

Proposal

*Thank you for coming

*As Todd said, I am a photographer and multimedia artist. Originally I am from appalachia, I try to infuse this part of my identity into all of my work because I was raised by Appalachian artists who shared skills, concepts, stories, and most importantly their support with me, and as such I am compelled to continue to spreading their skills, concepts, stories and again most importantly their support with all artist I encounter and all that art I make.

*Of all of my art, though, that is most exemplified here, today.

- Raven's Ridge is the first chapter of a children's ghost/mystery novel intended for late elementary readers, grades 3-5.
- I chose to structure my novel in the traditional noir style and borrowed the required elements for my opening chapter, which we see here today. I identify the characters, how they have come to be where they are, and introduce the overall mystery.
- In this case, the main character is Francis Glum, a 12-year-old girl who is moving with her parents to a new town. While travelling by sternwheeler, she discovers the belongings of a girl not much older than herself. Francis goes to the ship's captain to ask him about her discovery. I will now read an excerpt where the initial mystery is introduced to the reader.

Captain Suds squinted at the map and locket, then slowly shook his head.

“Well now,” he said, “I haven't seen this in years.”

“You recognize it?”

“Not exactly. But I know the story,” he leaned over the wheel and lowered his voice. “There used to be an opera house in Raven’s Ridge, *The Hippodrome*. Grand thing. Right across the street from the Mingo theater, where your folks are headed. The two buildings were connected by old coal-mining tunnels, from when the town ran on coal and needed a way to move gear underground. Later, the theaters used them to share props and costumes, especially during the winter.”

Francis’ eyes widened. “So they were connected?”

He nodded. “Most folks didn’t know about them. Then came the fire.”

His voice dropped lower.

“Opening night. Packed house. Something sparked, some say a gas leak in the tunnels started it, but no one really knows. Fire spread faster than anyone thought. They say nearly a hundred people died: the audience, stagehands, musicians. Some made it out, but most didn’t.”

Francis felt her breath catch.

“But the part that never left people,” the captain said, “was the girl. There was a child, a girl, maybe thirteen, who was an understudy for the show. When the fire started, she ran back inside, screaming that she had left something behind. Her mother chased after her. Witnesses say they saw them heading toward the tunnels. But then the stage collapsed not long after, and no one ever saw them again.”

Francis stared at the locket, her stomach twisting.

“They searched?”

“For days. But the tunnels caved in from the fire. Some folks say the fire was started down there and that something went wrong below before it ever reached the stage. Others say the tunnels weren’t safe, and should’ve been sealed years before.”

“And the girl?” Francis asked, wrapping her fingers tightly around the necklace’s chain.

“Some say her spirit still lingers nearby. Waiting. Watching. And sometimes, when the river fog rolls in, people say a raven flies from the ruins of the Hippodrome to the theater across the street. Just one. Always alone.”

By the inherent nature of a first chapter, we do not get to solve the mystery of the overall novel, but I devote much of the writing to introducing the mystery, and the first in a series of clues is solved.

In today’s installation, you are seeing this first chapter in its totality. Each photo is page or spread from the chapter in order on the wall. The exhibition is designed to allow viewers to be able to read the entire chapter by entering the room and then working in a clockwise direction. The spreads are printed at 25 by 36, except for the first three pages, the first work represents the cover, and the other the next two single spread works would have been attached to blank white if printed as spreads, and I decided that was unnecessary, so I made those three prints at 18x25. The dimensions were chosen to be proportional to a book, but larger for display. And because I personally love the irony of looking at little things printed much larger than they are.

The story itself is structured as a mystery intentionally. I want to encourage curiosity in my readers, so by creating a mystery, I encourage the reader to keep going to find the answers to that mystery. While writing, I had initially imagined that this book would be read by middle-grade readers. My friend Hope Woodowsky is a children’s librarian and acted as one of my editors. She was also able to read my chapter’s rough drafts to some of the children and ask for feedback. By in large, middle schoolers were not particularly interested; however, late

elementary schoolers were. So instead of changing my writing to fit the audience, I changed who the audience was.

Writing for elementary school children largely informed the length of my chapter and some of the word choices. It also informed how scary the ghost story could be. In my research, I decided that as long as the ghost story avoids gore or other age-inappropriate concepts for children like sex, drugs, or gratuitous violence, the book can be scary, and the scarier it is, the more my readers seemed to enjoy it. This book is meant to teach children about the history of Appalachia, without the reader even realizing they are absorbing that history.

I do this in the plot by referring to Appalachia's history in coal mining, having the characters travel by sternwheel, and in the types of animals and plants they encounter in the first chapter, in this case, Ravens and a type of wild onion called a ramp.

I also do this in my naming convention. The theater that Francis is traveling to is named the Mingo Theater in reference to the town of Mingo, West Virginia, where the first shot in the coal wars was fired. You can see this naming convention most prevalently in my map of Raven's Ridge, for example, all of the bridges are named after different insects that are native to Appalachia.

In addition to the writing and prints, you can see some of the miniatures that I have made. These miniatures are built almost exclusively from recycled materials like cardboard or materials I previously owned. I then photographed the miniatures and combined them with photographs of nature to create the entire set.

I chose cardboard and already owned materials for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, because I think it serves the context of the story. Appalachia is one of the most economically depressed areas in the United States. I found using low-cost materials was a way to pay homage to Appalachia by being resourceful with what I already have access to. In addition, I felt aesthetically compelled to work with materials that appear homemade. I have no interest in creating slick sets. I want you to see my fingerprints pressed into the clay and the hot glue used to bind together the parts. I want the reader to feel as though it was homemade specially for them.

I have a dual line of inquiry for this project: Appalachian History, and learning through play.

Appalachia is a geographic and cultural location in the Eastern and Southern United States. It spans across the Appalachian Mountain Range, which is the oldest mountain range in the world. It is literally older than trees. West Virginia is the only state entirely contained in Appalachia. Appalachia is also known as the coal belt, as it has provided 54% of all coal extracted globally since the 1800s, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission.”

To say the coal industry has impacted Appalachian culture and communities is too mild; the coal industry is inextricably tied to Appalachia. I specifically have focused my research on the West Virginia Mine Wars, taking place from 1912 to 1921, in which thousands of coal miners and their families violently fought coal company operators, their privately hired army, and the police for the right to unionize and the right to worker protections.

According to *The History of the West Virginia Mine Wars* by Duafala, coal miners were treated horrifically by the coal industry. The work for the miners was dangerous and frequently lethal, and miners did the work under armed guards hired by the coal corporations. They lived in towns owned by the coal corporations, in homes owned by the corporations, and bought all of their goods at the company-owned store with the company-issued script. Which is what the miners were paid instead of real money. The coal companies hired private investigation firms to prevent the unionization of the miners through spying on or even killing those attempting to do so. Which is where community strength ties into my research.”

“Because the West Virginian miners were not able to legally unionize, they performed wildcat strikes. Wildcat strikes are strikes where individuals working as miners would not be given the protections of the union, like access to food or pay, or other strike funds during their strike. The miners had to rely on the community for all of this and shelter as they were evicted from their company housing. Ultimately, the strikes turned violent, and the violence did not end until the strikers surrendered their weapons when martial law was declared, and the national guard arrived. Leaders of the strike were put on trial for treason, but ultimately not convicted, and their trial led to public sentiment changing to support the miners, who, up until this point, had been portrayed in the media as violent rednecks and hillbillies. These miners fought and died for our right to unionize and our rights for labor protections, and were able to do so because they had community support. This is much of the historical context that I would like to share throughout the book, and it acted as the background for the type of town Francis and her family

would arrive in.

And this is where learning through play comes in. *The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting* by Jennifer Zosh discusses particular forms of play that engage children in learning. Story-telling is the most effective way to communicate history to children. Children enjoy stories more that are centered on a child's perspective and enjoy participatory or interactive elements in their stories. Which is why I included a riddle in the chapter that the reader can attempt to solve along with characters, a map, and my illustrations in the form of miniature sets.”

I also chose many of the details in both plot and making because they parallel much of my own life. I was raised in Appalachia by a musician father and an artist mother. They often worked for our local community theater, which is connected underground to another theater and is considered haunted by many.

I wanted to make this in some ways as a love letter to my community.

I was not only influenced by my upbringing but by a myriad of artists across different disciplines.

Karina Schaapman is a multimedia artist and author of *The Mouse Mansion*. Schaapman creates illustrations with photographs of handmade 3D miniatures. As I am also intending to write a children's book using 3D miniatures, she is my greatest inspiration as an artist in terms of form for this work.

The arts and crafts movement has many elements that I admire, like sewing, beading, and general craftspersonship. Although artist John Henry Dearle got a lot of the credit, the actual weaving was done by women whose names are now lost to history. The arts and crafts movement led to the formation of women's groups like quilt circles that then formed political women's groups that fought for the right to vote in both the United States and the United Kingdom. This is an example of community as strength, which is another Appalachian tradition, so the arts and crafts movement appeals to me on both an ethical and visual level.

A Series of Unfortunate Events is another relevant work. This dark comedy for school-aged children tells the story of three orphaned siblings and their increasingly difficult attempts to find a guardian. The novel has an emphasis on imparting knowledge about the literary world in the form of history, spelling, and grammar, directly addressed to the reader from the author. I do not speak directly to the reader as the author, but have imitated writing with the intent of imparting knowledge.

My biggest inspiration for this project, though, was Walter Wick, the photographer and miniature creator for the *ISPY* novels.

Walter Wick's artistic choices in the *I Spy* series center on transforming everyday objects into visually rich, miniature worlds that blur the line between reality and imagination. He stages each scene with extraordinary precision, arranging toys, trinkets, and found items into intricate compositions that reward close observation. His use of lighting is deliberate—soft shadows,

bright highlights, and even theatrical contrasts—all of which guide the viewer's eye toward key details without ever giving away the puzzle too easily. Wick often builds depth through layering, placing objects at varying distances from the lens so the reader must visually navigate foreground, middle ground, and background to uncover hidden items.

Another signature choice is Wick's commitment to practical effects over digital manipulation, especially in the earlier books. He physically builds each set by hand, sometimes constructing elaborate dioramas or using mirrors, glass, and unusual textures to create visual surprises. This handcrafted approach gives the images a tactile realism, making the scenes feel both believable and magical. Wick's careful selection of color palettes—sometimes harmonious, sometimes intentionally chaotic—also contributes to each puzzle's mood and challenge level. Altogether, his choices create a visual language where curiosity is rewarded, and where every object, no matter how ordinary, becomes part of an enchanting puzzle world.

As you may be able to tell, I became a bit of a devotee over this process and have tried to pull in as many elements as possible from his work into my own. I am also trying to create a world that is recognizable but feels magical.

This leads me to my role in this project, I acted as a writer, a sculptor, a painter, a costume designer, and lighting designer, and photographer, and a graphic designer within this project. I had to take on all these roles and responsibilities so I could get the world that was swirling around in my head out for visual consumption. Thank goodness I had Hope, as previously mentioned, as one of my editors as well as my partner, Duncan Shaw.

Ironically, writing for me has always been incredibly difficult, not because I have nothing to say, in fact, I almost always have something to say. But because I have dyslexia. This meant it

took me a much longer time to learn to read than my peers, which led to lots of ridicule about my intelligence from them when I was in elementary school. So in a lot of ways, this has been an incredibly healing process. I feel like by writing, I am facing off with my own ghosts that tell me my voice is not important.

This chapter is intended to be part of what will one day be a thirteen-chapter novel for elementary readers. I would also want to streamline much of my making process so I could include instructions and printables within the book for kids to be able to recreate these scenes at home.

The context of this work, to be blunt, is to write a book that encourages anti-fascist behavior in children. The main way to do this is to create thinkers who are curious about the world around them. By writing a mystery, I am requiring the readers to ask questions and engage with the content through curiosity.

Much of this work changed throughout the process, most specifically, though, was the previously mentioned shift in intended audience from middle-grade readers to late elementary readers. I also had initially intended to use a wider variety of materials, but the specificity of recycled materials felt more important than implementing them.

My editing process for my writing, as previously mentioned, was done with my friend Hope. However, the editing process for the visuals and the production of the photos was entirely me. As recommended by one of my panelists in the thesis proposal, I built my sets in-camera. This allowed me to use as few materials as possible because I knew what would be out of frame. Which is why you may have noticed that none of the puppets have legs. This was not intentional, but what made it, if the audience won't see it quickly, became my motto.

Most of my visual artistic choices were made by thinking about what kind of books I liked to look at when I was a kid. I loved small details and little odds and ends. Although this is a book where I sneak history in, I want it to be fun for the reader. So lots of the elements were chosen because I thought they were fun.

For example, if I were a kid, I would spend a lot of time trying to discern what was written on the note and the map, so I decided to include larger versions of those for readers to spend time with as an actual spread in the book.

I also learned a very valuable and difficult lesson in the process. Build anything until you have your final edit written. I spent a large portion of my time designing sets. Some of which never made it into the novel when I was forced to cut pages for length when shifting audiences. So, to avoid wasting resources and time, I will only be building sets after writing the novel in its entirety.

For critiquing myself, I look first to see if I completed my objective of creating this chapter and its corresponding illustrations. In this case, I did complete it. I am generally pleased with the results, but wish I had allotted more time for installation and printing.

This is a constant issue with my work. I have great grand ideas, but feel like I never have enough time to follow through on them to a satisfying level. This is more of a personal problem, though, than an artistic one.

The next steps in this project would be writing the novel in totality, then creating the miniature sets, and then attempting to get the book published. As I told my mentor, initially this

project started with the intent of making something grand, a celebration for my time at PNCA, which has evolved to is the first artistic project I have waiting for me upon graduation.

I want to read another excerpt from the chapter that I feel best encapsulates the feeling I want the reader to leave with:

This is the night after Francis has discovered the riddle and the map.

The riddle reads:

“If you would know who wore the chain,
And how she met her end in pain,
Follow where the raven flies,
Past the place where silence lies.
The next clue waits beneath the ramps,
Not stairs, nor woods, nor seaside camps,
The light you seek is lost in time,
But truth will ring in bells that chime.”

That night, Francis couldn't sleep. She lay in her bunk whispering the riddle again and again.

“The next clue lies beneath the ramps. . .”

She stared at the map. Ramps? She found paths and bridges, staircases and roads, but nothing like a ramp. Nothing fit just right, she thought. She didn't realize she had fallen asleep until a sharp *caw* startled her awake.

When she came to her window, she was surprised to see, for the first time in days, that the sun was bright in the sky and fog and clouds had retreated. That only made her dark visitor more apparent. A raven landed with a flutter of wings on the railing outside her cabin, black as ink and silent as a ghost. It held something in its beak. A bundle of broad green leaves and red stems.

The raven and Francis made eye contact. It dropped the bundle, nodded at Francis, and flew away. Francis ran to grab the leaves. When she bent to pick them up, a spark of recognition flashed across her mind. Still holding the leaves, she ran to the wheelhouse again.

“Captain,” she gasped out of breath, “what is this?”

He blinked at the bundle. “Ramps.”

“Ramps?”

“Type of wild onion,” he said. “Grow in the woods this time of year.”

Francis was already digging the map out of her pocket. She traced her finger over the little wooded area called TRILLIUM GROVE. The carefully drawn, long, leafy plants with wide blades drawn above the forest were the same as the bundle the raven had brought her. Ramps were plants, and her next clue would be found in the forest. That was it. Not beneath stairs. Not beneath bridges. But beneath the earth.

The boat's horn sounded a low and long blast. Francis, startled, looked up to find they were almost underneath a bridge, and in the distance, a small town with buried secrets. A single raven soared above, leading them toward the theater and the ruins.

Francis clutched the map and felt a thudding in her chest. Anticipating the mystery that was waiting for her. The girl in the locket. The tunnels beneath the stage. Clues hidden in the forest. The truth had been buried with fire and silence, and Francis Glum was going to find it.

Okay, I want to wrap up with some acknowledgements. First and foremost, a big thank you to Todd Elliot, my mentor, whom I quite literally could not have done this project without. This is true as well for my editor, Hope Woodowsky, and Duncan Shaw, as well as my tester readers at the Cleveland Library. I want to thank Theresa Christiansen, Rachel Wolf, and Sarah Meadows for acting as both technical and emotional support throughout the process, as well as my other photo majors and friends. I also want to thank Appalachian artists, specifically my mother and father. We did not have a lot, but I was still afforded a magical childhood by them and want to share that magic with others. Their love and support not only shaped me but now move through me in the love in support I try to afford others I am in community with.

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