

READING GUIDE FOR THE PAPER KINGDOM

Read the story aloud with your young audience. Flip through the book again to point out interesting aspects of the illustrations, such as Daniel sleeping in one corner of the apartment, the family driving to work on an empty street at night, the crown on Daniel's head in the paper kingdom, the image on the back cover of the small family. (This is actually how I read any new picture book I pick up -- I read the book in its entirety to get a sense of the story, and then I go back to savor the details in the illustrations.)

Questions for discussion (Feel free to pick just a few of them, depending on the age level of your audience. I included my responses in brackets.):

- **Which illustration is your favorite and why?**

[HKR: I love the image when the family is driving to work. It's so beautiful. Illustrator Pascal Champion is a master of nighttime scenes. Also, driving to work with my parents is one of my strongest childhood memories, so when I first saw this image, I was very moved. I remember our rickety old car, the empty streets, the city lights.]

- **Daniel's parents tell interesting stories about the king, queen, and dragons. Why do you think they did that?**

[HKR: I wanted to show how the parents encouraged Daniel to use his imagination. The construct of the paper kingdom also allowed me to end the story with a message to kids to dream big: Daniel's parents encourage him to become the (mindful) king of a paper kingdom someday. Also, I tried to weave in subtle social commentary about the different classes in society, wage gap and income inequality, the lack of social services -- this is all in the subtext, and not overtly described, because my main goal was to write an engaging story.]

- **When Daniel and his parents first enter the building, they see Sam. Do you think Daniel has met Sam before?**

[HKR: When I was little, around 3 or 4 before I started attending school, I actually went with my parents to work pretty much every night. In this scene in the book, Sam tells Daniel that he's grown -- which indicates that Sam has seen Daniel before. I actually don't remember the security staff, so Sam was a character completely out of my imagination.]

- **Why do you think Sam tells Mama and Papa that he "won't tell anyone" that Daniel is there?**

[HKR: It's obviously unusual to take a kid to work at night, and my childhood experience would probably be impossible these days with heightened security and such. But taking their kid to work is what my parents did and were able to do back then. I wanted to be honest about our reality, and not romanticize the situation at all. We made the most of an unpleasant situation!]

- **Who do the king, queen and dragons represent?**

[HKR: Since the story takes place in an office building, I intended the king/queen to represent the boss/executives (possibly even the executive assistant) and the dragons to represent the workers.]

- **Why do you think Daniel gets angry when his parents start cleaning the kitchen? (Interesting note: the illustrator zoomed in on Daniel’s face to convey his intense emotion at that moment.)**

[HKR: When I was little, I felt sad and angry that my parents had to work so hard in an empty, messy building and continually faced so many financial problems. It actually weighed on me very heavily, and the memory of their toil defined the course of my life. It's probably the main reason why I became a lawyer: I wanted to have a good job to help them out, and I also never wanted to face such financial hardship as an adult because I'd witnessed first-hand all the stress and anxiety it caused. Interesting fact: the office my parents used to clean was a law firm.]

- **Who are some hardworking people in your life?**

[HKR: I think we can all agree, especially in this current world, that first responders, hospital staff, grocery store workers, restaurant staff, delivery workers, janitors and custodians, all the people helping to make our world safe, clean and livable are some of the most hardworking people ever.]

- **At the end of the story, Daniel is back in his bed. The story has come “full circle,” back to where it started. Do you think this is a good way to tell a story?**

[HKR: A "full circle" story often creates a sense of satisfaction and completion. So this was a deliberate decision on my part as a storyteller. While writing the very first scene in the apartment, I knew I had to bring the family back home for the final scene, but with both subtle and momentous changes. See below for what I mean.]

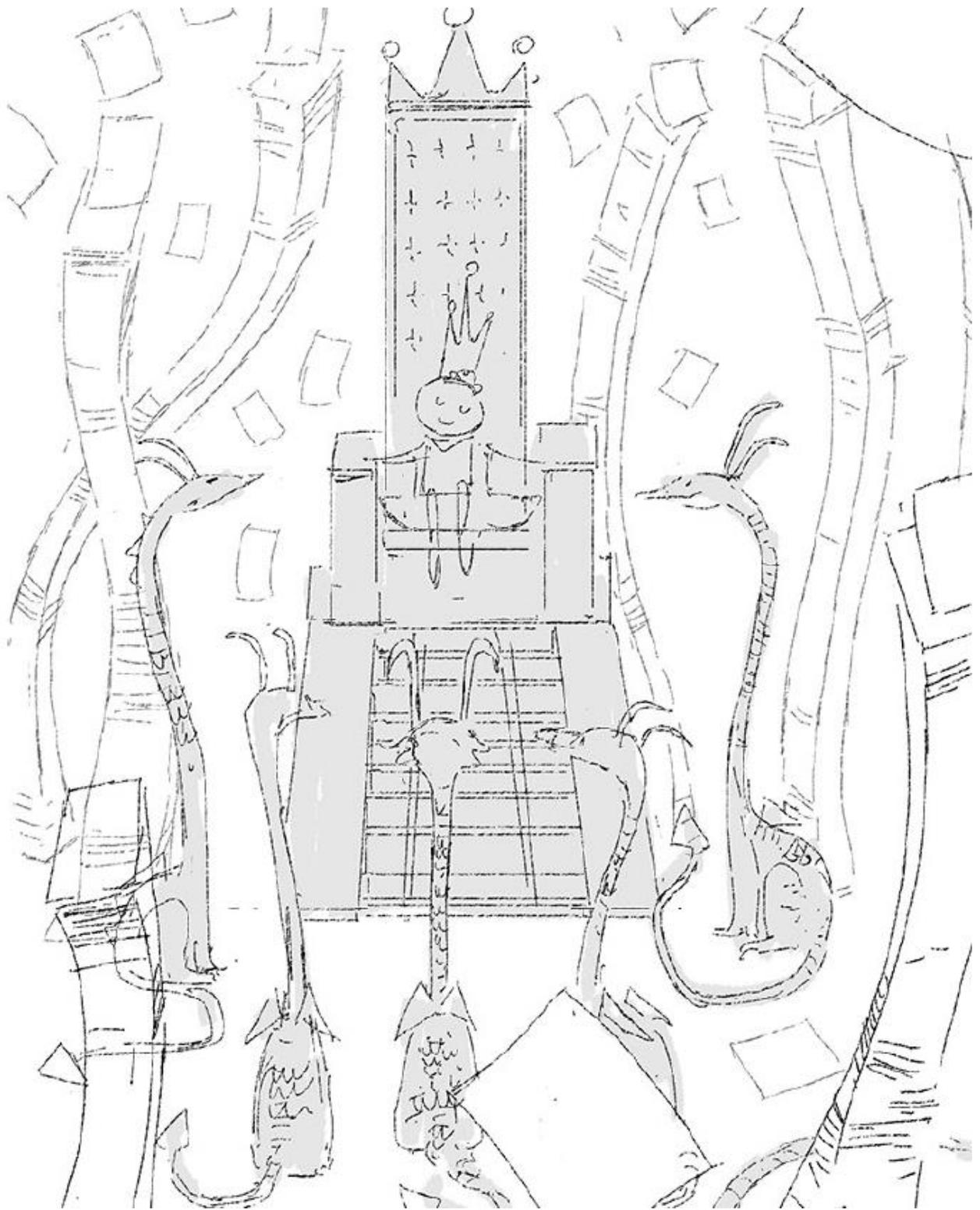
- **When Daniel is back in his little bed at the end of the story, some things have changed. Can you describe those things?**

[HKR: This may be a little abstract for young readers because the changes are mainly internal – Daniel’s realization that he can be king someday, his decision to be nice to the dragons if he does become king, his understanding that many people (and dragons!) work hard, etc.]

- **Read the author’s note at the end of the book. This story is based on the author’s childhood. Why do you think the author made the main character a boy instead of a girl?**

[HKR: This is probably the most frequently asked question I get from readers. While writing the story, I went back and forth on whether the main character should be a boy or a girl. Even though the story is based on my personal history, I ultimately decided I didn't want it to be an autobiography. I wanted readers to imagine any kid out in the world. That's also the reason why I asked the illustrator Pascal to make the family appear ethnically ambiguous. The way the characters are drawn, they could be Italian, Asian, Latino, Spanish, Arab, Indian, Greek, etc. And that's why I'm also glad that the author's note appears at the end of the story instead of the beginning. My brilliant editor made that choice, and I think it's because she also wanted the reader to experience the story in his or her own way, and then arrive at the author's note at the end.]

Here's an early sketch that illustrator Pascal did for the book. You can use it as a coloring page. Provided courtesy of Pascal Campion.



You can also draw your own dragons or any other page from the book. I'd love to see your drawings! Just ask someone with an Instagram account to take a photo and post your drawing and tag me @helenakurhee.