

Popup author Robert Sabuda on cutting edge of children's books

BY SAMANTHA CRITCHELL
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Robert Sabuda spends most of his day coloring, cutting and pasting. He's darn good at it, too.

But Sabuda is no kindergarten. He's a 40-year-old children's book author whose newest, "Winter's Tale: An Original Pop-Up Story" (Little Simon), was ordered with a first printing of 250,000 copies.

It's also the basis for many of the holiday decorations at Borders and Waldenbooks bookstores this season.

Pop-up art is a kid-friendly name for paper engineering. Sabuda says he doesn't work on a computer as many other children's book authors and illustrators do; instead, he works with tiny pieces of paper, trying to make them fit together so they open, pop up and close back down each time children flip a page.

"There's a lot of trial and error," he said with a laugh.

"There should be one second of magic as you open a page of a book," Sabuda added, giving a tour of his "studio" on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

The tour doesn't take long: The studio consists of a conference room with walls lined of Sabuda's books, those of his partner Matthew Reinhart (including his latest, "Cinderella") and books by artists they admire, including Maurice Sendak and Sandra Boynton.

The other room has five stations, one each for Sabuda and Reinhart, and three others for the more technical types who then figure out how to take Sabuda and Reinhart's paper pieces and fit them on a computer screen.

On this day, the office is abuzz as the pieces of a new book with the legendary Sendak just fell into place. Reinhart also is eager to show off the tiger character he's created for a pop-up adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book."

Sabuda and Reinhart also are working on a pop-

up version of a great white shark for the second part of a trilogy of nonfiction books they're doing about the beasts of land and air. Scholastic is giving the duo their own imprint, which is the equivalent of being knighted in the kid-die-book world, that will be called "Sabuda and Reinhart Present." One of the first projects will be a book on castles.

Sabuda also would like to adapt "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" by Roald Dahl into a pop-up book and do a book featuring a spread for every state.

"I've made a decision that I'm going to West Virginia soon because I've never been there before," he said. "It's touching to see the pride people have in their states and I find that intriguing."

Sabuda and Reinhart moved so quickly to the top of their class, they explain, because there are very few other people who do what they do.

"There might be 36 paper engineers in the world," Sabuda joked. Or maybe not.

Sabuda — now the youngest board member at the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators — just fell into it his line of work. **But Sabuda was always enchanted by books growing up in Pinckney, a rural southeastern Michigan town.**

His favorites included Sesame Street books, "Frog and Toad" and "The Adventures of Super Pickle," his first pop-up.

While an art student at Pratt Institute in New York, he interned at Dial Books for Young Readers and it was Sabuda's job to open the packages of original art from the illustrators. He was hooked. In his senior year, he decided to focus on children's books.

Dial remembered the talented Sabuda and the rest, he describes, "is a Cinderella story."

By 1992 he was writing his own books, using flat art — mostly collages and mosaics.

"The styles of books were so different, but the common theme was paper," Sabuda explained.

When he decided to do an alphabet book, he thought the letters should come alive for children, so he experimented with pop-up art. "The Christmas Alphabet" was published in 1994 by Orchard Books.

"My grandpa and dad were brick layers and carpenters, so I approached it as if I were building something," he said.

Sabuda acknowledges that he might have an unusual method in an increasingly digital world, but when it comes to books, people like to feel the pages and be surprised each time they flip one over.

"Who's talking about e-books now?" he said.

"Parents are busy. They want time with their kids to be well spent. ... There's greater attention to children's books now as a backlash to the technology in kids' lives. Parents feel the need to give an alternative to all the media saturation."

For more, go to Sabuda's Web site: www.robertsabuda.com



Photos/Associated Press/Dima Gavrysh
Left, pop-up book maker Robert Sabuda works on an owl for his recent project titled "Winter's Tale," at his studio in New York. Below is "Dinosaurs" by pop-up book makers Robert Sabuda and Matthew Reinhart. Bottom, Sabuda, left, and Matthew Reinhart display two of their books at the studio they share in New York. Sabuda's personal project is "Winter's Tale," and Reinhart's book is "Cinderella."



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