A professional illustrator, graphic artist, and art teacher, Brian Bowes M’16 is also a student enrolled in the Low-Residency MFA in Illustration program offered by the University’s Hartford Art School. He arrived on the University of Hartford campus this past July from his home in Santa Cruz, Calif., to begin his second of three two-week residencies. With him he carried the magical results of a yearlong book project.

When Brian was an undergraduate art major about 10 years ago, one of his drawing teachers asked him what he wanted his work to achieve. Perhaps with a bit of bravado, Brian said that he wanted his work “to last for 100 years.” As it turns out, he is about to get his wish.

“The low-residency MFA at the Hartford Art School seems just perfect to me. I have a studio in a complex with 50 other artists, but I rarely come across another illustrator,” says Brian. “The two weeks of the residency were amazing. I found the faculty and other people in the class super supportive. Not only was I getting feedback from my peers but also from people I look up to, like [HAS Professor of Illustration] Dennis Nolan and [MFA program Director] Murray Tinkelman.”

The book that Brian brought with him, The Story of the Fisherman—one of the many stories in the Arabian Nights—is a limited-edition, letterpress book that is hand bound, hand colored, and illustrated by Brian. While he drew the black line illustrations, Peggy Gotthold of Foolscap Press did the accordion binding, and Larry Van Velzer, also of Foolscap Press, did the printing. The text is a translation from the Arabic by Edward William Lane. The larger image spreads are all hand colored by Gotthold with an age-old technique called pochoir (French for “stencil”), and Brian hand-paints each title page and smaller details throughout the book. Gotthold also hand-makes each box that the books come in.

In all editions of the Arabian Nights, there is a common frame story that involves the ruler of the Persian Empire, King Shahrayar, and Shahrazad, daughter to the king’s own vizier. The core scene is the king’s bedchamber. The king has sworn to work his way through all the virgins of his kingdom, putting each to death the following morning because his former queen (and therefore all women, in his view) was without virtue.

Although Shadrazad is the new bride for the night, destined to die at sunrise after spending just a single night in the king’s bed, she has a plan. Each night, she tells the king a story that ends with a cliffhanger, and that is what keeps her alive. The king has to wait until the next night to hear the end of the tale.

“The overall design, the images, the way that the book is presented all grew naturally from the nesting nature of the Arabian Nights tales,” says Brian.

The partnership came about when Gotthold and Van Velzer attended an Artists’ Open Studios event in Santa Cruz and happened to wander into Brian’s studio. Their conversation led to a lunch and eventually to the idea of doing a book together, which then became The Story of the Fisherman.

The Story of the Fisherman has beautiful illustrations printed in a dark-blue ink and colored using a cool palette of colors. Nested within the fisherman’s story are many other tales. These stories are each printed and colored in their own palettes of brown or green. This subtle design choice indicates the level of the nested story and helps guide the reader.

“Over the course of the past year, I have been doggedly working on a project that is one of the most beautiful projects that I have ever had the honor of being a part of,” says Brian. “This book has already found a home in many university libraries across the United States as well as abroad. A copy is now in the Special Collections at Stanford University Library, and I am very proud to say that a copy is going to the U.S. Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division.”

And that copy of The Story of the Fisherman should be around for at least 100 years.
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—Brian Bowes MFA’16