



HE DREW HIS DESTINY

Normand Chartier

By Christina Levere



When Normand Chartier, 73, talks about the moment that changed the course of his life, he pauses a moment, which isn't that surprising — what is surprising is that he isn't wistful for what might have been, he's wistful for what might *not* have been: a fulfilling and fruitful career in art that has spanned decades and earned him fame in the form of accolades, awards and dedicated museum space.

Chartier was one of 12 children. Seventh in line (or, the sixth boy in a line of nine), he grew up watching Disney movies, which he "loved to death." At age five, he felt inspired to draw what he saw; by age eight he could draw all of the characters. He kept on drawing through high school, oftentimes crafting caricatures of his teachers and classmates during class.

Alongside his drawing, Chartier was busy playing sports — and doing so well. So well that he had 11 athletic letters in high school and was Killingly High School's first all-state football player. When it came time for college, he had quite a

From 1978 to 2000, Chartier illustrated 18 Sesame Street books. Below, "Madonna and Child."



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deaf children," Chartier said. The experience helped him hone his skills: "I had to tell a lot of story with art."

He became friends with artist Joe Mathieu, who was enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design for children's illustration. "Joe said, 'Your stuff is really good! You should get a job doing children's books.' So we went to New York City, to different publishers, and Joe got a job as Sesame Street and he said, 'You should try to as well!' and so I did, and that started 25 years working with Sesame Street."

From 1978 to 2000, Chartier illustrated 18 Sesame Street books. During that time, his work drew praise from all fronts; his clients read like a list from "Who's Who in Publishing": Random House, Simon & Schuster, MacMillan New York & London, Penguin, Houghton Mifflin, and more. He was an illustrator for Campbell Soup, J. C Penney, Fisher-Price and Hasbro. He contributed to children's periodicals such as "Crick-et," "Lady Bug," "Spider" and "Sesame Street Magazine" and created other promotional illustrations for Children's Television Workshop and Muppets Inc. He was awarded the Gold Medallion for the best preschool children's picture book of the year from the Christian Publishers Association in 1996.

Three years later, he was one of 43 of America's most distinguished contemporary children's book illustrators chosen to contribute to TIKVAH (SeaStar Books). In 2000 he was selected by the Hartford Courant/Mark Twain Committee as a Distinguished Connecticut Author.

To escape the bustle, Chartier regularly took "paint-cations" to Maine (he'd traveled to Maine with his family — 11 siblings! — for years). In the quiet of the landscape, he would start painting at 7 a.m., break for lunch and paint the rest of the day. Inspired by the natural beauty,

few offers. The University of Connecticut was one of them.

"They sent two assistant coaches to our house, to meet with me and my family," Chartier said. As he tells it, the Chartiers were a good Catholic family with "crosses on the walls and pictures of the saints everywhere." Noting the backdrop, the coaches called his mother a few weeks later and assured her that if her son enrolled at UConn, in addition to nightly homework and playing football, they would make sure Chartier made it to Mass every Sunday.

"That was all my mother needed to hear," Chartier said.

Things, however, were rocky at UConn. Freshman year while waiting outside a dorm for a friend, Chartier lost

his footing and fell into a window well. He needed surgery. There were more scrapes and falls on the field. Then, junior year, came the moment that changed everything. He and a player from the opposing team went head-on. The injuries were serious enough that his football career was over.

"I was so discouraged," he said. "I would never go pro."

Chartier dropped out of school that year and decided to pursue his other love: art.

His first job was in commercial art for a New Haven-based company; he then moved to Central Village to work for The Communicators, which produced commercial films for businesses.

"They got a contract to make films for



Awards, Accolades and Showings

Chartier is winner of 32 national and international awards and honors. He has been included three times in the "Original Art" exhibition of the New York Society of Illustrators and was listed in *The Very Best of Children's Book Illustration* by North Light Books. Two of his fine art watercolor paintings and 10 varied children's illustrations were acquired by the New Britain Museum of American Art in 2014. One year later, he was inducted into the Slater Memorial Museum's permanent collection with three of his children's illustrations and three of his fine art watercolor paintings. This fall, his work was shown at ARTicles Gallery in Danielson, Connecticut.

Above: "Maturing Pumpkin" and "Light Catcher"

especially the coastline, "I could paint two paintings a day," he said.

This love of nature — coupled with his way with watercolors, naturally — is how the 96-page volume entitled "My Maine, the Coastal Watercolors of Normand Chartier" came to be.

"After the job at Sesame Street ended, I started sending out my work for commission. I pitched a story and art [to Down East Books] and they said they wanted to publish a book of my paintings. It dropped into my lap."

The book was published in 2005 by Down East Books of Camden, Maine; a compendium of 90 of his works, it spans two decades of watercolors.

"It wasn't about the money. It was about an appreciation of Maine and nature," he said.

For that he thanks his parents and their annual family trips. And, when he thinks about it a little more, he thinks he should thank them for the natural artistic talent as well.

His mother was a notable violinist; his father, a doctor.

"He took up photography as a hobby and had his own dark room at home," Chartier said. "He would put together Christmas cards with his photographs and include a little sketch."

Chartier recalled the time he found his father's sketches of cadavers in the attic.

"They were gorgeous. My parents — it's where my juices came from."

The fortuitous course of Chartier's career — the innate talent and self-taught skill, the purposeful connections, the ease of employment and publication — makes you wonder if it was somehow meant to be.

It's something Chartier thinks about too.

"I've been doing art for 30 years," he said. "It hit me one day that if I had become a professional football player, they are has-beens in five to seven years. The injury. All this. This was a blessing in disguise."