

UP

BY Jim LaMarche

A Conversation with Jim LaMarche

“I think magic—a certain kind of magic anyway—can happen anyplace, anytime.”

*Jim LaMarche has been mixing magic with the everyday since his illustrations for Laura Krauss Melmed’s *The Rainbabies* earned him international acclaim by winning the Prix de Bologna in 1993. He is the father of three boys and lives with his wife in Central California. *Up* is the second book Mr. La Marche has both written and illustrated.*



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SP: Susan Pearson, Editor JL: Jim LaMarche

SP What inspired you to create *Up*? Did the book begin with the setting? The character of Mouse? The telekinetic ability?

JL A hot soak in the tub was the inspiration for *Up*. Once the house is settled down in the evening I enjoy a long hot bath. With my foot working the hot water I slowly simmer myself into a state of complete relaxation, or maybe delirium. I’ll do some reading and even revisit design or story problems I’ve worked on that day. One night in the tub the idea for *Up* came to me pretty much in a rush of images. The soap in my hand started the levitation idea and then it all tumbled together, the boy from a fishing family, the older brother, the boy’s growing power, and the final whale rescue. Usually my ideas take time to evolve, lots of time. It took me at least a year to figure out the title. Just one little *Up*. Thank God I don’t get paid by the word.

SP *Up* is very much a coming-of-age story—in this case, Mouse gains the respect of his father and admittance to the grown-up world of the fisherman. Do you recall a similar epiphany for you or your sons? A moment when you or they seemed to grow up in an instant?

JL There was never just one threshold I crossed in becoming an adult. There have been many and I think I’m still crossing them. Recently I watched two of my sons climb a 200-foot rock wall. Taking turns they carefully belayed each other up the granite face. As I yelled unrequested and uninformed advice from the ground, my son came back with, “Dad, please be quiet—I need to concentrate.” Letting go, and occasionally keeping my mouth shut, is one of my latest adult challenges.

SP Both *The Raft* and *Up*, the two books you have written as well as illustrated, are about boys who, even though they are part of loving families, feel themselves on the “outside,” until they find themselves through the course of the story. Can you talk about your own youthful feelings of being an outsider?





JL I never quite felt like an outsider. I was pretty shy as a kid but I always had good friends and never felt isolated. I guess I thought I was somewhat different—but I figured everyone felt different one way or another. I just never had a problem with being alone. Even on a freezing Midwestern day I'd put on my skis or skates and just go off by myself. There was usually some heroic story playing along inside my head. I think the characters in my stories are like me; they like quiet, alone time to explore and pretend. These days I see myself in my boys. Like me they prefer individual pursuits—backpacking, mountain biking, climbing, piano. We don't seem to be a family of joiners.

In a more literal sense, I was always an “outsider” in that I usually wanted to be outside. The house always seemed hot and stuffy, and with two brothers and two sisters and lots of their friends it was often busy. It's still hard for me to sit in my studio all day. In fact, think I need a break right now.

SP In both *The Raft* and *Up*, water is an important element—a Midwest river in the former, the ocean in the latter. What has been the role of water in your life? Water as inspiration?

JL Growing up in rural Wisconsin I could ride my bike to the river in five minutes and to half a dozen lakes in a half hour. I spent a good portion of my summer days with my mask and snorkel floating on a lake like a turtle, barely moving for hours. At the river in my hometown a bunch of us would swim behind the spilling wall of water at the dam. The sun would turn the tannin-stained water to gold. We always had a rowboat and canoe at our cabin and I was usually in one or the other. I guess it's not too surprising that now I live a stone's throw from the ocean. Water is so magical. I've dived in 80-foot kelp forests, which is as close to flying through the woods as I think I'll ever get. I can easily see myself as an old man contentedly painting water scenes pretending to be Claude Monet or Winslow Homer.

SP In almost all of your books—both those you have illustrated and those you have also written, there is an element of magic: a boy who thinks he has telekinetic abilities, the mysterious appearance of a raft able to attract animals, a bear who learns to read, a bird who nests on a man's outstretched hand, a carousel horse that comes alive, and of course the fairytales of *The Rainbabies*, *The Elves and the Shoemaker* and *Little Ob*, in which 12 miniature babies appear after a rain, a pair of elves restore a poor shoemaker to prosperity, and an origami doll comes to life. Yet the settings and characters are all very everyday and realistic. Can you tell us about your union of the magical with the everyday?

JL I've always liked to mix the “magical” with the world we see every day. I think magic—a certain kind of magic anyway—can happen anyplace, anytime. The magic of love, the magic of a child's imagination, the magic of dreams—well, they're not so different from the magic of elves or rainbabies or levitating beached whales.

There's also the dynamics of the thing. If fantastic events are set only in fantastical worlds, a tiny oyster cracker lifting off a table just doesn't seem like much. But if it happens in the real, regular world, to a real boy, in a real house like your own . . .

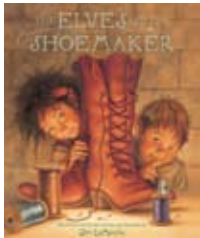
I think a familiar reality is what makes fantasy work, whether it's in a story like *The Salamander Room* or *The Polar Express* or *The Elves and the Shoemaker* or *Up*.



Up

Written and illustrated
by Jim LaMarche

\$16.95 HC, 0-8118-4445-5
9 x 11 inches, 32 pages,
Full color throughout
Ages 3–8
Fall 2006



Also by Jim LaMarche
**The Elves and
the Shoemaker**

\$16.95 HC, 0-8118-3477-8
Ages 3–8

★ ★ ★
IRA Teachers' Choice

“...this timeless tale will leave readers
suffused with the pleasure of seeing
gifts received and appreciated.”

—★ Kirkus Reviews, starred review

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SP I know you use models for your characters—your in-laws for the old couple in *The Rainbabies*, your own son for Nicky in *The Raft*, a Santa Cruz tailor and his wife for the couple in *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. Who did you use as models for *Up*?

JL My model for Mouse in *Up* is a boy from the elementary school my wife teaches in. He has a wonderfully expressive face and he always worked hard for me. I did use my youngest son, Dominic, for the boy in *The Raft*. He got tired of it all and quit in the middle of the job. His older brother came in and served as his agent. We had to renegotiate his contract.

SP Some illustrators who use models tend toward an almost photographic realism, but your illustrations feel much more freely drawn. Can you explain to us the relation between the model sketches/photos and the final painting?

JL I do use a camera, but before I take any pictures I make hundreds of drawings to help me decide on the scene. Then I take many, many photos for each scene. Most I toss away. Usually I will work from ten or so photos to do my final sketches. I try to get to the heart of the photos without trying to copy them. Facial expressions are so delicate. One small change in the eyes for example, and the portrait could go from surprise to sinister. By using real people for my characters I get to borrow their particular quirks. For example, in *The Elves and the Shoemaker* my model for the little girl elf met me at her door for a modeling session whistling and whistling. Her mother explained that she had just learned to whistle that day. Of course that had to be added to the storyline.

SP For some time you worked as a commercial artist. How has that affected you as a book illustrator?

JL For years I did commercial and editorial work. One week an art director would ask me to draw like Leonardo da Vinci and the next week someone would want a Norman Rockwell. I did my best. And I did learn to be flexible. I went to a lot of meetings with art directors and marketing teams and clients and I learned how to listen and try to distill all the ideas into one illustration. Now I only do children's books and I love the process of working with my editor and art director. I try not to get in the way of making a good book. The story and art should be a seamless marriage and the art shouldn't do anything else but help the story. 🍷