CREATING A FANTASY PHOTO COMPOSITE

A CASE STUDY BY DEBORAH OWEN

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THE GOAL

Powerful visuals can be hugely impactful on young minds. When those visuals are used to communicate an important message, it can inspire people to act, to learn, to create, and to grow. It was messages like those that inspired me to develop a love of reading at a young age, so I was determined to create a design that would communicate a message about the importance of reading in the lives of young children.

I determined the best way to accomplish this was by creating a photo composite that could be used as a poster. This poster could be displayed in schools, libraries, or bookstores to inspire children to read more stories.

THE IDEATION

SKETCHING

I had a lot of broad ideas at first. The only concrete decision I made was that I wanted a child interacting with a large stack of books in some sort of fantasy scape. I explored a lot of ideas through sketching and word-mapping. I initially started with the concept of a desolate wasteland and a child digging through a stack of books, with artifacts from old stories scattered around.

PLANNING

As I revisited and more clearly defined my target audience of elementary school children, I changed my concept to be something that would better connect with them. I created additional sketches where I played with composition, then created a mood board with images I could use as inspiration. I also planned the photos I would shoot myself, and identified elements I could bring in from existing images.

ROUGH DRAFT

I began creating a rough draft using stock images. My primary focus was on composition and arranging elements in a way that would tell a story. Once I had nailed down the composition, I did additional sketches and took notes about the lighting and angles so I could plan for photoshoots.
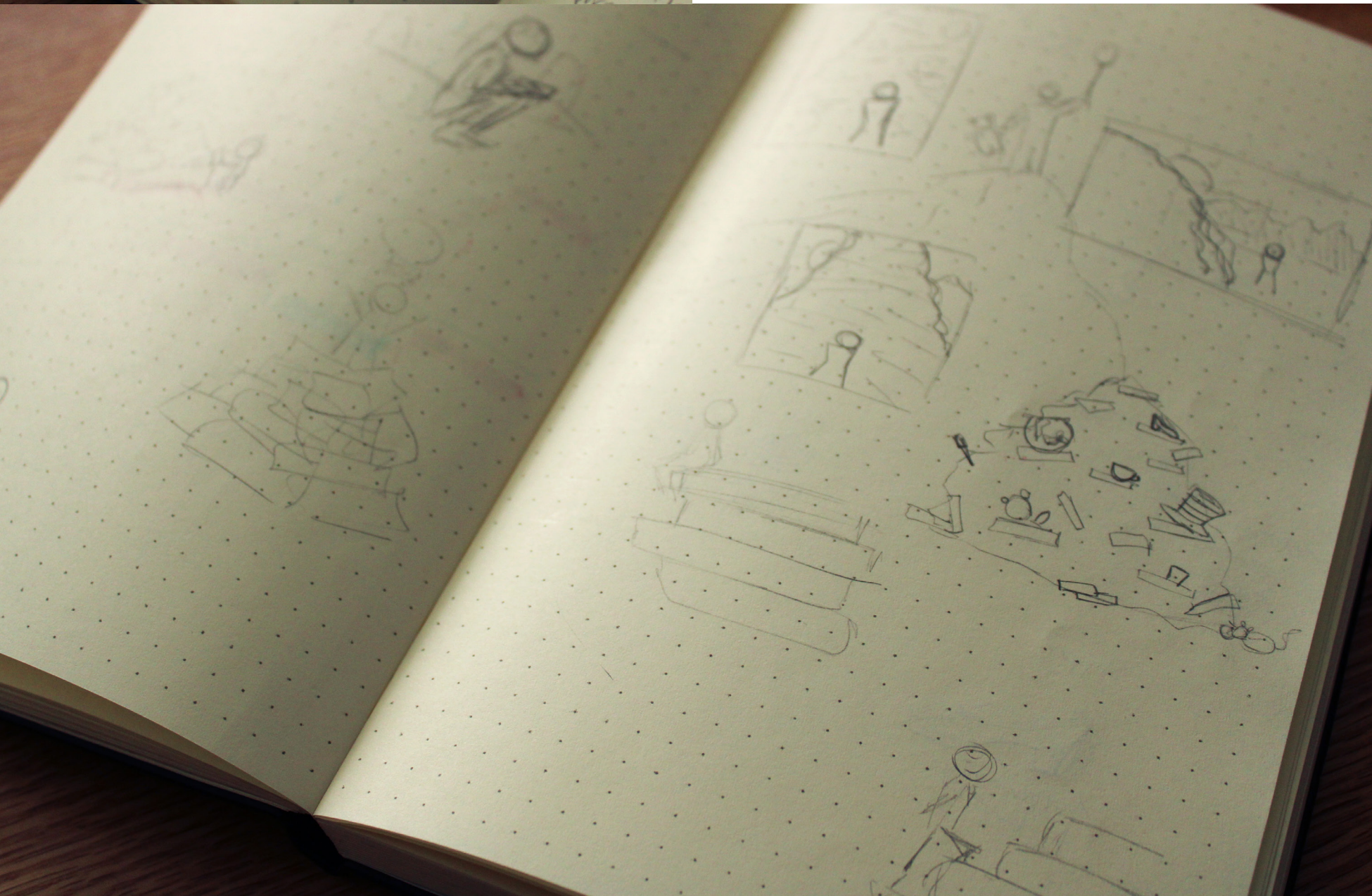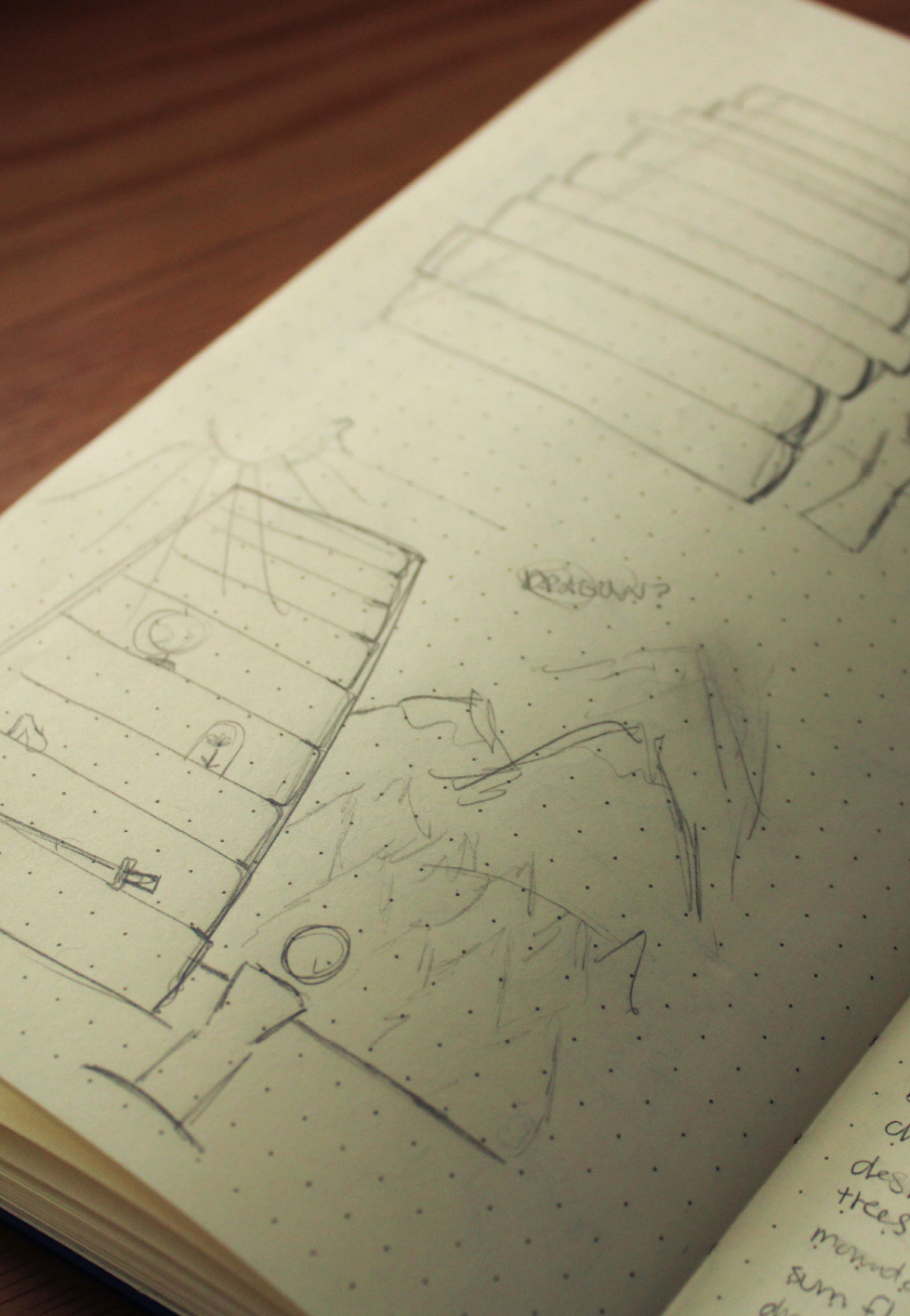
THE EXECUTION

PHOTOGRAPHY

After getting feedback on the layout and the concept, I took steps to execute the design. I photographed a stack of vintage fairy tale books, then photographed a young model outdoors who would be the focal point of the composite, and captured a photo of a tree in the foreground to use as a framing element of the composite.

COMPOSITION

I gathered additional stock photos that I would be incorporating into the final image and began arranging those elements. I found an arrangement that I worked well, then adjusted it to align to a one-third grid to make the focal point more prominent and strengthen the composition.

THE REFINEMENT

LIGHTING

I liked where my image was headed, but the lighting fell flat. It lacked depth and cohesion, so I sought feedback about how to improve those. I went through and adjusted the light and dark points of each element, adjusted the contrast of background and foreground elements, and added natural highlights and shadows to key elements.

ATMOSPHERE

I added additional atmospheric elements to the image by adding light rays, dust particles, and mist in the background and foreground. I also added grass over the girl's feet and at the base of the mountain of books to make them feel as though they're existing together.

THE REFINEMENT

COLOR GRADING

When the lighting began feeling more cohesive and natural, I moved my focus to color grading. This process allowed me to match the hues between different images so they all felt like they belonged. I used gradient mapping in Photoshop to add a unifying blue hue to the image and whiten the highlights.

MESSAGE

The final step was adding text to the image. I wanted to use very few words to make a point, and place those prominently on the image. I chose the phrase "Find Your Story" and picked a tall font in all caps to make the message stand out. I aligned the text and applied multiple blending modes to make it feel cohesive with the rest of the design.

THE IMPACT

RESPONSE

I published the poster on social media and garnered a positive response. Parents, teachers, and librarians made up a large segment of the respondents who recognized that it was effective at telling a clear message to the viewers, and felt it would connect well with the children they work with.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

This project reminded me of how crucial it is to work with a clear audience in mind. Design work isn't just about making things that look nice, it's about making things that your target audience will connect with.

Another key takeaway was how crucial realism is in fantasy. For this composite to be effective, even with its impossible elements, I needed to make sure the scale, perspective, and lighting were realistic. Realism helps the audience accept the fantasy elements more readily, allowing them to focus more easily on the message itself instead of distracting elements.

THE CREATOR

DEBORAH OWEN is a graphic
designer and communication specialist from
Tacoma, WA. She has experience in web
design, vector illustration, and layout design.
She loves working on projects that center
around making an impact.

GET IN TOUCH!

deborahjulene.com
deborahjulene@gmail.com
253 . 278 . 0509