

Hey! I'm Ae, as most of you know me, or Simone Burns, as it says on the front of the book. I'm an illustration major here at PNCA and a seventh generation Portlander, born and raised. For the last year, I've been working on Nana's Tale, the 40 page picture book dummy that you see on the wall in front of you. This story focuses on the way the people in our life, stories, and art make us who we are. I like to think of all art, and most of everything in general, as a form of storytelling. Nana's Tale is heavily inspired by the people and stories I have loved throughout my life who made me who I am.

Before my time at PNCA, I pretty much made all of my art in my sketchbook. I took a few art classes in high school, but my real passion was sketchbooking. I finished one of those big canson XL mixed media sketchbooks just about every month. I would draw in my sketchbook all day in class while the teacher was talking, which you might think meant I was distracted but really it was the only way I could focus on the teacher.

During that time, my dad coached me on technical drawing skills, and to place value on growth above perfection. I started to think of art kind of like going to the gym or reading nonfiction - something that I do to improve myself, for the sole purpose of honing my skills. Noticing improvements in my art month-to-month is the biggest rush. It's never even been so much about literal aesthetics as much as this ephemeral but tangible idea of being Better. I remember my dad saying about the pre-raphaelite painter bouguereau, "even if all I did all day every day was paint, I'd never be as good as bouguereau. It's too late." 14-year old me responds, "yeah! Me neither!" and my dad is like "I don't know, you're 14, maybe *you* could." Something lit up in my eyes at that moment and I immediately wanted to dedicate my life to art.

On my gap year before coming to PNCA, I worked at Gladstone Street Pizza (rest in peace). Whenever things were slow with work, I would stand at the front counter and draw on guest check receipts with different colored sharpies. This was a real turning point for me stylistically, looking back. My sketchbooks from that time are filled with taped-in receipts and bus passes. That year, I literally accepted admission to go to Portland State as an art and statistics double major. I loved math and figured, “there’s jobs in stats.” At the last minute, I decided to go to PNCA instead exclusively because I had a better financial aid offer here. I’m so glad I made that impulsive decision.

All of this history of my life can be felt in my work to this day. Everything I make is imbued with a sense of childlike glee and sunshine, juxtaposed with an underlying coldness. You might have heard the phrase, “I had a very happy childhood, but I wasn’t a happy child.” The opposite feels more true to me: even when times get tough, my heart keeps on skipping and my skirt keeps on spinning. Hippie white lady dancing through the pain, my smile somehow still reaching my eyes. I feel nostalgic for buying groceries with food stamps or at dollar tree, for playing outside while my parents fought. Almost all the memories feel happy to me, even the ones that seem sad to others. These memories from childhood and life as a whole molded Nana’s Tale; Portland, nature, family, and food are ever-present.

My favorite thing to cook is spaghetti sauce. ADHD life hack: you can just throw a pot of marinara on the stove and throw in whatever’s in your fridge whenever you want a dopamine hit and it’ll just get better and better. My art process is similar: back-and-forth between analogue and digital, crayon and collage, mama lil’s peppers and garlic.

Before I read you Nana's Tale, I'll explain a bit about picture book dummies for those of you who don't already know. A dummy is the version of the book you send to an agent or publisher to see if they want to work with you to complete the book. This is not a completed version, but a refined work-in-progress meant to convey the general direction. Art directors don't want you to bring them a finished book - they want to be a part of the process, get their fingerprints on it. Most of my dummy is colored rough sketches. I chose to include color because it's important to the storytelling of Nana's Tale, but often they'd be black-and-white. There's a few finished pieces - I believe about 4 or 5 spreads. These give the idea of what the rest of the book would look like if it were completed. Without further ado, I give to you Nana's Tale.

(read book)

The end.

Nana's story has been told over and over again, shifting and growing, until it comes to life when they return to the shop. The tree starts given first by the Shoeless Crone to Nana and then to Beck by kind of both the Shoeless Crone and Nana since Nana brought her there, grow and become their own organisms, bearing fruit that can be eaten and shared. These and other elements reflect the ways family, community, and stories shape us. I first wrote this story after a walk with my friend Sophia. I had been picking sidewalk fruit, talking to Sophia about the special moment of plucking a fruit off a limb and taking a bite. It's a more individual experience than eating fruit from the store,

and makes me feel grounded in that moment, that place, and myself. When I was a kid we had raspberry bushes in our backyard and people would walk by and pick raspberries. While I rode my bike home from that walk with Sophia, an idea popped into my head for a tall tale told by a grandmother about a childhood adventure to track down a sidewalk fruit tree. The style was inspired by Joe Hayes, a southwestern storyteller my dad had listened to on cassette as a kid in Santa Fe and later played for me and my sister. I had recently played some of his stories for some friends, and on that bike ride a story popped into my head synthesizing this style, so steeped in their New Mexico Setting, with the city I know inside and out: Portland. I told the entire story to myself out loud on my bike. Then I told it again so I didn't forget it. When I got home, I immediately opened my laptop in my backyard and recorded a 35 minute voice memo of myself telling the story for the third time. At that point, there were several grandchildren in the story, and they never went back to the shop at the end. I wasn't *trying* to write a story for my thesis - it just popped into my head because of that walk and the fruit and Joe Hayes and the beautiful blue sky and the spinning wheels and shifting gears on my bike. That's how each book I've written has come to me - many, on my bike. All, spontaneously.

That's the best method I've developed for creating stories and characters and art in general. I started consciously developing my current, cartoony style during my junior year here at PNCA. Previously, all of my finished art had been fairly representational. That semester, I wanted to develop a simpler style for my Capsule Collection class, both to speed up the process and because I thought it would sell better. In my sketchbook, I found a bunch of mindless sketchbook doodles, mostly of dead-eyed cat people. I thought, "I feel like I could make something with this." I ended up falling in love with that

way of working. Going through my sketchbooks, finding things that I never intended to use for anything finished - that I didn't even really consciously think about drawing. I come up with my best ideas that way. I even trick myself into doing it, like by "playing shapes." I have my friends doodle a bunch of abstract shapes, often with "babymarkers" or tempera paint sticks, which are for toddlers. Then I draw whatever I see in those shapes, like a Rorschach test. That's how I came up with the designs for all the characters in Nana's tale. I do pages and pages of shapes, and then, when I have an idea for a story, I'll go back through and think "where have I already drawn this character, without knowing it?"

Around the same time that I was starting to develop my cartoony style, I realized that I always wanted my work to have a sense of humor. It's easier for me, I feel less pressure, but at the same time I think funny work is often more interesting, because that humor comes from depth. Even if it's also serious, there needs to be some kind of sense of humor or irony. In spring 2025, I took Advanced Picture Book with David Hohn and Character Design with Molly Mendoza. I remember showing Molly my work-in-progress for the book I was working on, Jaime. During my favorite three-spread sequence, "AND-SHE-FELL," which is a super dramatic, over the top moment of the little girl falling out of a tree, Molly laughed so hard her face turned red, head in her hands. It was the biggest ego boost of my life. I thought, "all I ever want to do is make work that will make people laugh like that, feel that much." As I worked on Nana's Tale, I was always coming back to that, thinking, "how can I get this pageturn closer to that AND-SHE-FELL level of impact?" Even it's not as laugh-out-loud funny of a book as Jaime, I wanted it to have that drama. In Molly's class I also worked collaboratively with

my friend Katie, which was a mind-alteringly wonderful experience. Even though Nana's Tale isn't literally collaborative in the same way, I still think of it as a collaboration - the fingerprints of everyone in my life are all over this book. The book is always percolating when I'm talking to them, and our conversations are always percolating when I'm working on the book. That was true from the very start, with that walk with Sophia. It's also a collaboration with every past version of myself - the version that recorded that 45 minute voice memo, the version that drew on those receipt papers, the version that wandered around the Cully and Sunnyside neighborhoods as a kid.

Two of my biggest inspirations for this book were my dad and his mom, my grandma Skye. As I've mentioned, my dad helped form the way I think about art. My thought process has evolved throughout my time at PNCA, but the foundation he gave me really set me up for success. He also introduced me to a lot of music. I remember rapping along to la-di-da-di as a little kid, singing Green Lights by Aloe Blacc, my dad singing Here Comes the Sun and Mr Tambourine Man. That music has been a huge inspiration for Nana's tale. It feels very hiphop, and also very old school folk, or as my dad likes to call it, "hippie boomer music." I made playlists for the project as a whole and each of the characters, which I have QR codes and links to so you can check them out. Overall, the Shoeless Crone listens to folk, Nana listens to hiphop, and Beck listens to pop and kid music, but they all overlap and influence each others' tastes.

My grandma Skye, the other biggest inspiration for this book, is the main reason I think of myself as a "third generation hippie." She's a real, true blue, 60s broke hippie, one of the few that stayed that way ever since. She never had much money but she'd always have organic broccoli, unsalted kerrygold butter, and a jar of kombucha brewing

on the counter. I'll always associate her with the smells of kombucha and compost that should've been taken out a few days ago. She also loved to garden - her yard back at her house on Belmont was full of all kinds of plants with brick pathways, re-used blue glass bottles filled with water sitting out to soak up the sun and moonlight before drinking them. Her traditions have passed through generations, softening with each one but still a significant part of the identities of me and my sister and cousins. I've made art inspired by my grandma before, like this portrait of her (still somehow a work in progress after a year) from Colette's visual techniques class.

While I was working on this project, my grandma's health began to decline more than before. She ended up having to stay at my apartment for three weeks in the middle of this semester. I spent a lot of time taking care of her. It was an incredibly difficult experience, but I also got a lot out of it. It was cool to spend time with her while working on a project that was already so inspired by her. I remember sitting in the kitchen light late at night, having her tell me the story of how she moved from Portland to Santa Fe and back. Countless times, she'd ask "could you go to the natural foods store and get me some organic broccoli?"

Throughout my time at PNCA, I've made three picture book dummies. First, for the picture book class, I made a book called Basic Channels, with based on a song by Josiah and the Bonneville's about growing old in the country, broke and happy and in love. I made it into a story about two old women who miss their daughter, until she comes back home with a baby and the sunshine. My next book, for Advanced Picture book, was Jaime, the first one I wrote myself. It's about a little girl who's not the best at climbing trees but loves it so much she does it every day, until she falls and has to heal

both her broken arm and her self-confidence. And, of course, for my thesis you know that I made Nana's Tale, in which a girl's Nana tells her a story about a tree. Without realizing it, I made a book about grandmas, then a book about a tree, then a book about grandmas and trees. In Molly's character design class, I also came up with a story about two old ladies who are in love and one of them is a giant douglas fir. So I guess I can't escape grandmas and trees.

What made each of these stories, and my other ones, interesting was what I brought to them - the "me" of them. I know that now, but while I was working on Basic Channels I remember spending a lot of time overanalyzing what a "good" book or "good" art was, what shape I had to force myself into to create one. Through each book, and my other projects, I've built up confidence. Trust in myself. Trust in my subconscious mind to make something interesting. I've learned not to try to make something that someone else would like, but something / would like, something that reflects me. At the same time, I've learned a similar thing about how to interact with other people. If I spend all my time trying to make people like me, trying to be the "best," nicest, most acceptable version of myself, I'll have a lot of people that think I'm just okay. Tolerable. But the people that would *really* like me, won't really know me. But when I just let myself run wild and free, I find people I really connect with. With both my art and my personality, I get better results when I act natural, when I don't limit myself.

My process for Nana's tale ended up meandering as much as any river. Setting out, I had a very rigid process in mind. I wanted to finish writing my entire manuscript before winter break, then thumbnail over break, and work on many rounds of toned rough sketches throughout the semester. Once every single toned rough was perfect, I

would move on to finished art. The order was very specific and segregated. I thought that that order would help manage my time and create the best possible book. I ended up having a lot of changes and setbacks throughout the semester, and honestly just with the way I am it never would've been feasible to work with that kind of rigid structure. The process ended up being much more free-flowing, by necessity. I had planned to write my entire manuscript before winter break. Guess what? I didn't write it before winter break. Or during winter break. Or before spring break. Or during spring break. I wrote the second half of Nana's Tale three weeks ago. By the end of winter break, I had a general outline. I thought, "oh my gosh, I really need to hurry up and write my book, but I guess I'll start thumbnailing in the mean time." So I thumbnailed it, and then I worked on rough sketches. Those thumbs and roughs were all done digitally in photoshop. They didn't need to be clean or nice, just get the point across. I ended up having a lot less rounds of revisions on the rough sketches than I intended. With the punches I was thrown this semester, I had a lot of ups and downs – some weeks, I couldn't do anything because I was too busy or anxious or unfocused. Others weeks, I'd just go go go go. By the time I started working on finished art, I still didn't have a full manuscript. Can you believe that? And I also hadn't finished all my toned roughs, like I had intended. It got late enough into the semester where time was ticking and I had to get some finished art in there. So I made this piece where Child Nana is leaping up for the fruit.

My process for this piece, and the others, was very intuitive. I already knew I liked to work intuitively, but I had planned a lot of restraints on that intuitive process which I quickly realized wouldn't work for me. For one, I had been trying to force myself

completely analogue. I figured, "I LOVE mixed media, I LOVE analogue, I'm the analog guy, shouldn't I be working *all* analog?" I was trying to make myself use a gouache or baby marker base, but I find gouache really annoying to work with and the baby markers are missing my beloved color mixing. The process was also missing the back-and-forth between digital and analog that I really love. In the end, I used a process I had developed in Molly's character design class. The end, I took my toned roughs, traced each element in them physically, scanned it all in, isolated the linework, colored it digitally, then printed out the digital color and worked back into them with acrylic, colored pencil, crayon and collage. I particularly loved using collage, because it means I get to use marks in ways I wasn't expecting when I made them. I have a technique I learned from my favorite boomer collage youtuber, Jacki Bernardi, where you make marks on medical exam table paper. Then you take that paper and get it all wet, and then you paint acrylic gloss medium - not matte, gloss - on the back, then put it on top of the art, paint more gloss medium on top and wait for it to dry. When it's fully dry, the paper will go fully transparent but the mark won't so it looks like you did the mark on that page, but you didn't. So you get the gesture that you would get from a mark that you were doing completely separately and still see the layers underneath. Obviously, since I'm doing this process on printed out sheets, literally printer paper, it gets pretty warped and crinkly and sometimes the paper wants to tear a little bit. The first spread I did on slightly nicer paper, but the four I did literally this weekend - I literally finished them YESTERDAY - those I printed on even worse paper, so when started to tear I glued them down onto thicker paper or matteboard so they wouldn't rip to shreds as I added

more wet layers. After I was done-ish, I scanned them in and made digital tweaks and color adjustments.

I also decided at the last minute that I wanted to do analog linework for the entire book - not every single sketch got them, but almost. So, a couple weeks ago, on a Saturday when I was feeling pretty bad, I went to the park with all of my printed out roughs, my light pad, some pencils and paper. I traced every single item in my book, a lot of them multiple times. The next day, I brought them to school and made my dad scan them all for me. Thank you dad for spending like 8 hours scanning these. On Monday during class, I brought all of those assets into Photoshop and isolated the linework. If you have ever had to isolate linework on an asset you're going to think this is crazy. Please, some of you, be as excited about this as I am. In one day, between 11am and 5pm, I isolated the linework on FOUR HUNDRED ASSETS. FOUR HUNDRED ASSETS. I am a god, break for applause. Not actually, but if you clap extra hard at the end I'll choose to believe it's for the four hundred assets. Then put the assets into the book on top of my existing rough sketches. I had to move all of the assets around - I didn't do linework for one whole spread. I did linework for this foot. For this foot. For this Nana, for this Nana. And then, I think I might've messed up the face on that Nana, so I'm gonna do another face and then a couple more faces so I can pick between them. So I had to choose between what assets to include, and then maneuver them so they fit together. Then, I had my wonderful mother come in one day and do my flat colors in Photoshop by color picking from my color comps. I cleaned them up a bit, but a lot of it is still just how she put it in. Thanks, mom.

So, this process was a lot less clean cut than I expected. But it ended up a lot better than I expected. My priority wasn't a lot of finished work, a lot of really clean stuff. My priority wasn't having color, or having these beautiful analog line plates on every spread, which is insane and I never would have expected. I planned on having probably one or two finished pieces, and having probably the rest just toned roughs. And I'd like them to be kind of clean but they could be kind of rough. Digital, of course. Because my priority was really strong bones for this book. I wanted a really good foundation to build off of, because this is the book that I want to launch my career. This is a book that I want to work with in the future and get published. So I was like, "I know that this isn't gonna be a finished thing when I'm done with thesis. This is still gonna be a work in progress. So I want something I can continue to tweak and edit and make better, where the core is really strong. I don't want to put a bunch of icing on a cake that isn't all the way baked in the middle. My biggest focus was the flow and rhythm of the entire book, each spread into the next. I wanted everything to feel really important, vital to the story. I also wanted every single page to have great composition, and to find a balance so it didn't feel like each spread was similar. Another focus was balancing the intuitive markmaking that I love with good legibility.

And I feel like I succeeded so well on all of these, and my other major focuses of great emotion and great character and acting and gesture and rhythm and pacing - pacing, the most important. But on top of that, I also created a project that was more finished than I would have ever expected. It's certainly still not finished, but the art itself? I would have *judged* you if you told me that I was going to finish this many pieces. I would have said no, that's not worth my time, I need to be more focused on the

roughs. If you told me I would have made four hundred assets and had analog linework on the entire book, I would have laughed at you. I didn't even expect to color the entire thing. This isn't even stuff that I thought I would do if I had a normal semester, like I expected. I took one less class than usual, I thought I'd have a chill semester except thesis, be really focused, it would be fine. My grandma got sick. I crashed my bike twice. I lowkey set the house on fire - not *really* really but the fire department kicked down the door. A million other things happened. This semester has been the craziest time in my life. Still, I somehow managed to create a book that is more finished than I would have ever expected. And I honestly think a lot of that is because I was forced to trust my gut throughout the process, because often my body wouldn't *let* me work on whatever I thought the was optimal thing. I'd be thinking, "I should really be working on my script right now, that's really the most important thing because I'm so freaked out that I don't have a full manuscript. I should be working on that. But I just can't make myself think about that, so I'm gonna be working on this rough instead or this finished art instead or I'm gonna be working color instead. At any given time, I was usually just having to work on whatever it was that it felt like I *could* work on at that moment, rather than what I "should" be working on. That usually didn't follow the rigid structure that I had planned for myself, but I think that going with that flow of what my body and mind were allowing me to do at any given moment empowered me to find a process that really works for me, specifically. That isn't a consistent, perpetual, doing the same amount of work every day, very specific schedule. What works best for me involves a lot of breaks. It's working a lot for one week and then not working at all for a week or two. And then working a lot again. While I was doing that this semester, it was really stressing me out, because I felt

like I wasn't supposed to be working like that. I felt like the way I was supposed to work on this was slow and steady, consistent, a little bit of progress every day. But because I *couldn't* do that process, I found a process that actually worked a lot better for me, which I plan to take into the future. When I trust myself, trust what feels right in the moment, I end up being more productive in the long run.

I also worked on a lot of side projects during thesis. And it wasn't because I thought "oh, this seems like a good thing to do," I was kind of just grabbed by my mind and forced to. I would wake up in the morning and just desperately *need* to work on something that wasn't thesis and wasn't a project for a different class and wasn't anything even remotely productive, the way that thought about it. I'd get home and I'd *have* to make a playlist. I'd spend hours, stay up late into the night making that playlist, making a cover for that playlist. I'd wake up some days, and all I'd be able to do was work on mending. I mended the pockets of all these jeans, because each one has the a hole in the right hand pocket from the corner of my phone. And then, pretty late into the semester, I was walking to get my bike back from the bike shop because it was getting the brake and gear shifter fixed from the two times I crashed it. I was walking to pick up my bike and a song lyric popped into my head. And another and another and all of a sudden I found myself writing a song, and I was like, "This song is good, why is this good? I want to listen to this song. I feel like I'm not allowed to think that this song is this good considering that I've never written a song before." In the following weeks, I wrote 26 more songs. And I like all of them. And just like the playlists and the mending and the choices I made with Nana's tale itself, I wasn't making conscious choices. It felt like I was remembering a song that already existed, but it only existed in my mind and on the

wind. That's really what this has all felt like, and it's been a great way to process everything I've been thinking about.

I've also written a few picture books, which I haven't started art for yet. Those stories, and Nana's tale, and Jaime, all just popped into my head one day, just like the songs. So I followed where they took me, and it was somewhere really cool and really unique to me. And it's not that you can only make cool stuff if you have some gift that calls you to make it – I think the reason that I had these ideas pop into my head was because I allowed myself to, I primed myself to. With the books, I didn't sit down and think, "I'm going to write a book today," but I did have the idea in my head that I wanted to be writing books. So because I was thinking about it, they started to come to me. With the thesis process, I was working on it, and I had to make choices, so I made those choices. It's a lot like how, I normally don't remember my dreams. But I know that if I write down my dreams every day, and when I don't remember I write down "no dreams tonight," if I do that every day, then after just a few days I'll start to remember all of my dreams. I could think of myself as someone who doesn't remember my dreams, or I could tell my brain, "I want to remember my dreams," and my brain goes, "Oh, maybe that's something I'm supposed to remember." In a similar way, I told my brain, I'd like to write a picture book. I'd like to draw a character. I'd like to draw a picture book. And my brain said, "Oh, okay, yeah! Now I'll be thinking about that in the background, and at some point I'll pop one out for you." And you can't do that if you don't trust yourself. But when I do, and when I trust the knowledge that I've already built up over time, something really cool can happen.

I've already talked about my influences from my family and my life, but I also took a lot of inspiration from stories. I love a long story, a story that you can really sink your teeth into. I love to re-read that long story over and over. I love a show that has nine seasons. I listen to an album all the way through, again and again, even if it's two hours long. I love listening to the entire discography of an artist. I love a book series where each book is 800 pages or longer.

There's something really special about getting to know a story, about living with the characters, the themes, the words for as long as you can. You also live with who you are while you're reading it. When you read the same story over and over, it becomes part of who you are. That's something I love about the picture book medium. Within illustration, it's a pretty long format medium. It's a project that I get to spend a long time working on, getting to know the ins and outs of each character, illustration, word. And I know that if I do my job right, readers will re-read the book as well - a picture book can become a part of the fabric of a family. As a kid, I had some books pretty much memorized. I remember acting out the scenes from a Dr. Seuss book while my dad read aloud - I knew the story so well I could do it all on cue.

That's the kind of relationship I would love for readers to have with my books, like *Nana's Tale* and *Jaime*. Maybe one day I'll rework the concept of my *Basic Channels* book. I'm also excited to work on other book projects I have percolating, like *Claude Is Insufferable*, one of a few books I've written but haven't begun to illustrate, and *January on Lake Street*, a graphic novel/picture book combination concept I came up with in Molly Mendoza's character design class. I'm really just profoundly in love with the picture book medium and book art more broadly. I can't wait to get my start in that

industry after graduation. I've already joined the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and am hoping to go to their Oregon conference in may to get thoughts on Nana's Tale and Jaime, and then hopefully either the summer conference in LA or the winter conference in New York. I'll be pitching my author-illustrated books to agents and cold emailing art directors about projects with other authors. I also have non picture book art plans, I'd love to do some gallery work, editorial, and tabling. I also have an idea for what I sometimes call my "white trash dating sim." I'm so excited for all of these projects and more to come. I'm proud of how I've learned to trust myself, trust the process, trust the ghost in the room, trust my intuition, just really harness what's unique about myself through my own subconscious. There's absolutely stuff I wish I could've completed in Nana's Tale in time for this presentation. I wish some of the finished pieces were a bit more refined. I would've loved to have put analog assets in the few pages that are missing them. I wrote out like half the book by hand and never had time to scan it in and replace the font with that hand type. I'm glad I waited to the last minute to finish my manuscript because it's so integrated with the illustrations, but I still think it could use a little bit of massaging. Most likely, I'll be putting Nana's Tale on a shelf for the moment, and coming back in a while with fresh eyes. In the meantime, I'll start working on one or more of my other books. Maybe Jaime, because it's the closest to being ready, but I'm really so excited for all of them. I love so much where Nana's Tale is at now. I couldn't have made a better book, even if everything hadn't been horrible and chaos this semester. I'm excited to return to it after a bit of a break. I cannot say thank you enough to my mentor Zach, who could not have been a better help throughout this process. Thanks to my family and friends, who have endlessly helped and inspired me.

And thank you to all of you for listening to me gush about this book that I love for 45 minutes. And now, questions from the panel.