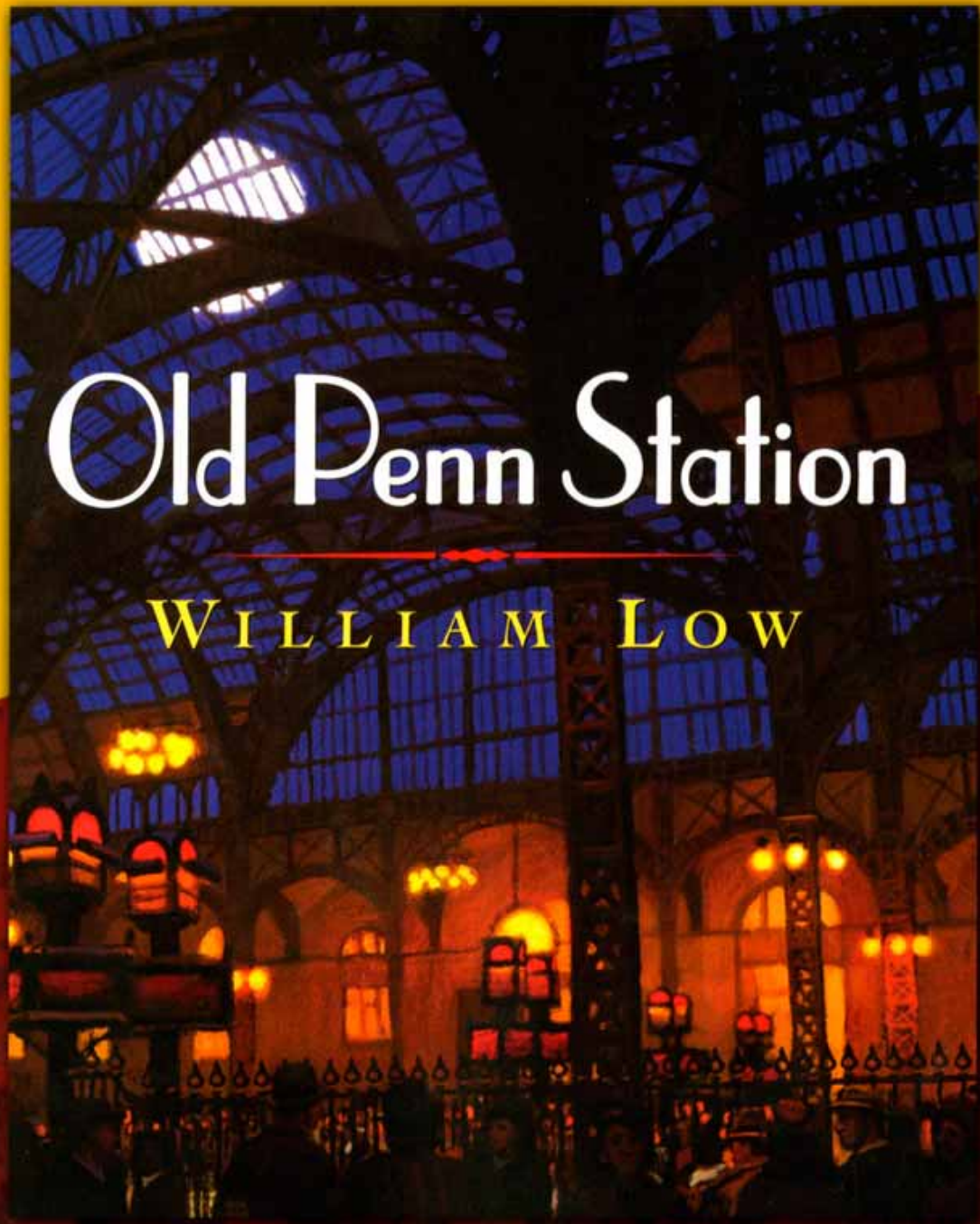


A GUIDE TO THE ART OF
OLD PENN STATION
BY WILLIAM LOW



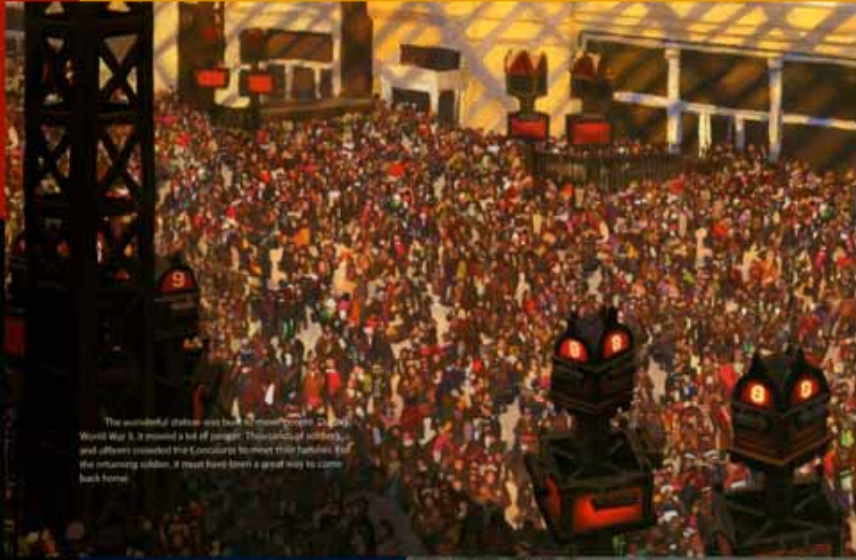
Old Penn Station

WILLIAM LOW

ABOUT THE BOOK

WILLIAM LOW BRILLIANTLY REVEALS the theater of art in his dramatic illustrations of old Pennsylvania Station. He uses a combination of deeply textured oil and computer-generated paintings in dark tones to establish the time and place of the setting, and to symbolize the dim fate of this once “grand palace.” Small rays of light reveal energy in some scenes and cast symbolic shadows in others. There are occasional pages of single figures surrounded by white space that give the viewer a break, a chance to prepare for the next act in this visual drama. The characters are builders, travelers, and demolition crews who represent the beginning and the ending

of an era. The mood shifts from anticipation and hope, signified by the building of the tunnel under the Hudson River, to that of despair as the majestic carved statues of the maidens are brought down by wrecking balls and jackhammers. Even the red hook of the crane as it lifts an eagle from its concrete nest implies sadness. Every image and textual fact is authenticated by careful research, revealing Low’s commitment to “truth” and a heartfelt respect of his audience. The message of this tragic story is a powerful warning—old buildings are not simply monuments of the past, but gifts to their communities, regardless of how large or small.

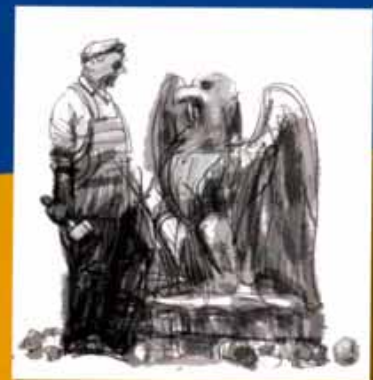


The successful station was built in 1903. In 1963, World War II, it missed a lot of things. Thousands of soldiers and officers crowded the Concourse to meet their families. For the returning soldier, it must have been a great way to come back home.



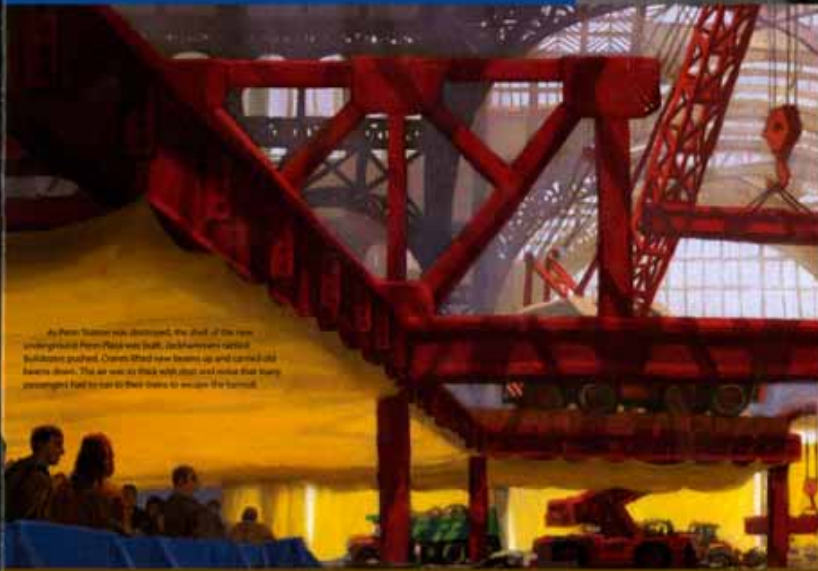


But the ailing Pennsylvania Railroad Company was determined to have their trains cross the Hudson River into Manhattan, and they wanted to do it with style. So they hired the architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White to design a "palace" on West 23rd Street for the new electric trains, which were fast replacing the older steam-driven locomotives.



THE IDEA FOR A CHILDREN'S BOOK about old Pennsylvania Station developed from Low's thesis project at Syracuse University, which was a series of ten oil paintings of old Penn. Since he never saw the station, his work began with extensive research. He spent hours in many different libraries and ultimately uncovered a few photographs of the station, but only two were in color. He made rough drawings from the photographs, and used what he read to develop his story, and to create mental images of everything about the architecture of the station and the services rendered within. As he worked on the book, Low had to make changes to the storyline because of technical problems with combining art with words. While he had flexibility in his original paintings, he now had to make accommodations to fit the text onto the page. He scanned his original ten

paintings into the computer, and created additional paintings by using a cordless pen and a pressure-sensitive tablet to build up blotches of color on top of one another to form texture. The entire process involved several layers of complexity, creating an art form that has a very organic look. He says, "I wasn't going to use the computer unless I could figure out how to make a mark that looked like paint. I wanted the brushstrokes to have dimensionality." Low is known for his work with darks and lights, and his subject matter dictated the dark color pallet for the project. He made a conscious decision to syncopate the pace of the story by using white space to brighten the book and make it more interesting to read. Low has described his work on old Penn as magical. He says, "I imagined the descent of light, the architecture, and the shifting of the sun to cast shadows. It was a real challenge to capture this."



PRE-READING

Help students connect to the grandeur of old Pennsylvania Station by visiting this Web site: www.nyc-architecture.com/SPEC/GAL-PENN.htm Point out the light streaming into the main waiting area of the station, the activity of the travelers, and the details of the architecture. Ask them to discuss why this station might have been called a “palace.”

Many students may have never seen a train station. Ask them to draw a picture of what they imagine a train station to look like. Then have them use the other side of the drawing paper and create an inside view of their train station. Allow students to share their work.

DISCUSSION

- 1 What kind of research must an author and illustrator do before they begin their work? Why was it important for William Low to see actual photographs of old Pennsylvania Station? Compare and contrast the details of the train station in Low’s illustrations to the details in the old photographs viewed in the first pre-reading activity.
- 2 Discuss the many decisions an illustrator must make about art technique, color, placement of text, double-page spreads, etc. Take a close look at the illustrations. How does Low’s color pallet help define the time and place of the book? Note Low’s use of white space. Why are the illustrations of the barber, the stone carver, and the removal of the eagle especially effective because of the white space?
- 3 What are the men doing in the first double-page spread of the book? What are they doing in the final double-page spread? How do these illustrations represent a beginning and an ending of an era? Note the hats and the work clothes the men are wearing and the tools they are using. How does this illustrate the life span of Penn Station?
- 4 “There is a light at the end of the tunnel” is a common phrase that means hope. Discuss how the tunnel under the Hudson River was especially hopeful for the Pennsylvania Railroad and its passengers. Explain how William Low illustrates this hope in the picture of the men working on the tunnel.
- 5 William Low says that sitting in the grand waiting room at old Penn was a magical experience for many travelers. Discuss the meaning of the word “magical.” Explain what was so special and enchanting about that great room. How did the light shining from above add to the magic of the room?
- 6 Discuss how train stations throughout the United States brought joy and sorrow to families. How was this especially true during World War II? Talk about how transportation changed after the war. How did these changes affect old Penn Station?
- 7 There are many symbolic nuances in the illustrations of the book. Explain the meaning of the word “symbol.” Discuss the symbolism of the close-up view of the train in the beginning of the book, and the far-off view of the train at the end of the book. What is symbolic about the statues that were dumped in the New Jersey Meadowlands? There is only the light of the moon in this illustration. What does this symbolize?
- 8 Why didn’t the city leaders try to save old Penn Station? Many people became angry after the station was destroyed. Discuss what the people of New York City did to keep this from happening to other historic buildings. How did their efforts save Grand Central Station?

ACTIVITIES

1 Display a map of the United States that includes all of the major cities. Remind students that in 1890, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company served all the major cities from Boston to Chicago. Ask them to use the map and make a list of the large cities that this railroad company served. Through how many states might a passenger travel if they boarded the train at Pennsylvania Station in New York, and got off the train in Chicago? Students may want to consider several different routes.

2 Allow students to make a virtual visit to the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania (www.rrmuseumpa.org). Ask them to explore the Railroad Occupations page, and read about the following jobs: conductor, engineer, fireman, tower operator, Pullman porter, baggage handlers, car inspector, and stationmaster. Which of these jobs might a woman do today? Instruct each student to select the occupation they would most enjoy. Write a story titled "My Work as a _____."

3 All cities and towns have old and grand buildings. Perhaps it's a train station, post office, public library, school, courthouse, or even a private residence. Invite someone in the community to talk to students about these buildings. Has the community made a special effort to preserve these buildings? Why is it important to protect historical places? Older students may enjoy forming their own Historical Preservation Committee. Have each student research an old building in their community, and prepare a "Save the Building" speech that they might deliver to community politicians.

4 William Low uses layers of paint to create texture in his illustrations. Ask an art teacher to show students other techniques used to form texture. Instruct students to illustrate an old building in their community, using one or more methods to create texture.

5 Write and illustrate a postcard that a mother might send her child from old Penn Station.

KAREN EATLER PIPPER



WILLIAM LOW was born and raised in New York City. He is a lover of trains and New York architecture. Mr. Low is the author and illustrator of *Chinatown* and a four-time Silver Medal winner at the Society of Illustrators. Currently, he teaches at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

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