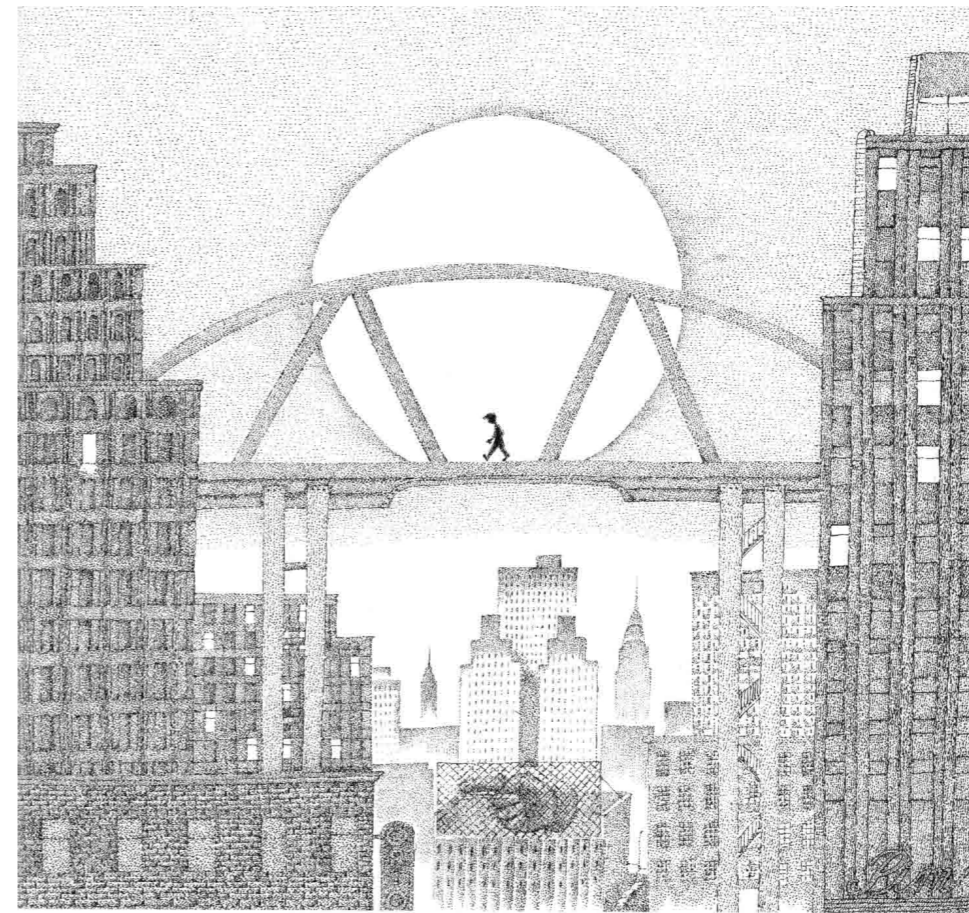
**LSM:** Steinberg, who was also from Eastern Europe, loved to make drawings that were like imaginary “official documents” of one kind or another. It was as if he was forging—in both senses of the word—a new identity for himself.

**PS:** I think so. One of his books was called *The Passport*. I was also fascinated by his imaginary maps. During Communist times, I would sometimes forge a train ticket or a letter if for instance I wanted to visit Norway and didn’t have the right documents. It was another way of getting around the system. The other day I sent an e-mail to someone and put at the end of the message, “Sent from my Blackberry,” even though I don’t have a Blackberry. I fooled my friend—so it worked!

I met a woman in Florida once who didn’t know who I was and asked about the work I do. I told her I made children’s books. She asked what kind. That’s always hard to explain, so I said, “Special books.” She replied, “Like Peter Sís?” That felt good!

The first time I returned to Prague it was amazing. It was still under Communist rule. I had become a U.S. citizen in May of 1989 and I immediately went to Prague—seven years after I’d left. I went to see that everyone I had known there was still alive. I was hoping that some policeman would stop me just so that I could say, “I have an American passport.” The only thing that happened was at the airport when I was going through the Passport Control, somebody asked me, “Is this your first time here?” I almost think it was a joke but I’m not sure.

*Leonard S. Marcus – historian and critic of children’s books and illustrations. This interview with Peter Sís was recorded for the forthcoming expanded edition of the book Ways of Telling: Conversations on the Art of the Picture Book (Candlewick/Walker, 2012).*



*This article explores in depth the themes that resonate through the life and work of Peter Sís, particularly the dualisms of growing up in the Cold War era. More than many other contemporary artists, Sís’s way of seeing the world, as well as choice of artistic media, are determined by his reflection on state-ordained and controlled propaganda and the attempt to evade their influence.*

Any resemblance to the story in this book is intentional.” That is the final sentence of Peter Sís’s afterword to the original edition of *The Wall*, his most recent and autobiographical book about his childhood and coming of age in Communist Prague. While his previous books gave mere glimpses of his personal experiences, Sís, who has made the United States his home for nearly twenty-five years now, here looks back to tell his own - and all - children what it was like “growing up behind the Iron Curtain.” Sís’s life and creative work are

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# Peter Sís

## A Quest for a Life in Truth

by BARBARA SCHARIOTH

translated by Nikola von Merveldt



Barbara Scharioth is the former director of the International Youth Library in Munich and especially active in the field of children’s book illustration.



*Sís's life and creative work are deeply scarred by the dualisms of the Cold-War Era: East versus West, totalitarianism versus freedom, communism versus democracy, indoctrination and surveillance versus the ideal of individual freedom and civil liberties for all, censorship versus freedom of expression.*

*For twenty-two books, Sís is both author and illustrator. These works have been published in twenty-five countries and translated into more than twenty languages.*

deeply scarred by the dualisms of the Cold-War Era: East versus West, totalitarianism versus freedom, communism versus democracy, indoctrination and surveillance versus the ideal of individual freedom and civil liberties for all, censorship versus freedom of expression.

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1949, he grew up in a home that was unconventionally cosmopolitan by Communist standards. His grandfather had brought back children's books and comic strips from his various trips to the United States in the 1920s. His father, a documentary filmmaker who travelled widely, came home with jeans, magazines, and especially records of famous rock-and-roll bands such as the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. Spellbound by this "wild" music, Sís worked as a disc jockey, hosted his own radio show, and travelled with the Beach Boys on their tour through the Eastern Bloc states. But soon enough, he met with opposition from the Communist regime. In 1969, just two years after his show first hit the airwaves, it was cancelled. Sís was twenty at the time.

He attended the Academy of Applied Arts in Prague, specialising in poster design and, inspired by the great master Jiri Trnka, animated shorts. In 1977, he was granted a one-year leave to study at the Royal College of Art in London. "It was my first escape," he commented looking back at this attempt to free himself from the restrictive situation in Prague. But sure enough, he came back home.

The year 1977 also marked the publication of his first book, an edition of three fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm illustrated with colour plates. Since then, Sís has illustrated 65 books, including titles by Sid Fleischman, George Shannon, and exquisite poetry volumes by Jack Prelutsky. For twenty-two books, Sís is both author and illustrator. These works have been published in twenty-five countries and translated into more than twenty languages, earning him numerous national and international awards. His own books, created over the last twenty years, present the core of his work.

But Sís also takes time for public art projects, such as the mural at the Washington/Baltimore Airport, the wonderfully ambiguous poster "Subway Whale" commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Transport Authorities in 2001 and displayed in many of the Big Apple's subway cars, or the permanent artwork of "Happy City," four mosaic murals at the 86th Street Subway Station in Manhattan, created for the Arts for Transit Program in

2004. In 2003, Peter Sís was named a MacArthur Fellow, an honour recognising "talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction."

*More than many other contemporary artists, Sís's thinking, way of seeing the world, unique themes, as well as choice of artistic media are determined by his reflection on state-ordained and controlled propaganda and the attempt to evade their influence.*

His deep creative power and his unconditional determination to live as an artist free from "prescribed" commissions and ideological brainwashing impelled Sís not to return home to Communist Czechoslovakia from a trip to Los Angeles in 1982. He was thirty-three years old at the time, and he had to start all over again.

More than many other contemporary artists, Sís's thinking, way of seeing the world, unique themes, as well as choice of artistic media are determined by his reflection on state-ordained and controlled propaganda and the attempt to evade their influence. Trained in the Czech tradition of illustration and animation and steeped in European visual culture, Sís poignantly relates highly complex stories that call for interpretation on multiple levels.

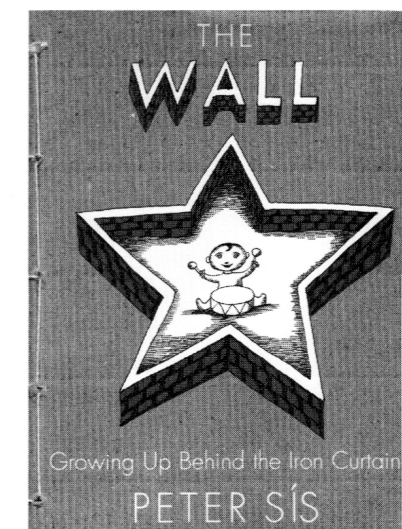
#### The Wall

*The Wall* perfectly illustrates this multi-layered artistic approach. In this memoir inspired by techniques of the graphic novel, Sís resorts to mostly small-format storyboard panels in black-and-white, punctuated by red flags and other

Communist symbols to tell about his boyhood, coming of age and the events in Communist-governed Prague. Two layers of text add a verbal narrative: Italic text in the margins provides details about the repressive political system, and a spare main narrative at the bottom of the page sketches a laconic political and artistic biography. The visual sequence reminiscent of photos or film is interrupted and authenticated by double-spreads with journal entries, private photos and drawings by the young boy and adolescent. A few double spreads in blasting colours, which express his dreams and longings, introduce yet another narrative level.

Walls, barbed-wire fences, and informers with pig-nosed heads are recurring motifs in this haunting graphic memoir. Time and time again, Sís shows humans attempting to overcome fences, ditches, and other barriers despite permanent surveillance. Finally, there is an image of young Sís, on a bike, his drawings carrying him like wings across one of the innumerable fences: He has finally escaped the system and found his road to freedom.

From page to page, Sís explores different layouts, designs, and artistic techniques, aiming for a subtle balance between fantastic elements, formal experiments, and documentary details. The deeper

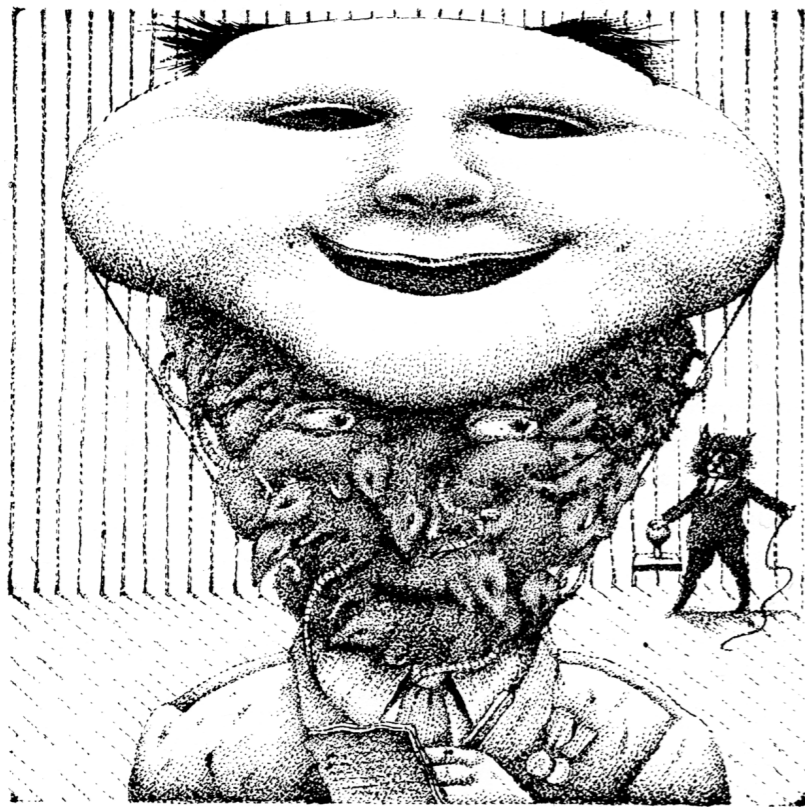




*“For instance, if you’re making a film or a painting [...] you put in a big church. You can be sure the censors will tell you to take it out, and perhaps they won’t notice the smaller, important things.”*

meaning is often hidden between the lines. Large parts of the visual and verbal narrative only yield their meaning after repeated reading, as if Sís was still playing hide-and-seek with the censors.

In one of the journal entries, for example, he reflects on dealing with censorship: “For instance, if you’re making a film or a painting [...] you put in a big church. You can be sure the censors will tell you to take it out, and perhaps they won’t notice the smaller, important things.”



*On Censorship*

#### Hidden images

These hidden messages are a hallmark of Sís’s art, even long after he left the Eastern Bloc. A small-format pen-and-ink drawing illustrating a general essay “On Censorship” for a 1985 issue of the *New York Times Book Review* is a case in point. It shows a head, the top part of which is concealed by a white mask. The remaining face is constructed from bodies of rats, in the style of the mannerist artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo. In the background, there is a tiny tomcat wearing a bright shirt collar and a dark tie, a rubber stamp in one paw, a whip in the other. The message seems obvious, but there is more to

it. The fact that Sís visually quotes Arcimboldo is far more than a formal indulgence. It is a veiled reference to his native Prague, where the Italian artist served at the court for many years and is still present with many of his paintings. Sís’s fellow Czech countrymen will not have failed to detect this allusion to censorship in their homeland.

It is also a reference to his own animated shorts, which he produced between 1977 and 1980 for the state-owned production company Kratky Film. These animated shorts tell moral tales in highly detailed pictures, mixing different techniques, such as drawing, painting and collage. In his

journal entry of May 1977, Sís gives an account of how the censors interpreted his animated fairy tale “Island for 6,000 Alarm Clocks” as an invitation to emigrate – which, perhaps, it may have been – and banned it after only a few public showings.

When “Heads,” a surrealist sequence of constantly morphing heads – another Arcimboldo reference – won the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival, the censorship committee, which had condemned the short as a call for individualism, complied and even repeatedly sent Sís abroad as a representative of Czech film art. This allowed him to defect and to opt for a life in freedom without censorship.

#### Recurring motifs

Departure, farewell and parting, being haunted by doubts and anxiety, and the quest for a life in freedom – these are other recurring motifs in his work. An early example of this is a 1984 illustration of *Bean Boy* by George Shannon, his first book contract in his new home country. The hand at the lower margin of the image hints at an uncanny resemblance between the story’s protagonist and the recent New York resident, who is crossing a bridge between high-rise buildings, leading from East to West.

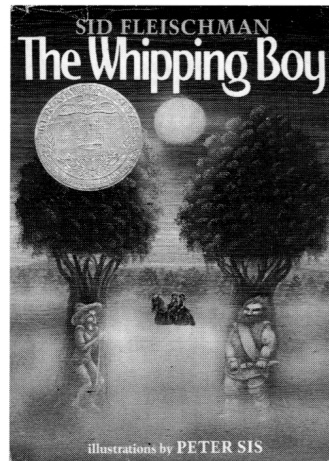
During these years, working as a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and other newspapers and magazines, Sís further developed his trademark style. Using a meticulous pointillist approach, similar in effect to the classic technique of cross-hatching practiced by Maurice Sendak, for example, he masterfully shaped contours, surfaces, spaces and bodies. The countless tiny dots, painstakingly stippled with pen and ink, allowed for particularly smooth transitions and a delicate abstraction otherwise only achieved in paintings. The pointillist technique also favours subtle details while evading blatant

*Departure, farewell and parting, being haunted by doubts and anxiety, and the quest for a life in freedom – these are other recurring motifs in his work.*



*Bean Boy*





realism. It challenges viewers to call upon their imaginations to decode and complement the motifs with their own store of imagery. Finally, it enables the artist to create highly complex and enigmatic thematic and formal allusions. This technique, which he later also applied in his colour illustrations, allowed him to tell his story on different levels in one and the same image. In this way, he avoids redundancies because even autobiographic references operate differently on these various levels.

When Sid Fleischman's novel *The Whipping Boy*, with Sís's pen-and-ink drawings, was awarded the coveted Newbery Medal in 1987, Sís's career as a children's book illustrator was launched. To the present day, this book has sold more than one million copies and has been translated into many languages.

This success served as a stepping-stone to many further contracts for book illustrations, including his first "own" full-page colour picture book, *Rainbow Rhino*. Against the backdrop of a soft-hued, surreal landscape, a stylised rhino and colourful birds illustrate the simple moral that even the most fantastic voyage ultimately proves that there is no place like home – a tale of homesickness, perhaps?

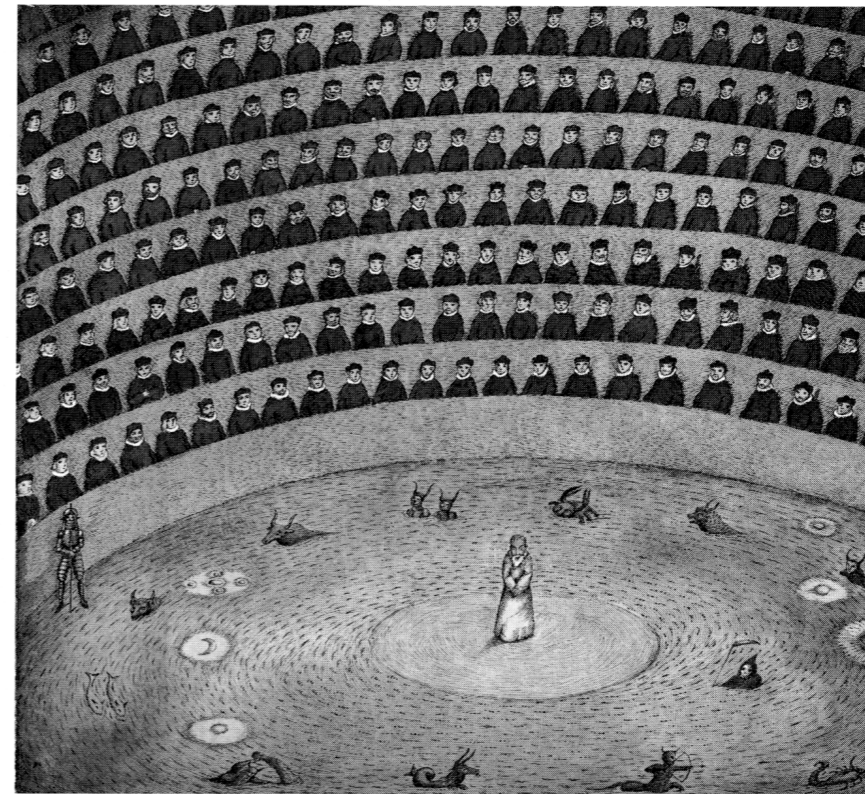
*The fall of the Iron Curtain, and with it the possibility to finally return home to his parents, inspired him to recapture the wonder of his childhood and adolescence in Prague – the magic moments, dreams, and stories he had thought long lost.*

**Sís books and themes**

In *Follow the Dream*, Sís relates the "true" story of Christopher Columbus, the man who, more than 500 years ago, firmly believed in his dreams and vision, overcame many an obstacle, and tenaciously pursued his goal with relentless perseverance. Undeterred by the prevailing style of children's book illustration based on simplified forms and colours, Sís opted for a complex array of motifs and structures in this first of his more sophisticated picture books. He gave his illustrations the look of fifteenth-century artifacts

by adding ornamental gold frames reminiscent of panel paintings or by imitating old sea-charts and drawings of historic shipping vessels. While the historicizing approach invests the narrative with authenticity, the vast blue ocean powerfully conjures up dreams. Attentive readers will not fail to discover the image on the endpapers and to decipher its deeper meaning: The map of the world, as it was known then, encircled by a wall with four watch-towers not only symbolizes the distrust and anxiety of the people who refused to share Columbus's vision of a New World back then, but also the suffocating complacency of Sís's contemporaries who fiercely sought to protect their familiar limits and narrow worldview.

In his Prague book, *The Three Golden Keys*, Sís explored the world of



*Starry Messenger*

his childhood. The fall of the Iron Curtain, and with it the possibility to finally return home to his parents, inspired him to recapture the wonder of his childhood and adolescence in Prague – the magic moments, dreams, and stories he had thought long lost. Three keys help him and the reader to unlock the doors to his past. In the Prague Castle, we once more encounter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, first in the guise of the librarian composed of books, then in the garden where fruits, leaves, and roots figure as members of the emperor's court.

In the preface to this homecoming book, a letter addressed to his young daughter Madeleine, he invites her to visit his native city one day and emphatically reminds her that unlike himself, who grew up in Communist-governed Prague, she enjoys the freedom to live her hopes and dreams: "You are free."

In *Starry Messenger*, Sís retells the biography of one of the great scientists of the Renaissance, Galileo Galilei, who eventually recanted his discoveries out of fear of the Church. In his own unique way, Sís combined historical documents, including maps, portraits, city views, costumes, and quotes from Shakespeare and Galileo's treatise "The Starry Messenger," to bring history to life. All of the illustrations are framed and many include circular motifs,