Disney Imagineer Joe Rohde Explains How a Hermit Crab Built Disney's Animal Kingdom

Joe Rohde, the Imagineer behind Animal Kingdom, on Pagoo, the book that set his artistic life in motion, and his new book on creative work, Floating Mountains.



Joe Rohde poses with his copy of Pagoo.

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, September 11, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- Decades before Disney's Animal Kingdom opened its gates to the public, a small boy sat alone in the Honolulu municipal library. The boy had already taught himself to read upside down, and he was working, slowly, through a dense illustrated children's book about a hermit crab named Pagoo. The illustrations were stunning. The margins were filled with anatomical diagrams and scientific terminology. In the quiet stillness of that library, the book ignited a lifelong passion for the natural world.

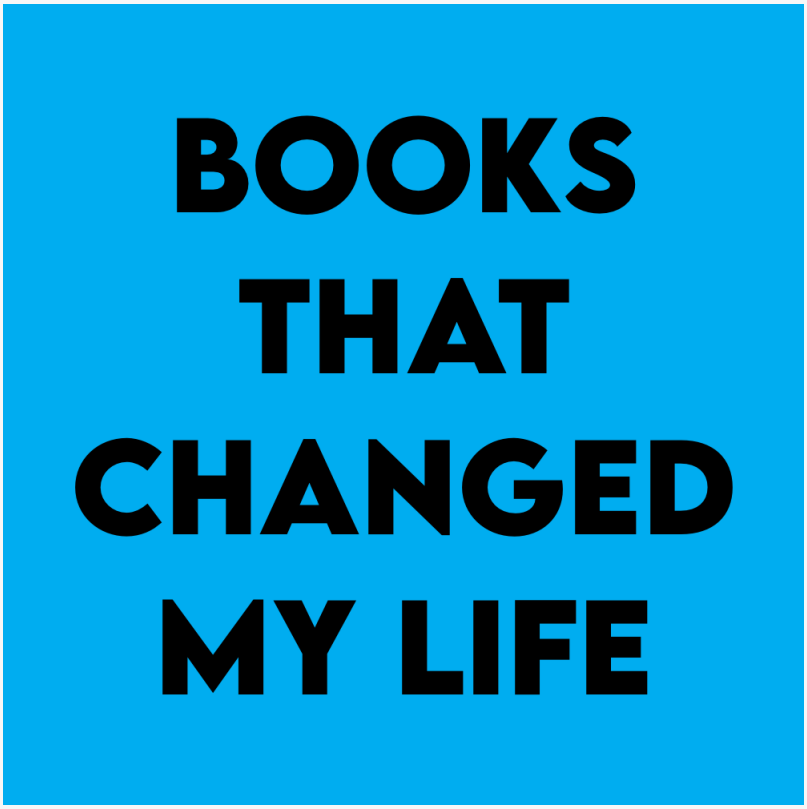
That boy grew up to be Joe Rohde, the Imagineer behind Disney's Animal Kingdom. On Books That Changed My Life, he joins host Chris Collins to talk about Pagoo by Holling C. Holling, and Floating Mountains, his new book on how creative work actually happens.

A CHILDREN'S BOOK?:

Pagoo is not what people expect when they hear "illustrated hermit crab book." It's a coming-of-age story with combat, death, abandonment, and peril. The illustrations, by Holling's wife Lucille, are lavish. The margins are crammed with real tide-pool science, none of it dumbed down. "It's an insanely dramatic story for a little kid to read," Rohde says, "and then to go stick your head back in a tide pool."

The three-part combination of powerful imagery, real information, and strong narrative form the

contours of Rohde's whole career. Art and science were fused in his mind before anyone got the chance to tell him they shouldn't be.



Books That Changed My Life.

CREATIVITY IS STRUCTURE:

Rohde's real argument, the one that separates this conversation from every other about creativity, is that creativity isn't a mystical anointing at all. It's structural. Almost mathematical. "I believe things that work, work for the same reason as anything else that works," he tells Collins. "Why does that light work? Why is this building held up? It's physics, math, chemistry, structure. That's why things work. Creativity works because of structures."

The structures just aren't the ones organizations usually reach for. Rohde's model is fractal; a creative project grows algorithmically from some initiating impetus, mutating as it goes, taking on form only as it becomes itself. Businesses tend to think in fixed, measurable, Euclidean terms, which is why creative people so often struggle inside them. Force a growing thing into the wrong container, Rohde warns, and you get a plant whose roots are shaped exactly like the pot. "You just created a root pot," he says, "not a new root system."

He is also blunt about how early the culture starts sorting people out of creative life. Kids are anointed as creative or not before they've had the opportunity to try. Rohde sees the problem as cultural, and offers Bali, where he has spent years, as an alternative: "They don't have a thing of 'I can't paint, I can't dance, I can't draw, I can't sculpt.' So everyone does."

SAVANNAHS IN ORLANDO:

Disney's Animal Kingdom, Rohde admits, wasn't supposed to exist. It wasn't on a business plan. It was controversial. Which, he notes drily, is the only reason a young and relatively inexperienced designer was allowed to run it: the project wasn't real yet. He assembled about five peers, no titles among them, and built a strange, flat information culture that somehow survived the park's growth to hundreds of people.

The clearest illustration of what Rohde was actually building comes from a jeep tour, a year before the park opened, across an artificial savannah. There were no animals yet. Only grasses.

And the executives in the jeep, Rohde recalls, were taken with the seed heads, the rusted color, the delicate shafts. None of them, he points out, would have said any of that driving through a real savannah. But this savannah had been built. It had a frame. And once something is framed as intentional, people pay attention.

Which is, more or less, the trick Pagoo had pulled on him at six.

TO CREATE, CENTER NO ONE:

If there is a single principle underneath Rohde's collaboration philosophy, it is that real creative teamwork has no person at its center. What holds a group together, in his telling, is a shared idea that everyone, like astral bodies, orbits. Whether a value, a theme, or just an urge, no individual contributor “owns” it. He calls it, in one anecdote about how designers navigate disagreement, the "third blue": the color that emerges when two people bring different associations to the same word and have to create something neither of them arrived with.

Floating Mountains, out now, is Rohde's attempt to codify his philosophy. The title itself carries three meanings — the stage-magic trick of making people believe the impossible, the suspended peaks he engineered for a certain Disney film franchise, and the optical illusion in the Himalayas, where he has spent much of his non-Disney life, of mountains that seem to hover free of the earth.

National Geographic, he says, initially wanted a different book from him. They pushed him toward the origin story first: tell us who you are, and then the other books can follow. Floating Mountains is that origin story, structured not chronologically but around a single question — what does it take for a group of people to create something together?

Rohde's answer, delivered late in the conversation with Collins, serves as a potent call to action: "It's not obligatory that you unbecome who you are to participate in creativity. But it is obligatory that you choose to participate."

Watch the full conversation on Books That Changed My Life HERE.

ABOUT BOOKS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE:

"Books That Changed My Life,” hosted by bestselling author Chris Collins, is a YouTube show exploring how great books transform us in profound and unexpected ways. Each episode features a special guest sharing a book that shaped or inspired them, sparking deep conversations and unearthing unfiltered personal stories.

Recent guests include actor and comedian Patton Oswalt, soap opera legend Susan Lucci, former covert CIA officer Andrew Bustamante, actress and reality star Lisa Rinna, Dancing With the Stars pro Jenna Johnson, Good Morning America icon Joan Lunden, and television legend

Kelsey Grammer.

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