Black Belts and Gold Awards

BY MARGARET WITHEY

The book is a children’s picture book called *Karate Hour*. The illustrator is Bill Thomson, assistant professor at the Hartford Art School. The awards are almost too many to name. They include the 2005 Gold Award from United Parenting Publications, the 2005 International Reading Association Children’s Notable Book Award, and a 2004 Editor’s Choice Award from the American Library Association. The book was also included in an exhibition, *Original Art, the Best in Children’s Book Illustration* at the Society of Illustrators in New York.

The illustrations in *Karate Hour*, which has rhyming text by Carol Nevius, portray the intense action and expressions that take place in a typical karate class. Boys and girls kick and spar their way against a background of sepia tones, grays, and creams. The only bright accents are the various colored belts that show the skill levels of students. In each double page spread, the reader is brought up close to a single concentrated moment.

Thomson underscores the dramatic effect of the drawings through contrast of light and dark, use of deep shadows, and a “modeling” style that captures everything from the roundness of flesh on a child’s leg to the heavy drapery of a gi, the karate robe. The actions portrayed extend beyond the frame of the pages.

Thomson has been an illustrator for almost 20 years, but had not previously worked on a children’s book. “My father, who died unexpectedly right before I started working on *Karate Hour*, had often encouraged me to try my hand at illustrating a book for children. It was especially significant for me to be able to dedicate the book to his memory.”
St. Francis of Assisi for Young Readers

BY MARGARET WITHEY

Dennis Nolan, assistant professor of illustration at the Hartford Art School, already had Assisi, Italy, on his mind. He was preparing to teach a painting workshop there when he was selected by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to do the illustrations for a children’s book Kennedy was writing about St. Francis of Assisi. “Some things are meant to be,” says Nolan.

Kennedy was familiar with Nolan’s award-winning illustrations from his other volumes for children including a retelling of *The Sword in the Stone*. The result of Kennedy’s and Nolan’s collaboration is *Saint Francis of Assisi: A Life of Joy*, which tells the story of the gentle saint who rejected worldly prestige and wealth to live in poverty and serve the poor. Facing each page of text by Kennedy, who is an environmental activist and a wildlife rehabilitator, is a full page illustration by Nolan. The illustrations are in vibrant color, depicting scenes from the life of St. Francis as well as the insects, flowers, birds, and animals he cherished.

“Because I was going to Assisi anyway, I was able to prepare to do the illustrations by walking the streets where St. Francis lived and absorbing the sights that have changed little over the centuries,” says Nolan. “I could see the colors and light of the area and talk to people who may have descended from the people of St. Francis’s day.”