

In the **Spotlight**

Grades
K-2, 3-5

by | Sharron L. McElmeel

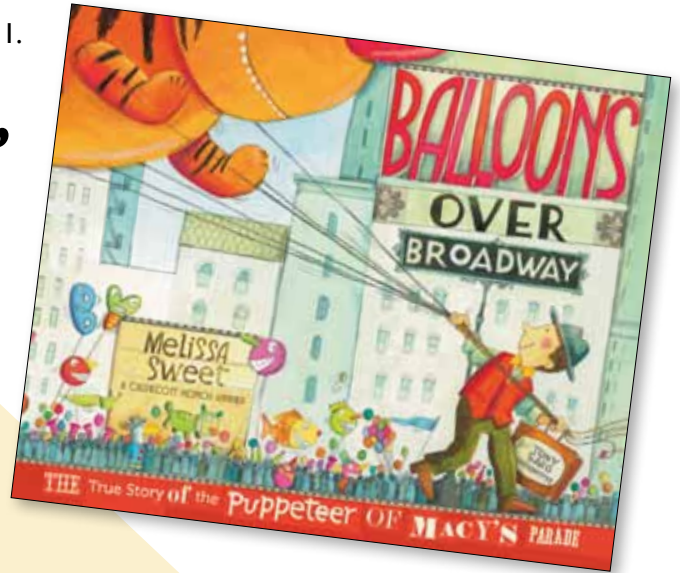
Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade by Melissa Sweet. Houghton Mifflin, 2011.

Balloons, Marionettes, and Mobiles

Publication of the Sibert and Orbis Pictus award-winning *Balloons Over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade* by Melissa Sweet has turned readers' focus to the incredible work of Anthony Frederick Sarg—better known as Tony Sarg, the creator of the helium-filled, flying balloon puppets that have been long associated with Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. In her book, Sweet tells the story of Sarg's artistic development as a puppeteer and marionette manipulator.

Tony Sarg was of German and English heritage; he was born in Guatemala, where his father was a member of the German Consulate, and lived there for the first seven years of his life. Later, he lived in Germany and England. He immigrated to America with his wife and daughter in 1914, first settling in Ohio, where his wife's family resided, and later in New York City, where he turned his childhood interest in puppetry into a profession.

About ten years after moving to New York, Sarg was invited by Macy's department store to fashion a moving display for its holiday windows. Macy's "Wonderland" window attracted many viewers, all wanting to see the animated puppets that Sarg had created and based on storybook characters. His display was a success, and it wasn't long before he was asked to help create larger puppets for the first Macy's parade. Over several years, his puppets evolved into manipulatable balloons, which he built with the help of his protégé, Bil



Baird. His knowledge of puppetry was essential to effectively launching and controlling the balloons when they soared high above the delighted crowds. In the end, his work became the centerpiece for the parade.

When Melissa Sweet set out to write and illustrate a story about Tony Sarg and his role in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, she drew upon her own interest in making things and figuring out how they work. For the collage illustrations she created paper mâché toys and puppets to use along with paint, handmade paper, and found objects that felt as if they belonged in Sarg's world. Many of the puppets she made were based on puppets from Tony Sarg's collection. There is a wooden Pinocchio with his long nose, square feet, and quaint clothing. There are simple, one-inch-wide stick puppets made tall and skinny with hats of knitted wool or a wooden game marker, and another made of a small block of wood with button eyes. And then, in addition to Sweet's puppet

and toy creations, there are her glorious watercolors of the people of New York City, of the parade, and of the magical, high-rising balloons that have come to be the symbol of the parade. Actual newspaper advertisements from the era were utilized for part of the endpapers, and images from a 1921 book about Sarg's marionettes were used in part of the front endpapers.

Bits of information, presented in scrapbook form, augment the narrative as Sweet recounts Sarg's career as a puppeteer. The parade ends at Macy's, and Melissa Sweet's story of Tony Sarg ends with him silhouetted against even more images of puppets and marionettes, seemingly contemplating his next puppet creation.

Sarg and Other Puppeteers

In an author's note at the end of *Balloons Over Broadway*, Melissa Sweet mentions Bil Baird, an apprentice of Tony Sarg's, and Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets. Find out more about Baird at his hometown museum, the MacNider Art Museum, in Mason City, Iowa (www.macniderart.org/baird.html), and about Henson at the Jim Henson Legacy site at www.jimhensonlegacy.org. One source for further information about Tony Sarg is a site created by the Nantucket Historical Association Research Library, www.nha.org/digitalexhibits/sarg/sargbiography.html.

Exploring the Process

In *Balloons Over Broadway*, Melissa Sweet presents an interesting snapshot of the history of a national tradition. As she conducted research for the book, she studied many sources, and not all of the information she found about Tony Sarg and the parade could be included in her book. As she developed her writing and her illustrations, decisions and revisions had to be made in order to present the best story possible.

Before creating, painting, and assembling the final illustrations, Sweet drew initial sketches that guided the story's text and art. Her sketches were loosely drawn and presented the basic form and layout of the illustration to come. Sketches like these become part of the dummy that she presented to her editor. When she created the final art, the layout of the text and the placement of images in the illustrations were more closely con-

sidered. How many sentences could be put on a page? Will the text stand out against the colored illustrations, or should white spots be left for the text? What pictures will best convey the story's emotion and facts?

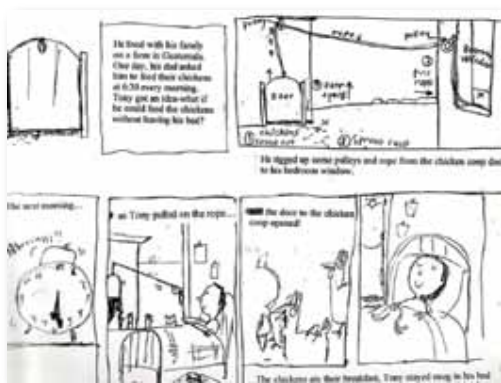


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Visual Literacy Discussion Points

Background #1: The sketch above is an early drawing that Sweet created for the cover of the *Balloons Over Broadway*. The final jacket illustration is not exactly like this sketch. The central figure remains, as does the crowd and smaller balloons flying above it. But in the final art, instead of holding the tethers for balloons that spell out "balloons," the central figure (presumably Sarg) is holding a huge tiger balloon that sails right off the page and extends around to the back side of the book's cover.

Discussion Question #1: Why do you think Melissa Sweet (and possibly the editor and/or art director) decided that the man should be holding a large tiger balloon rather than the eight letter balloons? (Possible discussion point: The publisher and illustrator may have talked about the fact that the parade never did have letter balloons—and the parade's most successful balloons are animal and character balloons. Also, the balloons were originally developed as a substitution for the many live animals that had been in the first few parades, which had scared many children along the parade route.)



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Background #2: The sketch above is part of the dummy created for the second interior page of Sweet's book. Like the cover, revisions were made to this page, as well. In the published book, Sweet changed the text on the opening panel. In this draft layout sketch we read that Sarg was born in Guatemala. That fact was left out of the book; instead, Sweet added a paragraph explaining that Tony's idea was to use levers and pulleys to automate his feeding chore so he could stay in bed a little longer. She eliminated the first sketch of the door/gate and reworked the illustration to show the activation sequence of the gadgets. In the lower four panels, words were rearranged and details added to most of the frames. Compare this sketch with the final version published in the book (second page after the title page, unpagged).

Discussion Question #2: Changes to note and discuss:

- Sweet removed the first sketch of the gate alone. Why? (Possible discussion point: Perhaps the gate was removed because the illustration was redundant—the gate was incorporated into the next couple of sketches.)
- Throughout the book, Sweet conveys bits of information through the details in her illustrations. For example, the final illustrative panel in this sketch includes a picture on the wall that seems to foreshadow Tony's interest in creating toys. The first panel in the bottom of this page Sweet shows the alarm clock ringing at 6:29. In the final panel where Tony is still in his bed, Sweet has placed another view of the alarm clock with the time set to a few minutes

Note: The artwork featured in this article, as well as other sketches by Melissa Sweet, can be viewed on a larger scale with commentary at www.mcbookwords.com/books/sweet_balloons.html.

after 6:30. Between these two scenes, readers see three chickens busily eating, presumably the food made available by the system that Tony rigged. What else do students notice? What might they guess about Tony's personality by the details Sweet provides?

Illustration Scavenger Hunt

Use the following facts to guide students on a scavenger hunt through the illustrations in *Balloons Over Broadway*. Locate the spot in the book where a direct reference to each of these facts is made, or where a clue is given that indicates Sweet knew about the fact as she created the illustrations. Older students might do further research to determine where Sweet might have found this information.

1. The Humpty Dumpty puppet was created for Macy's Puppet Parade window in 1923.
2. Sarg used cloth, buttons, and other items to create the clothing for Humpty Dumpty.
3. Tony Sarg's New York studio was on an upper floor of a tall skyscraper.
4. In 1924 on Thanksgiving Day, the parade began at 146th Street and traveled down Broadway.
5. In the early twenties, the parade was called Macy's Christmas Parade.
6. The man who was in charge of Macy's was named R. H. Macy.
7. Tony Sarg, his wife, and child had a connection to Nantucket.
8. Sarg had a daughter and her name was Mary.
9. *The Tony Sarg Marionette Book* was published before Sarg created the large balloons to replace the real animals that frightened young children watching the parade.
10. Sarg created marionette shows for the Helen Hayes Theater.
11. The "El" was an elevated train track used in New York City.
12. The balloons were made in Ohio and transported 439 miles to New York City.

New York, New York

Melissa Sweet's *Balloons Over Broadway* shows readers a bit of New York history. For students interested in further reading, two other books that provide insight into the history of New York traditions and landmarks are:

- *The Christmas Tugboat: How the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree Came to New York City* by George Mattheson and Adele Ursone.
- *One Times Square: A Century of Change at the Crossroads of the World* by Joe McKendry.

Art Connections: Puppets, Marionettes, and Mobiles

Tony Sarg (1880–1942) was a talented artist who created animated toys, puppets, marionettes, and illustrated books. Another artist who lived during Sarg's lifetime was also interested in toys and moveable art. Alexander Calder (1898–1976) was a sculptor who used wire and metal to create large, outdoor sculptures that are displayed in many cities. He also developed the concept of the mobile: suspending objects by wire so that they move and balance one another in changing harmony. Try the following activities and reading suggestions with students to broaden their perspective on the artists' work.

- Introduce Alexander Calder to young learners by reading Tanya Lee Stone's *Sandy's Circus: A Story About Alexander Calder*.
- Both Calder and Sarg created fanciful, imaginative figures and toys by using found objects. Gather together pieces of wood, paper, cloth,

buttons, and other objects, and use them to create an animal, person, or other object. If possible, try to make your figure have some moveable parts. For instance, simple marionettes can be made by punching holes in arms and legs of a cardboard figure, and then reattaching them with paper fasteners. 3-D figures can have arms and legs attached with thread or wire.

- Share projects from *Paper Puppet Palooza: Techniques for Making Moveable Art Figures and Paper Dolls* by Norma V. Toraya. Older learners who are seriously interested in exploring the making of marionettes may be interested in Helen Fling's *Marionettes: How to Make and Work Them* (192 pages, with 400 illustrations).
- Follow the same principles used to create mobiles by balancing created objects from wires and strings to make a piece of art that can move and still retain its equilibrium. Use *Making Mobiles* by Bruce Cana Fox as a resource.



Sharron L. McElmeel is director of McBookwords (www.mcbookwords.com), a literacy organization, and an instructor of children's literature and young adult literature in the University of Wisconsin-Stout's online education programs. She often writes and speaks about authors/illustrators and their books. Visit her website at www.mcelmeel.com.

About the Author/Illustrator: Melissa Sweet

Melissa Sweet has been drawing for as long as she could hold a crayon or pencil in her hand. She has created art for everything from board books to picture books to magazines. Her work has appeared on Martha Stewart's *Living* and in *The New York Times*. In addition to the books she has written and illustrated such as *Tupelo Rides the Rails* and *Carmine: A Little More Red*, she has illustrated almost 100 picture books by other authors, including the 2009 Caldecott honor book, *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos* by Jen Bryant (learn more at www.mcbookwords.com/books/riverofwords.html). Melissa lives in Rockport, Maine, a small town of fewer than 3,500 people. Most days she works in her studio painting and writing. She sometimes visits schools and libraries, and she often rides her bike to the Rockport library accompanied by her two dogs. One of them, Rufus, has a starring role in *Carmine*. Learn more about Melissa Sweet on her website at www.melissasweet.net.