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The Story of a Picture Book: A Process Analysis

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

"The Story of a Picture Book: A Process Analysis"

written by

Christy Evans

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

(Name) thesis director

(Name) second reader

(Name) third reader

honors program director

May 5, 2006

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Christy Evans

Honors Thesis

May 12, 2006

The Story of a Picture Book: A Process Analysis

> "The [picture] book is not a series of pictures just stuck in. Many people think it is, but I think it terribly important that it move visually. It is not enough to have one page of color and then another page of color—lots and lots of color. It's like lots and lots of sounds: it doesn't mean anything unless it's verdant…".
>
> -John Burningham, "Breaking New Territory"

Creating a successful picture book is neither an easy nor simple process. The illustrations must harmonize with the text, move the reader smoothly through a story, and be, as Burningham puts it, "verdant." To achieve this, an author/illustrator must be prepared for constant revision. In my story *The Fantastic Transformation of Frog* the main character experiences some bizarre changes, but reverts to his normal state in the end. Through my process of creating a picture book, my story also went through numerous changes, but, unlike the main character's changes, these changes were not reversed. They led to other changes.

Beginning my story turned out to be one of the most difficult parts of the process. I came up with several ideas but abandoned each one for different reasons. One of my ideas for a story concerned sharing. In this story, a man has a box with a light in it. He never lets anyone see this light, and as a result, the light begins to fade. At the end of the story, the man realizes that he needs to share his light with others for it to stay bright, so he takes it out of the box, letting it thrive on the attention of others.

Another idea I had was somewhat of a mixture between Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Judith Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. A little girl has a bad day and, in her imagination, escapes to an island where nobody can bother her. While on this island, the girl wants to do things that require the help of other people. Realizing that she needs other people, she returns home to be with her loved ones.

I abandoned the first idea because I found it too "preachy." I am not opposed to morals in children's stories, but I wanted to write a story that would teach a lesson *and* be fun to read, as if studying a forest by hiking through one rather than reading about it in a textbook. As for the second story idea, I'm not sure why I abandoned it. I suppose I didn't think that it was brilliant enough. (This lighting and extinguishing of ideas has made me realize why this process is called "brainstorming": ideas come in a whirl, slowly die down, and then disappear.) Eventually, I settled on a story because I realized that the initial idea does not have to be profound. In fact, most ideas, in their beginning stages, probably are not. Once conceived, an idea for a story must be revised, and then revised, and finally, revised, until it is worth publishing. With this in mind, I began working on a story entitled *The Fantastic Transformation of Frog*.

Deciding on a story, however, did not mean that the progression of my picture book from that point on was a straight path from one good idea to the next. Rather, the process has been like working my way through a maze, traveling down one hallway (or idea) only to run into a dead end, and backtracking to the main point before moving on to the next idea.

In developing my story, I first decided upon a moral, and the plot and characters grew from that. Yet this time I conveyed the story humorously so as not to be as blatantly didactic as my light-in-a-box idea. *The Fantastic Transformation of Frog* is about being content with one's physical appearance. This message is communicated through the silly alterations that Frog

experiences. Frog wishes to look like his friends, and one day he gets his wish and is given all of the various traits that he desires. The irony in the story is that Frog, thinking he looks great, actually looks ridiculous. He shows off to his friends, but, after seeing their negative reactions to his new look, he realizes that he did not look so bad to begin with and changes back to his former self.

That is the main plot of the story, but the details have been repeatedly modified. Initially, I cast as Frog's friends a swan, a goldfish, and a deer. Frog wanted a graceful neck like Swan's, shiny scales like Goldfish's, and handsome antlers like Deer's. I even began illustrations of these animals before deciding that they were too familiar and, therefore, dull. Having grown up in south Louisiana, I kept leaning towards swamp creatures for Frog's friends, but changing to such characters would alter the setting of the story as well, a change that I was reluctant to make for fear of narrowing my audience to a specific region, namely, the southern United States. After expressing this concern to Dr. Amy Sonheim, I realized that the swamp setting might actually *expand* my audience, making the story seem exotic and therefore more appealing to readers all over the country and perhaps, if I may be so ambitious, to readers all over the world. Setting the story in a swamp also has the potential to educate readers who may know nothing of the bayou. So I performed a fantastic transformation and changed the swan to an egret, the goldfish to a catfish, and the deer, of all things, to a crawdad. I even introduced a new character: Grand-père Nutria.

Here, Grand-père Nutria's introduction deserves some attention. At first, Frog's transformation was initiated by his personified reflection in the swamp water. In this version of the story, as Frog cries about his slimy appearance, his reflection begins to speak to him, asking him why he is so sad. Once Frog recovers from the shock of hearing his reflection speak, he

expresses his desire to look like his friends, and his reflection grants him his wish, transforming him into a fantastically-ridiculous creature. I did not like the idea of Frog's reflection being the catalyst for his transformation, because it seemed to imply that Frog's change came from within, as if he changed himself. I wanted Frog to be a completely helpless creature with no power over his circumstances, so I made Grand-père Nutria the "fairy godmother" figure. Grand-père Nutria inquires as to why Frog is so sad, and Grand-père Nutria performs the fantastic transformation, giving Frog a long neck and legs like Egret's, shiny scales and whiskers like Catfish's and claws like Crawdad's. Another reason I introduced Grand-père Nutria was purely for comedic purposes. Grand-père Nutria is a nutria rat, a disgusting creature resembling a beaver with a rat's tail. Not native to the U.S., these rats were brought from Argentina for their fur. Apparently, a few rats escaped and have been populating and eating away at the marshlands since the early 1900's. These rats are so destructive to the Gulf Coast that the Louisiana government pays ten dollars for every nutria rat killed. In *The Fantastic Transformation of Frog*, I have taken a pest and seemingly elevated him to good-guy status. In reality, the nutria rat is destroying the swamps of the United States, and in *The Fantastic Transformation of Frog*, a nutria rat destroys, albeit temporarily, the image of Frog.

Changing the characters to swamp creatures also changed the tone of my story. For consistency with the swamp setting, I decided that the characters should speak with a Cajun "flavor," using words like "dis" instead of "this" and "dat" instead of "that." When Grand-père Nutria (Grand-père being French for "Grandfather") first encounters Frog, he asks him why he's "makin' such a bahbin," a Cajun phrase for pouting (Nihart).

The turning point in the story occurs when Frog shows himself to his friends. When he does, he gets three different reactions: Egret is frightened of him, Catfish laughs at him, but

Crawdad is surprised that Frog was discontent with his looks in the first place. In fact, Crawdad says that he envies Frog for his powerful hind legs and his stretchy tongue for catching food. At this point, Frog finally realizes that he was better off as a normal frog.

My story is comparable to two picture books already published: Eric Carle's *The Mixed Up Chameleon* and Bernard Waber's *You Look Ridiculous Said the Rhinoceros to the Hippopotamus*, both stories of animals who are dissatisfied with their looks, take on body parts of their animal friends, and in the end realize that they were perfect as they were in the beginning. This may seem to be a strike against my story, negating its originality. I feel, however, that there are enough differences between these stories and mine to set mine apart. First, my characters are different. Carle's creatures are zoo animals, and Waber's are jungle animals, creatures that get a fair amount of attention in children's books. As far as I know, my characters are less common in children's literature. Second, my story involves a character with magical powers. The chameleon in Carle's story randomly gets his wish for change, and the hippo in Waber's story only experiences her transformation in a dream. In my story, Frog's changes are initiated by a nutria rat. Finally, my illustrations are different. Carle uses a method of cutting out different colors and textures, and Waber uses black ink and only two other colors (green and orange), while I use a wider range of colors and watercolor as my medium.

My story finally being developed and the most difficult step in my process of creating a picture book being complete, the next move was to plan the layout. This is an important step in which the author or illustrator decides the number of pages, text placement, and so on. I chose to make my book 32 pages long because this is the length most publishers prefer (Shulevitz 68). As for laying out the text and illustrations, I learned of two steps in this stage: a storyboard and a book dummy.

First an author may want to create a storyboard, a "bird's eye view" displaying all pages simultaneously (Shulevitz 69). A storyboard is made up of small frames, or thumbnails, representing each double-page spread on which the illustrations can be roughly sketched. Each frame may also have a few blank lines underneath for text. When using this type of layout, the author and/or illustrator must remember that the first four frames of the 32 pages must be reserved for the title and dedication pages, the end pages (the blank pages at the beginnings and ends of picture books, sometimes decorated in the same style as the story's illustrations) and the publishing information. These first few pages are called "front matter" (Shulevitz 68). The story does not actually begin until the fifth frame.

While a storyboard is often helpful, an author may skip ahead to the book dummy step. (This is what I did.) A book dummy is a model of the final product that can be flipped through and is often sent to editors for publishing consideration. There is no official method to create a book dummy, but in September of 2005, I attended a conference of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) where Patrick Collins, Creative Director for Henry Holt, taught attendees how to create a simple yet effective book dummy.

In his lecture, Collins stated that he receives many book dummies in a variety of formats ranging from primitive to nearly complete, but the near-complete book dummies can seem pretentious and are often a waste of the author's time. An intricately detailed book dummy leaves little room for revision, and as I have already stated, constant revision is key in producing a quality picture book.

Collins' method of creating a book dummy is sufficiently detailed for a publisher to understand the basic idea for a story yet rough enough for the author to easily make any necessary changes. Collins went through a step-by-step process with conference attendees to

create this dummy. First, he instructed us to fold in half eight sheets of tabloid-sized paper (11 by 17 inches), enough for a 32-page book. Then we cut the two corners on the folded edge of the paper so that, when unfolded, the paper had two notches in the centers of the top and bottom edges. Next, we placed a large rubber band around our paper so that it rested in the two notches and formed a sort of spine, and we secured the rubber band with masking tape. Collins then distributed to each of us the text of a story entitled *Here Comes the Night* by Anne Rockwell. On each page of our book dummies, we pasted phrases of this text in order and drew quick illustrations. This exercise helped us feel the rhythm of the words and see how they ought to lead the reader's eyes through the pages. Collins encouraged us to use quick, gestural strokes when sketching the illustrations, emphasizing the point that a book dummy is not the final product, and that the focus should be on the composition and placement of characters. Collins also pointed out that the story itself ought to grab the attention of the publisher. An engaging story does not need an elaborate presentation.

In a picture book, the pictures are of primary importance and the words secondary. There should be little to no repetition between the content of the words and the pictures. If an illustration shows a brown cow, it would be pointless for the text to say, "The cow was brown." This was my challenge: to create a picture book that shows more than it tells. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* is an excellent example of how pictures collaborate with instead of copy a narrative. The first two pages *tell* the reader "The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind" (1) "and another" (2), while the illustrations *show* the reader specifically what kind of mischief Max makes:

page 1

page 2

If Sendak had written, "Max wore his white wolf suit with four buttons, two pointed ears, and a bushy tail and built a tent out of a flower-print bedspread, disobeying his mother by standing on books and hammering nails into the wall," and "Then he further infuriated his mother by chasing the family's white terrier down the stairs and our the door with a fork held high above his head," then the illustrations would be redundant, and the story would be wordy, losing its charm.

Similarly, Ian Falconer in his Caldecott honor book, *Olivia*, relies more on images than words to tell the story. On page 12, Olivia's mother shows her how to make sand castles at the beach. On page 13, the text simply says, "She got pretty good," but the picture shows just how good Olivia got: she is putting the finishing touches on an almost life-size sand skyscraper. To add to the humor of the situation, Olivia's mother is reclining on a beach chair reading a book with her back to Olivia, completely oblivious of her daughter's monolithic construction:

page 12

page 13

I did my best to follow the patterns of Sendak and Falconer in the illustrations for my story. For instance, after Grand-père Nutria gives Frog his "makeover," the text says, "Frog was so excited about his new look, that he decided to show off to his friends." Instead of spending paragraphs describing how silly Frog looks, I show it through an illustration on the centerfold:

Before coming up with the final illustrations, I drew pages and pages of preliminary sketches. The manner in which I worked was similar to the way author-illustrator John Burningham used to brainstorm for his illustrations: "I break every rule in the book. I have things all over the floor, things that the dogs have walked on and I've walked on and are covered in whatever" (Territory).

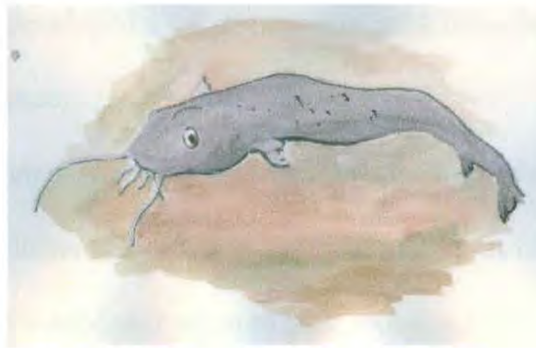
Minus the dogs, my process was very similar to this. I had sketches scattered all throughout Moses Provine 205. I scribbled on almost anything I could find, including the butcher paper covering the desks (the closest I've ever come to committing vandalism). I sketched and re-sketched my characters until I was satisfied with them. In his book *John Patrick Norman McHennessey: The Boy Who Was Always Late*, Burningham says he "probably did about three hundred little drawings of that schoolmaster figure with the mortar board. The final printed illustration looks as if it's just tossed off, but the preparation work is actually quite considerable" (Territory).

I also experimented with a few different mediums. One of my earliest illustrations of Catfish was a pencil drawing with careful shading, but this style seemed too realistic and therefore did not match the whimsical story's tone. Eventually I decided to use a medium that is a primary component of the swamp: water. The illustrations are done in watercolor to help the reader get a sense of the wet, soggy swamp, and I chose a subdued color palette to reflect the marshland's murkiness.

I encountered a few problems when creating the illustrations. Initially I modeled the characters after photographs:

As a result I was having a difficult time drawing the characters in different positions. For example, after creating the above illustration, I wanted to draw Frog crying, but I didn't have a photograph of a sobbing frog for my model. I couldn't create a crying frog without departing from the look of the first illustration. Simply put, I was having a hard time making the illustrations consistent.

Aside from being inconsistent, the illustrations were also too static. I wanted my characters to be more exciting, to move and twist and express, so I abandoned these illustrations and turned a different direction. For my final illustrations, I didn't create the characters by looking at photographs but used my imagination to put them in more dynamic positions, thus creating more cartoon-like, "Christy-styled" illustrations. So, for example, Catfish went from this:



to this:

Even in the midst of working on the idea and illustrations for a story, an author may begin thinking about publishing. I have never heard anyone say that it is easy to be published. It is a long and often frustrating process in which an aspiring author will send a manuscript to an editor, wait for an extended period to receive a response, and most likely face rejection. To cope with this process, a writer must keep in mind that very few manuscripts are accepted on the first go-round.

At the SCBWI conference, I picked up an information pamphlet on composing and sending manuscripts, and I also obtained several sheets of submission guidelines from different publishers, including Candlewick Press and Alfred A. Knopf and Crown Books for Young

Readers. From these sources I developed a list of common guidelines that help improve a manuscript's chances of acceptance.

1) Before sending a manuscript or query letter to an editor, a hopeful author ought to know what the publisher is looking for. Researching past titles is a great way to see what sorts of books a publisher tends to pick. Also, a resource such as *Writer's Handbook* is extremely helpful. This publication that tells what types of books an editor is pursuing (genre, age group, length, etc.), how to contact that editor and whether or not he or she accepts unsolicited manuscripts.
2) Do not call an editor to check on the status of a submission. It takes editors three to four months to respond to a submission (to accept, reject, or suggest revisions). However, to encourage notification from an editor, an inquiring author may include a self-addressed stamped envelope or postcard with a manuscript.
3) Do not send an editor more than one submission. Publishers are swamped with manuscripts and do not have time to spend on only one person's submissions.
4) Do not send the same manuscript to more than one editor at a time. This increases the risk of multiple publication and exposes the author to copyright lawsuits. After two months without response from an editor, it is okay to send a polite letter of inquiry on the status of a manuscript, and, if there is no response at the end of three months, sending a letter to withdraw a manuscript from consideration may be a good idea. Doing so will allow an author to send his or her manuscript somewhere else.

According to Suzanne Nelson, Senior Editor for Scholastic Book Club Division, the four P's of publishing are Persistence, Patience, Publishing knowledge (knowing what's on the market), and Passion.

One way to get a book published is to send a query letter that essentially "sells" a story to an editor. I have sent one query letter to Little Mai Press in Lake Hiawatha, NJ and am still patiently waiting for a response. A query letter can be divided into five parts: the hook, the pitch, the body, the credentials, and the close (Allen 31).

The hook should grab an editor's attention, demonstrate effective writing skills and indicate an understanding of the intended market. Hooks should never fawn, ask for sympathy, or boast, else the editor will know the inquirer is an amateur. My hook to Little Mai Press went as follows:

> *Where can you find trees that have knees and bugs that build mud towers? In the swamp, of course! The swamp is a slimy, murky place filled with cypress knees and crawfish, but it is still strangely beautiful. I would like to offer you a 32-page picture book called* The Fantastic Transformation of Frog *that takes place in such a swamp.*

The pitch usually appears in the second paragraph and explains exactly what the writer has to offer, including a working title of the story, the estimated length, and a brief summary. However, when I wrote my first pitch, I felt like I basically repeated myself in the body. To fix this, I simply divided my pitch between the hook and the body.

The body should be several paragraphs and really start to sell the story. It should include the target-age group, a synopsis of the story, and why the author believes the story would reach his or her intended audience. To help the editors at Little Mai Press grasp the tone of my story, I included excerpts of dialogue.

It is also helpful for an author to include his credentials in a query letter. These credentials should include any professional or teaching experience, academic degrees or training, etc. The closing paragraph should thank the editor for consideration and "offer one last 'nudge' to encourage the editor to respond" (Allen 35).

I made still more revisions to my story even after sending a query letter. The process itself of submitting manuscripts and query letters can also spark changes in a story. An editor can sometimes like an idea presented in a query letter or manuscript, but he may suggest revisions before accepting the submission.

The irony of the title *The Fantastic Transformation of Frog* is that Frog's outward transformation was not fantastic, at least not in a positive sense. His inward transformation, his realization that he should be content with himself, was the truly fantastic transformation. When creating a picture book, the author/illustrator must be prepared for his story to undergo fantastic transformations as well. These transformations are the driving force behind a picture book's progress. Creating a picture book is like traveling through a maze. It's like a storm. It's a fluid process that never seems to stop moving and flowing until it is frozen by publishing. In Frog's case, change is bad. In the creation of a picture book, change is good.

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Book Dummy

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The Fantastic Transformation of Frog

by Christy Evans

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for Dad and Mom

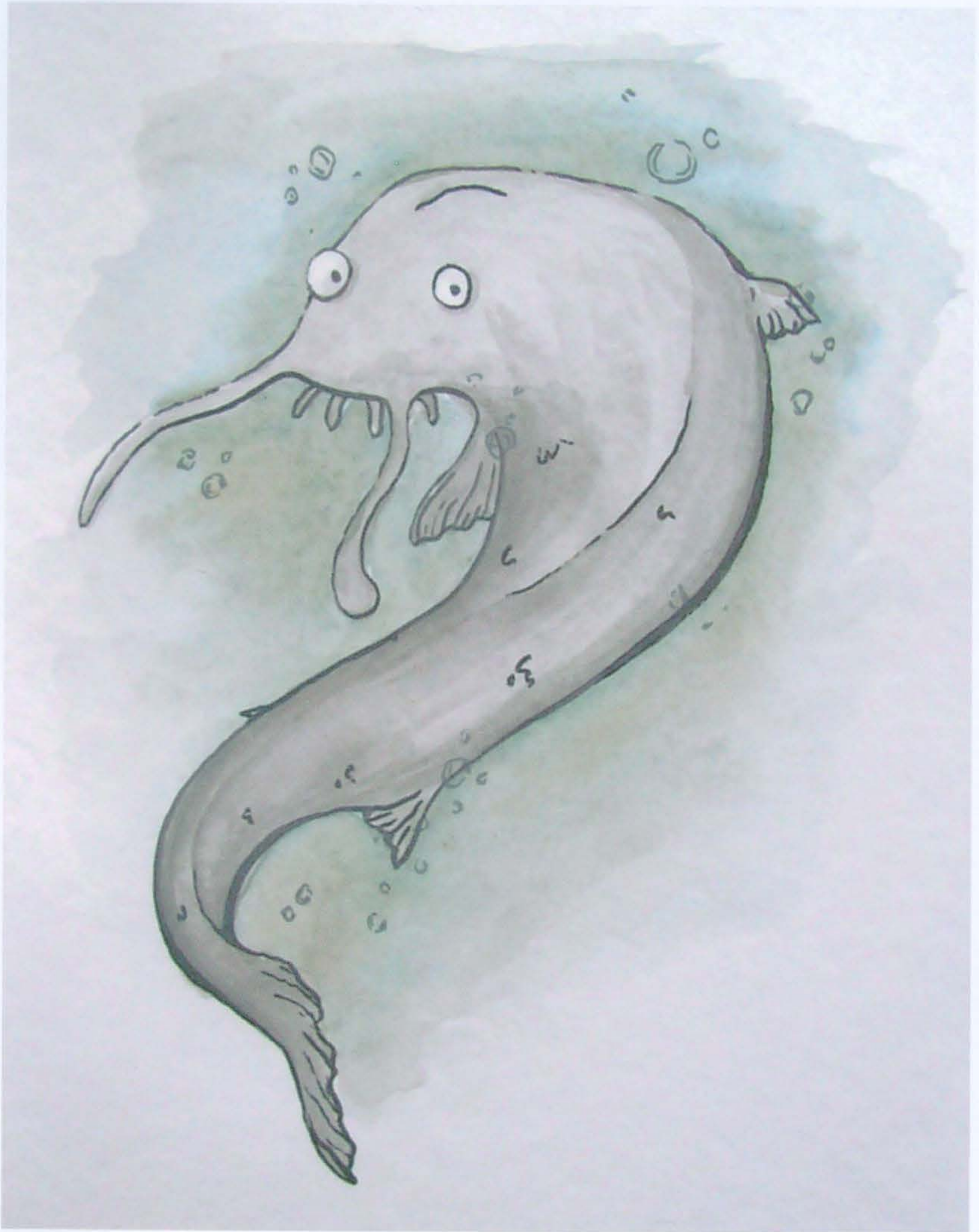
publishing info

This is Frog.

Frog was once the saddest creature in the bayou because he thought he was the ugliest creature in the bayou.

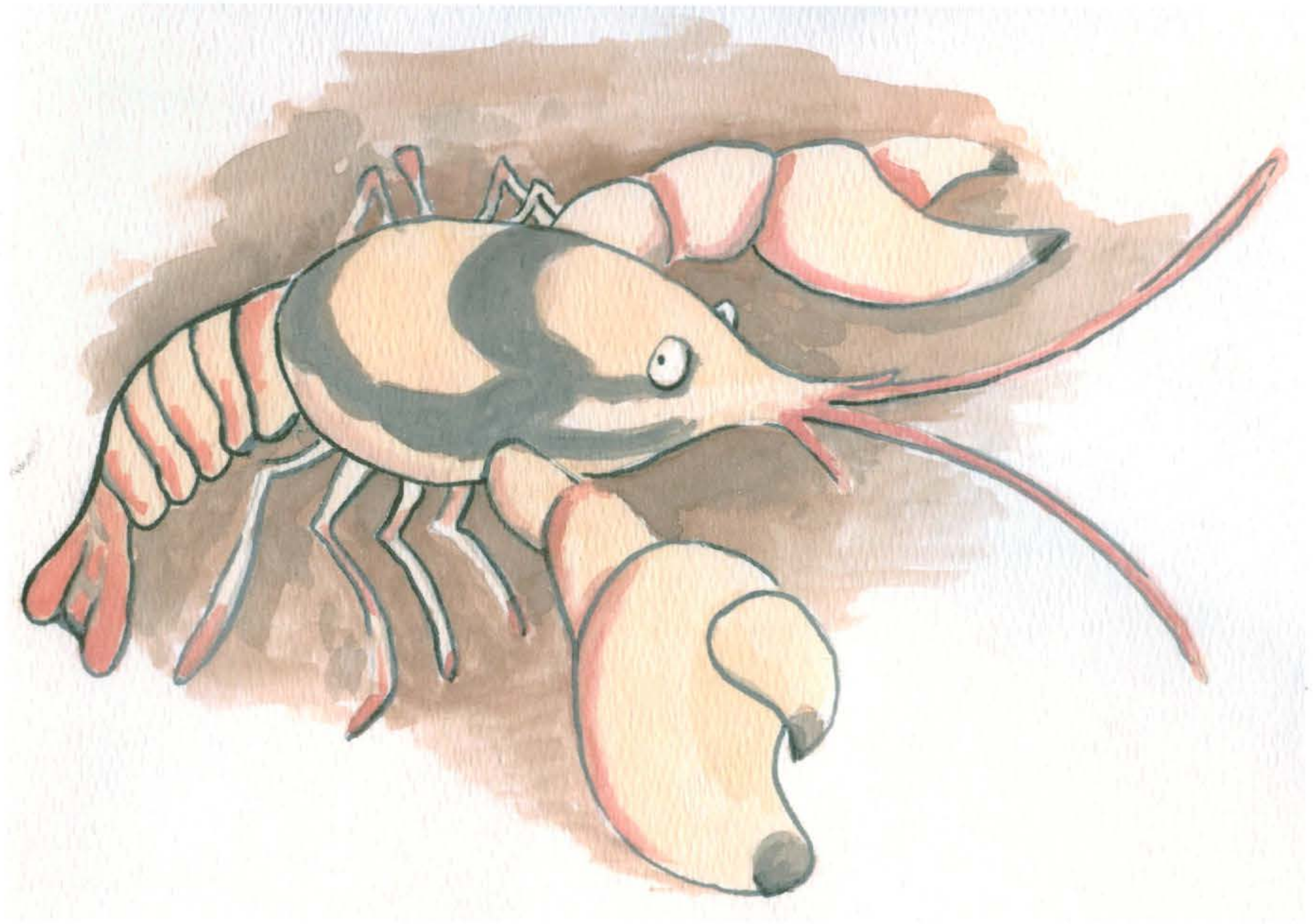
One day Grand-Pere Nutria shouted, “Hey! Frog!
Why you makin’ such a bahbin?”

Frog replied, “I am da ugliest creature in da bah-yoo. I wish I had shiny scales an’ whiskers like Catfish...



“...a pretty neck an’ legs like Egret...”

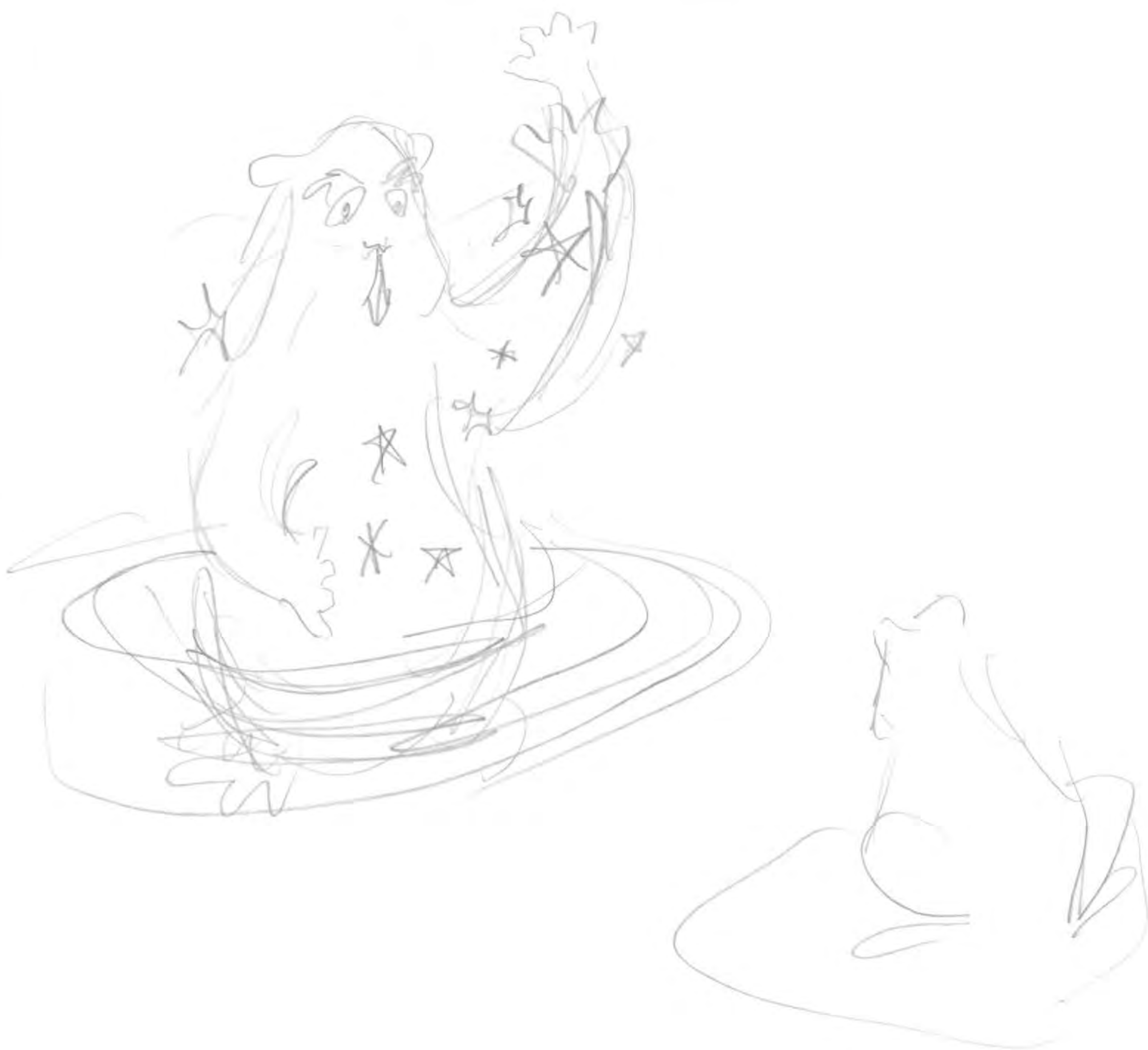
“...an’ claws like Crawdad...”



"... If I had dose tings, den I would be happy."

"Well, gah-lee!" said Grand-pere Nutria, "Is dat all? I knows a little bit o' magic, an' I can give you all da tings you want."

He chanted a few words, and when Frog looked at his reflection again, he saw a different creature.



Frog went to show off to his friends.

First Frog showed Catfish.

"Well," thought Frog, "dat mashwarhon don't have good taste anyway."

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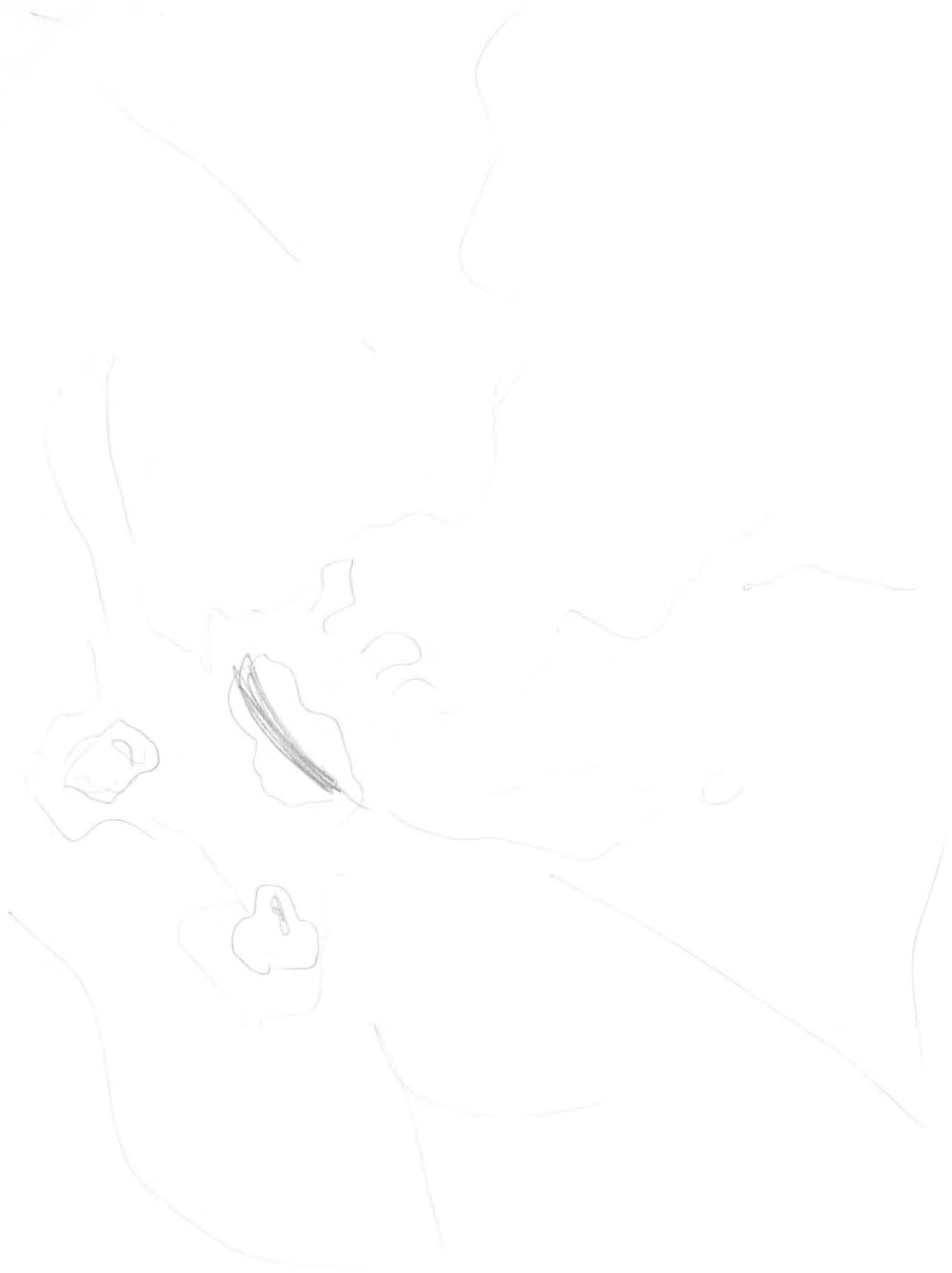
Then Frog found Egret.

“That bird always was a ‘fraidy cat,” Frog reasoned.

Then Frog found Crawdad.

“Frog!” said Crawdad, “Is dat you in dar? Whatchoo do to yo’self? What happened to yo’ strong legs an’ feet? I would’ve trade my clumsy claws fo’ yo’ legs any day.”

Frog was shocked. He never dreamed that someone else might want to be like *him*.



"Coo! I do look like a fool!"

"Please!" said Frog, "Change be back!"

"What for?" asked Grand-père Nutria.

"I look like a coo-yon!"

Grand-père Nutria chuckled, “I’m glad you finally see.”

He chanted some words, and Frog was himself again.

The End