

## One Giant Leap

Burleigh, Robert. Illus. Mike Wimmer. *One Giant Leap*. New York: Philomel Books, 2009.

*Mike Wimmer*

“Whatever you can do or dream  
you can, begin it.  
Boldness has power,  
Magic and genius in it.”  
-Johann von Goethe

### Introduction

For ten thousand years of human history, if man wanted to travel from one place to another, he had to do it on foot or by domesticating animals to carry him or pull him by cart. It was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that man was able to invent the steam-powered locomotive to carry him or his possessions farther and faster. Even though man was able to travel farther and faster, he was always solidly “grounded” to the earth. But man’s mind has always dreamed of breaking the tether of gravity and taking to the heavens like birds. Those dreams were realized and expressed through the genius of writers, bards, and artists like Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). His many designs for flying machines, whether were winged gliders or helicopters, conveyed man’s dream of flying. Man was finally able to break the bounds of earth through the use of lighter-than-air balloons or gliders, but it was the first machine-powered flight of Wilbur (1867-1912) and Orville (1871-1948) Wright’s *Flyer* on December 17, 1903, that prepared the way for another of man’s dreams: to one day fly to the moon.

Those dreams were articulated by great thinkers and artists like Georges Méliès, (1861-1938) whose movie *A Trip to the Moon* took the viewer on a special effects jaunt to the moon, or H. G. Wells (1866–1946) story, “The First Men In the Moon,” which predestined Neil Armstrong’s (b. 1930) “First Step” some one hundred years. But before man could fly to the moon, he first had to master the air. The world as we once knew it grew smaller after the achievement of one young man just twenty-four years after the first engine-powered aircraft was invented. It took a twenty-five-year-old mail carrier by the name of Charles Lindbergh (1902-1974) to win the Orteig Prize and connect the North American continent with the European continent in 1927 through his famous thirty-three-hour solo flight from New York to Paris. Lindbergh had the hubris to believe that he alone could achieve

what seven men had already failed, some losing their own lives in the process. It was this famous transatlantic flight that inspired my first collaboration with author Robert Burleigh (b. 1936) on our book, *Flight, The Journey of Charles Lindbergh*. That book highlighted the seminal event of Charles Lindbergh's life, which fostered greater achievements of men and women in the history of aviation, leading up to man's exploration of space and landing on the moon.

### Inspiration

It was the success of the first book, *Flight, The Journey of Charles Lindbergh*, which won the Orbis Pictus Award as best non-fiction book of the year selected by the teachers of English in 1991, that inspired this companion book, *One Giant Leap*. *One Giant Leap* celebrates that human capacity of making what was once considered impossible, possible, by making dreams come true. It was July 20, 1969, when astronaut Neil Armstrong took his place in history and uttered his famous quote as he was about to step onto the moon: "This is one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." It is even more amazing when you realize that it took only forty-two years from Lindbergh's famous flight across the Atlantic to man's having the capability to walk on the moon and only sixty-six years after the first powered flight of Orville and Wilbur Wright.

How to bring this story to life through pictures created the greatest challenge for me. The world over is ingrained with the visions of that epoch event by the television images beamed back to us from the moon itself. Every person I have talked to who was old enough to remember had absolute recall of where he was or what she was doing when the success of the *Apollo 11* mission to the moon was broadcast to the world. One couple described how they even put their honeymoon on pause to watch the incredible event. The world was glued to televisions, listening in on radios, or reading the details in newspapers. It was, without doubt, the greatest technological accomplishment of man in his ten thousand years of civilized human history. I myself remember sitting in front of our consoled black and white television set, in our un-air-conditioned house as Walter Cronkite (b. 1916), America's most beloved news anchor, described each stage of the *Apollo 11* space trek. I was especially focused on how they used the models, which to my eight-year-old eyes were the most incredible toys ever seen, of the *Saturn* rocket to illustrate the stage separations, or the docking maneuvers between the *Apollo* craft and the *Eagle* lander; hence, my challenge of exactly what imagery to use to depict this event. I studied the styles and imagery of many artists for inspiration. Vin Di Fate's (b. 1945) science fiction illustrations, Norman Rockwell's (1894-1978) renowned paintings of the historic event, and other artists such as Robert T. McCall's (b. 1919) magnificent murals of space exploration at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. But it was the paintings of astronaut Alan Bean (b. 1932), who, along with Pete Conrad (1930-1999),

landed in the moon's Ocean of Storms in November 1969. It was his personal approach and use of color that really caught my eye. As a painter, Bean wanted to add color to the moon. "I had to figure out a way to add color to the moon without ruining it," he remarked. If you look at his paintings, you will see the lunar landscape is not a monotonous gray, but shades of various colors. "If I were a scientist painting the moon, I would paint it gray. I'm an artist, so I can add colors to the moon," says Bean. I wanted to capture that spirit of adventure while still staying true to life to the scientific and technological correctness of the *Apollo* mission. The accomplishment of a dream and making a vision come true was far more important than the actual science of the experience.

### The Process

Bringing a story to life is much like giving birth to a baby. At first is the exaltation of an idea, an idea that is based in love, the love of communicating a viewpoint from one person to another or to many. Then comes the realization that something is germinating inside you, growing day by day, taking form yet unseen. And then with much patience and effort, the story is born. Like each child, every story has its own unique personality and purpose. Within every story, poem, or song there is a voice, a voice crying to be heard. It may be a voice of sadness or celebration or education or pure fantasy. As an illustrator, I must find this voice and bring vision to it. My interpretation of that voice will be the one that is inextricably linked to that story, helping or hindering its perception as a success or failure. It is why, as an illustrator, I cannot just repeat the same words the writer or author used, because that would be like stuttering. If the author has written well at all, he or she has already painted a picture, and why just repeat that same picture? It is my job to find pictures not painted within the text and bring them to life, making the story even richer, more intricate, and more complete. So before I even start sketching, I look for "that voice." In this story, that voice was "dreams have power, they bring about reality."

The next step in the process of bringing a story to life is to immerse myself in the story itself. If it is fiction, I must find a way to make it believable. Who are the characters, where did they come from, what is their past, do they or the story take place in a historical context? If the story is true, then I must be personally acquainted with the facts. I will read almost everything I can get my hands on—biographies, research papers, history books—so that I can positively set a timeline of events. Then I will start asking even more definitive questions such as, "Why is this event important? What effect did it have on the lives of those who lived through it or what consequences arose from it?" Only when I have started asking these questions am I ready to start thinking about images, because, at first, I have to know what story I am telling, its character, its voice, and its purpose. At this time, I also think about arrangement: Should it be a double-page spread, single page, color, black and white? I do not want to imply that this is a mechanized process, because it is

not. It is much more organic, and my emotions are constantly reacting to new information, ideas, and stimuli. All this information ruminates through my head and heart while I work on other projects. And like the earlier allusion to birthing a baby, ideas and visions grow until they take shape as sketches, many sketches. It is the sketching process where most of the story really takes shape; it only grows and matures from there. I usually sketch from twenty to forty small thumbnails for each finished illustration. These rough thumbnails usually focus on composition: where the main elements will be placed in comparison to the other elements. At this time, I am also thinking about values. Once an idea starts to intrigue me, I begin contemplating details such as costuming, lighting, and character. Another thing I am conscious of is the pacing of the story. Remember, first and foremost, I am telling a story. No matter how well the picture is painted—what its technique is or how pretty it might be—if it does not help convey the story first, it is a failure. So elements such as how a story begins and ends or how the conflict within a story is resolved are extremely important. Where is the climax of the story? What is the best way to convey that climactic spread: double-page, panels, one quiet spot? These very important details can draw viewers or readers into the story, making them a part of the action, or leave them feeling remote and not part of the narrative.

My sketches are usually about two inches in size, worked out quickly without much consideration for them as art. They are just a way to visualize an incomplete idea. Once I hit on an idea I like, I start refining my sketches, concentrating on values and lighting. These ideas are compiled into a dummy, a mock-up of the finished book. Here I am thinking about pacing and page placement, how one page should flow into another. It is only once I have completed the dummy that I will show my thought process to the publisher. After I receive approval, I use the dummy as a map to plan out the finished illustrations. I had researched and bought some very detailed models of the *Apollo 11* spacecraft and *Eagle* lander, along with an articulated twelve-inch figurine of Buzz Aldrin (b. 1930) in his space suit. At this point, I set up my models and lit them with a strong light to emulate the bright sun in poses to match my dummy drawings. I set up a mock moon surface with a black background and placed the *Eagle* lander on the surface. I had also set up my figurine as if he were jumping or bouncing across the lunar surface. Because the moon landing was the greatest technological feat of the twentieth century, I considered painting these images digitally, but in the end I chose to combine digital painting with traditional painting. I composed each painting using Photoshop, combining the different elements to complete the image. I printed the image out on a fine artist's paper in a monochromatic cobalt blue. I then mounted the prints on a Masonite panel and sealed it with an acrylic medium. Next, I painted the finishes in oils, using a colorful palette to better represent this heroic adventure of mankind's greatest scientific achievement to date.

Once the paintings were completed, they were vetted by Max Ary and Suzette Ellison, both members of The Science Museum of Oklahoma, and Milt J. Heflin and Mike Gentry of

NASA's Johnson Space Center. With their expertise, I corrected any technical discrepancies in the paintings. I have included a few examples of their comments with illustrations.

## The Program

After finishing my BFA from the University of Oklahoma and my apprenticeship with Don Ivan Puchatz (b. 1936), I spent the next twenty-four years as a freelance illustrator. I was able to earn a national reputation as an illustrator and, along the way, garnered some of the biggest corporations in the United States as my clients. I also taught from time to time on the college level and spoke at workshops and conventions. I was first introduced to Murray Tinkelman (b. 1933) by his reputation as an illustrator. Later, when my former mentor, Don Puchatz, could not make a planned trip to Syracuse where he was to speak, I was asked to fill his position. It was there that I first thought of continuing my education, but the limited aspect of Syracuse's MA program and my very busy work schedule prevented it. Years later, while teaching as a visiting artist at a state college in Oklahoma, the desire to further my studies and my skills as well as the desire for more inspiration again piqued my interest. I had mentioned to Murray that if the Syracuse program ever became an MFA program, I would be interested in joining the program. Apparently, the stars aligned perfectly with my desires because it was while I was teaching that Murray Tinkelman contacted me with his intent to start an MFA program at the University of Hartford. I signed up that very day, and I must say it has been the best professional choice I have made in the many years of my life as an artist. The incredible opportunities to learn from some of the greatest name in the illustration industry and garner the wealth of experience from the faculty have left me with a feeling of simple and humble gratitude. I am equally thankful for the camaraderie and friendly competition of my classmates and peers, who include some of the best-established illustrators in the field as well as some of the most talented up-and-coming illustrators today. I honestly consider this part of my education as the greatest in my career.

## Conclusion

As I come to the end of this piece, I return to the beginning. Goethe's quote perfectly reflects my inspiration for this book and so many of the other books I have illustrated in my career: to instill within young readers and students of every age that seemingly impossible goals are achievable, but only if you first believe and then take action in making that belief become a reality. I chose to concentrate, not on the history of man's dream to walk on the moon, but on the very act of achieving that dream, because it is the accomplishments of men and women that we build upon and remember. Dreams unrealized are like rainy days to a sun-starved world; they only create mold and decay and regrets. I hope to have

instilled that spirit of achievement and adventure in these paintings. The use of high-keyed color and dramatic vantage points echo the same spirit of adventure that infected other great explorers such as Magellan, the Polynesian sailors, or the mountain men who climbed over the next craggy range just to see what was on the other side.

It was with this same sense of adventure, curiosity, and a desire to better myself that I chose to study here at the University of Hartford Limited Residency MFA in Illustration Program. I wanted to reach beyond myself, and in the reaching, I discovered more of myself in addition to many new friends and new dreams and new goals.

I want to thank everyone who helped make this discovery possible, Murray and Carol Tinkelman, Doug Andersen, Dennis Nolan, Bill Thompson, Bunny Carter, Ted and Betsy Lewin, Jim Carson, Lisa Cyr, Jeff Seaver, Power Boothe, Tom Bradley, and my classmates and peers who taught me as much as anyone by their examples of kindness, hospitality, friendship, and talent.

“The miracle, or the power that elevates the few is to be found in their perseverance under the promptings of a brave, determined spirit.”

-Mark Twain

### About the Author

**Mike Wimmer** is a prolific illustrator of many children’s books, and his work takes on a broad audience. One of his recent works is *One Giant Leap*, a fortieth anniversary celebration of man’s dream to fly to the moon. *One Giant Leap* was selected for the 2010 NSTA/CBC Outstanding Science Trade Books List. For more information about Mike Wimmer, please refer to his Web site: <http://www.mikewimmer.com>.