

## *My Childhood In Pop-Ups*

### Artist Statement

Nicole Soley, printmaker, book artist

*My Childhood In Pop-Ups* is a series of four screen printed pop-up books exploring my personal experience growing up as a child of divorced parents. I found the process of illustrating pop-up paper narratives to explore my childhood memories therapeutic and symbolic. The manipulation of the pop up, whether it is turning the page to experience a portrait or location popping up to demand your attention, or pulling on a tab to create movement, lent itself well to the questions central to my illustrations surrounding my upbringing: did I have control or agency as a child experiencing divorce? If so, how much or how little? Illustrated imagery explores these central questions for a child navigating a similar experience. Each book explores a different repeating narrative I experienced as a child navigating a separated-parent upbringing. Through creating and sharing the book series, I hope to send comfort and care to my childhood self, and I hope that audiences who have experienced something similar may in viewing the books do the same.

The first book in the series, *The Chaska McDonald's*, was the first book created for the series, logically, as it centers around the halfway point where my parents would meet to exchange kids for the weekend.. This repetitive experience of changing cars and parents and residences for the weekend made way into my core memories of being a child. I can remember vividly the experience of pulling into the parking lot, waiting for the other parent to arrive, switching vehicles, and sometimes ordering a kids meal or a McChicken. Napkins, french fries, and ketchup in a paper cup were paramount memories in trading parents for the weekend. Not a lot of agency or control existed for myself or my siblings in these moments, aside from how much ketchup we put on our fries.

The second book in the series, *The Long Drive*, is an extension from *The Chaska McDonald's*, providing a visual narrative of driving from the Chaska McDonald's to my dad's

house at the time in Olivia, Minnesota. Memories of corn fields out the window and numerous activities meant to occupy myself in the car organize themselves within the pages. I felt a small presence of agency and choice as I switched between reading, listening to music, and drawing in the backseat as we rode to Dad's.

The third book in the series, *Walks by the Kinni* centers around the memories of my dad taking us for walks by the Kinnickinnic River in our hometown of River Falls, Wisconsin. Either we would do this when my dad still lived in River Falls or when he would come and stay in River Falls and spend time with us for the weekend. We would enjoy time spent outside together, walking, and playing in the river. These are some of the happiest memories I have in my experience of having separated parents. I attribute this to the potential for authentic connection when humans spend time outdoors. That or the freezie pops. Despite these memories being some of the happiest or colorful of my childhood, I do recall feelings of sadness, melancholy, or frustration from myself or my siblings as we experienced the tumult and insecurity of our situation, despite having mostly consistent living situations and time spent with both parents involved to some extent anyway.

The final book in the series entitled *One Time, At Mom's* centers around time spent at my Mom's house, the house that my mom and dad built together after they got married. This was where we spent most of our time as children. The book centers around memories playing inside and outside at mom's. For me, this book is the most personal, as it features images of me, referenced from photographs taken of me by my mom. The images are evocative of many memories that are central to my experience of being at my mom's house. For me, this book is the most revealing of how I felt when I was in and out of control of my own childhood. The imagery comes full circle when I pull the tab to move a kite, revealing my younger self pointing with delight toward the former; as an adult, I contemplate how any moment I was able to experience joy through wonder and play was an important and significant moment for my

childhood self. These moments, for me, are important to represent visually in the project as I feel they illuminate the memory of joy during a less than perfect childhood.

I hope that my personal story, as represented in a handmade book arts format, will implicate consideration and reflection among readers who resonate with childhood experiences of divorce. Perhaps the reader has a “Chaska McDonald’s” experience, an activity they enjoyed during “The Long Drive,” a local walk at a park with a visiting parent, or particular associations with one parent’s residence over the other. Through manipulation of the pop-ups in the series, perhaps the viewer regains control and agency over their own memories of a less than ideal upbringing, as I know I have through their creation.