

Kazu Kibuishi talks to Mike Wu

Engaging, eye-catching, images partner with punchy, on-pitch text in both the **Amulet** series, by **Kazu Kibuishi**, and in **The Oodlethunks** series, illustrated by **Mike Wu**, a picture-book artist and Pixar animator. The duo discussed how each finds inspiration as writers and illustrators.

Mike Wu: What book that you read in middle school inspired your writing and illustrating?

Kazu Kibuishi: If we're really focusing on middle school, I'll be honest and say that it was a combination of comics by artists like Jim Lee and Todd McFarlane, combined with books like *Jurassic Park*, by Michael Crichton, that really interested me. I would discover the world of classic literature in high school, when I fell in love with the works of John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway.

Kazu: Speaking of influences and inspirations, Bill Peet was a tremendous storytelling talent at Disney, working on films like *101 Dalmatians* and *The Jungle Book*. The children's books he made after his years at Disney had a massive influence on me as a kid, so I'm a huge fan of Disney story artists working in publishing! Who are your favorite artists and writers who were once—or are currently—Disney employees?

Mike: Bill Peet is fantastic! Yes, he's a legendary story artist whose career spans from *Snow White* all the way though to *Sword in the Stone*. I had the great fortune of working at Disney Feature Animation during the late '90s and worked with many amazing artists. It was my first job out of school and I was in awe of the talent at the studio, including Glen Keane, who supervised the animation on *The Little*

Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, and Pocahontas, to name a few. One of my favorite designers is Chen-Yi Chang. He designed all of the characters in *Mulan*, which remains one of my favorites from that time. Really, there are just too many to name, and this could easily be a short essay on the history of Disney art and animation.

Mike: You were obviously influenced by many artists. What drew you to work in the graphic novel genre?

Kazu: *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, by Hayao Miyazaki. When I read that, I knew what I wanted to do. Then I read *Understanding Comics*, by Scott McCloud, and I began to realize why.

Mike: How do you balance the role of art and words in your graphic novels?

Kazu: They always inform each other, and when one is missing, I can always work on the other, so I rarely have writer's (or artist's) block. I make a huge mess when I create sequences for each book, drawing sketches, writing dialogue, sketching thumbnail pages on reams of printer paper. Then I sort it all into the books.

Kazu: I hear you also make children's apparel. How did that come about?

Mike: It's my wife's business, and I'm her partner in the design and marketing side. It's similar to the desire to do something outside of the studio system. After working on film for so long, it was exciting to try something new that still involved a good sense of design and creative expression. The fulfilling thing with apparel is you can touch and feel your product and design. That's really exciting!

Kazu: How would you compare working in publishing to working on the production of an animated film?

Mike: They are such different businesses. Our schedules are much longer to develop and produce movies. It typically takes four or five years to develop an idea to finish a film. The process involves hundreds of artists contributing to make the best possible film. In contrast, publishing is often a single artist's or writer's vision, and often you're left to your own singular talent to execute the book. I love doing both, and I love the collaboration in animation. However, after years of working on big films, it is nice to do a small project that is your own personal story.

Kazu: You have so much going on! What is a typical work day for you?

Mike: I usually arrive in the morning and get some tea or a quick bite and head to dailies. Dailies are held in a screening room where a group of the artists/animators show their work for the film to the director. He or she gives us feedback and others can chime in as well. Everyone is looking to improve the work, and it's the strength of the collective that elevates the animation to new heights. I'll jot down the notes and address them in my office and continue to improve the scene. I may show it again at the end of the day, but I will usually be on a shot for one to two weeks before it's completed. This will go on for nine months to a year to complete animation for one film. However, the studio encourages you to take breaks and feed your mind to stay fresh and inspired. It's the culture that keeps everyone smiling and doing their best work.

Mike: What are you most passionate about?

Kazu: Being useful!

Discussion Questions

- Kazu and Mike name several artists and writers who have influenced them. Can you name an author or artist who has influenced you, and why?
- The way Mike describes it, the process of creating a movie is much longer and more collaborative than the process of creating a book. Why might that be?
- How does mixing art and words help Kazu avoid writer's block?

Writing Prompt

Choose one of your favorite movies and depict one scene from the film in the form of a comic. The scene should take up only five panels, and include both words and art.