Picture Books and Illustrations Worthy of Note

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Picture books with their wealth of stories and pictures have become an outstandingly important factor in initiating children into literature and visual art in general. There are countless ways in which books aid children in sharpening their grasp of themselves and in gaining experience to solve the riddles of existence.

As a guide to leisurely activities, today's illustrated children's books move far ahead of other means and media especially that of television, in ingenuity and versatility. Also, children's books present a land of opportunity and revelry for illustrators – the audience is eager and wonder-eyed. There is room for action, incentive, imagination and invention and there is certainly more colour to play with. The material dealt with is natural picture material. No wonder the field attracts so many of the best illustrators. And that last comment leads us to the first of three criteria to be dealt with here, thus

Criterion 1 states:

> Illustration is not merely picture-making – it is picture-making with a sharp and definite purpose. (Henry C.Pitz, 1947).

Because the eye must alert the mind, the illustration is the initial attraction of the finished product – even though the story may have been written first. So, in looking at the illustration, one should ask the questions

- Does the illustration compel us to pick up the book, hold it, see more?
- Does it invite the next step - reading the story?

Knowing a child, one is not surprised when it is quick to say – "But I don't like the pictures" and then refuses to read the book. The illustration is, then, a compelling element. The excitement found in children's books today is to a large extent in the variety of interesting techniques, styles and personal expressions with which illustrators can invite the reader.

In *The Biggest House in the World,* Leo Lionni uses lavish, majestic and gloriously coloured paintings – a perfect match for the tale of a snail which built the biggest house in the world – a house which began very small and dull-coloured later sprang bright with the author's use of four-colour separation. The technique used in this book shows the author-artists' success in *using art to support and extend the text.* In the first few pages of the book, he uses basic, primary colours but as the story reaches its climax, when the house was getting bigger and bigger, the child turns to an exciting conglomeration of colours which almost spells `hurrah!'.

On the subject of exciting children, there are books which have horizons and foreground brought onto the same plane by use of colour – *to produce a decorative and imaginative effect.* This is seen in *Striding Slippers* by Mirra Ginnsburg, which has pleasing colour combinations. Here the contents of the illustration is not ugly although the story presents bad characters who are presented in no unpleasant manner. The artist avoids the trap of mawkishness, however, with overtones of marvellous humour.

Accordingly also, in illustration, *everything is shown to be possible.* In picture-form metaphors blossom (as in "Jack and the Bean stalk"), princes turn into toads, animals act like humans, plants shoot up into the clouds – giants roam and bluster – no need to take the story teller's word for it. There on the page the illustrator shows what happens. In the end the prince is restored to his human form, the beanstalk is chopped down and the giant crashes to the ground.

Because childhood is a stage when it is still permissible to stare and demand instant explanations for everything, some illustrations have to be *instructive as well as interpretive.*

In contrast to *Jack and the Beanstalk,* Leo Lionni again, in *Geraldine, the Music Mouse,* gives detailed, interpretive pictures. The child is left with no room for questions because he has predetermined their possible enquiries. On the question of the cheese statue, he has artfully spaced out the features so that when the page is opened to the full statue, we get a strong focus on the drawing – beautifully done in crayon-like painting.

But illustration is more than a means of conveying instruction, "There must be,above all things, the power to slide into another man's soul," said Mervyn Peake. The illustrator has to *arouse curiosity, set scenes, spark off reactions.* Paul Goble meets this criterion in his gorgeously expressive Caldecott Winner *The Girl who Loved Wild Horses.* The illustrations are so wonderfully done they can hardly fail to spark off excitement and other reactions from children.

The illustrator too can influence the effect a book may have because by working in a certain style, repeatedly depicting the hero as a certain personality and supporting and reinforcing certain events and situations, he *creates a continuum.* In this case, the illustrations are more than a decorative item or a mere extension of the text. This is true of most well illustrated books. Are we not influenced to a certain extent by the pictures of the cruel stepmother and the innocent Cinderella and Snow White? And does Prince Charming not charm us through pictures drawn of him? Similarly, in that fun and chirpy book *Black is Tan is Beautiful* by Arnold Adoff, the reader identifies with the characters as they are drawn – the boy protagonist, grandma and grandpa.

Sometimes *the illustration complements by running ahead of the text and pushing the action forward.* Exemplary of this is Robert Kraus' *The King's Trousers.* The text relates how King Ivor's disgruntled subjects accidentally discover his secret and decide to remove him from the throne by force. And in desperation the king struggles to put on his trousers in a different way from his subjects. In his first collaboration with Kraus, Fred Gwynne expands his drawings across the pages so that the pictures are seen first, then the words read – most of the time very hilariously as we see the antics and clumsiness of King Ivor.

Besides that, *natural landscapes in the illustrations in children's books are an important symbolic means of instruction.* "They offer depth to children's imaginary experience, they strengthen their sense of beauty, belonging and identification with their small intimate world; beckon to them in the shape of landscapes presented as ideal,or open for them the liberating vistas of far away scenery where elemental forces range". (Kenneth Clark, 1961).

In *Awake and Dreaming* by Harve and Margot Zemach, the serene landscape drawings of the protagonist's daydream brings the child into a state of daydreaming himself – into the seemingly external – with the complementary diction of long vowels whereas

in contrast the landscape comes in amber angry colours when he has nightmares – giving rise to expressions of fear and tension. Then we see a fascinating example of illustrations where nature – its shapes and forces represent aspects of the protagonist's state of mind where emotions are projected onto the landscape and expressed visually. In *Beauty and the Beast*, romantic landscapes continually accompany and signify feelings and thoughts that are projected onto nature – the trees are stable and the mountains in the background have solid lines when the actors are decisive. When Beauty is reunited with her Prince, nature bursts out in bloom! Illustration styles like these enrich, as Betsy Hearne reviews, "the symbolism of the stories while at the same time making them more accessible to children on an emotional level."

However, not all illustrators take the representation of nature seriously. There are many books in which nature is treated and presented in a purely decorative way – like a stage set – two dimensional and artificial. One such example is *Owliver* by Robert Kraus, where the page turns to a haze of blue mountains and sky to show Owliver flying off into the distance. When we compare these books with those having aesthetically valuable illustrations, it will strike us forcibly to what extent flat, schematic, negligible cardboard landscapes, lacking in grace, intimacy and depth mar the child's experience, though they may be stylistically pleasant. This artificiality is characteristic of many illustrations created for fables and parables.

Thus, in conclusion, illustrations in children's books are not mere decorations. They play significant roles. They orchestrate the textual melody of the books. A picture attracts affectively first, followed by an attempt to understand what it contains and means.

Criterion or generalisation II states:

> "*The plot may be as simple* as learning to tie a shoe, spending a first day at school or a first night away from home or making adjustments to the death of a pet, but it *should have a structure, problem and solution,* achievement of a new skill and a new experience or the presentation of an event or an attitude that *affects a change in a character or characters*".– Zena Sutherland and associates, 1981.

Though seemingly simple, all picture books meet the above criterion. The fairy tale is one literary genre whose importance

derives to a great extent from the relative simplicity of its form and the generality of plot. The hero or heroine goes through dreadful and glorious experiences whose irrationality is significant on the unconscious level. These experiences represent or symbolise human situations and conflicts and developmental processes which apply to any child growing up.

In *The Kings Trousers,* the simple plot is that of a proud and haughty king who has a well-kept secret and that is, he puts on his trousers the same way that everyone else does - one leg at a time. Unfortunately, his secret was discovered and his subjects decided to remove him from the throne by force. In desperation, King Ivor struggles to put on his trousers in a new way. He fails. But necessity being the mother of invention, he creates a new royal raiment in the nick of time.

Similarly, the simple plot of *Move over, Twerp* is that of a boy going to school on a bus by himself, is bullied by a bigger boy, finds a solution to his problem and is finally accepted by the group. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* too has a structure, problem and solution, to mention one other book.

On the other hand, *The Voyage of the Jolly Boat*, written and illustrated by Margret Rettich, is the story of little Johan, whose father, a fisherman on a small island in the North Sea, died when he was eleven years old. He began to help his mother by working for the fishermen in the village. One day, wanting to prove that he was strong enough to catch fish, he takes a tiny jolly boat and goes out to sea -- together with his friend and his sister. They are caught in a storm and are later saved. Adamant about bringing the boat home, the three children set out on a tedious and dangerous voyage to return home. The church bells ring for joy all day. Johan will be a good fisherman. The story has a factual description, elaborating on what is supposed to have happened - having none of the generality of the folktale. The children are characterised by their behaviour. In changing circumstances they act as fit their individual personalities. The passages in the story have a common structure -- a statement of what is about to happen is followed by a circumstantial account of how it happened -- then comes the closing phrase.

Then there are books which contain repetitive plot actions -- for instance in *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* by Iolotow, a book in which the rabbit and the little girl continually repeat the same set of actions (structure) as they try to find just the right present for the girl's mother (problem) and finally they do (solution).

There is also Inch by Inch by Lionni which is illustrative of the category using repeated compounded actions. In this book, the main character performs a task on five consecutive occasions:

> The inchworm measured the neck of the flamingo. He measured the toucan's beak, the legs of the heron, the tail of the pheasant and the whole hummingbird .....

Sometimes an echo-like feature appears in picture storybooks. This is the use of a plot segment that precedes or follows a plot action grouping which uses the same plot segment and other plot actions. For example, the plot segment attempt-failure occurs in several instances in *Whistle for Willie* by Keats. Peter saw the success of a boy in whistling for his dog – Peter tried to whistle and failed. Next he played games, tried to whistle and failed. Finally, he resolved the problem when the earlier pattern of seeing the dog, hiding, trying to whistle and failing was changed to seeing the dog, hiding, trying to whistle and succeeding. This analysis reveals that the internal structure of picture-story books can be described as having a series of plot actions, that moves the story from its initial event to the climax and denouement.

Here one cannot deny the fact that there are some books in which structure is lacking. However, this is usually compensated for by the strength of some other aspects, for example, the range of lively creatures, appealing illustrations and witty captions which carry the text along at a good pace - which brings us to the third criterion.

Criterion III states:

> Sometimes the appealing element is the information given by the text, by the pictures or both – Zena Sutherland and associates, 1981.

In this case, the story and the illustrations help make up the other's weakness or complements the other. In the Persian Folktale *Two Pairs of Shoes* the simple story of two men, one bad and the other good is made more memorable by the typical Persian artwork in the illustrations, especially the beautiful borders on the drawn pages. Similarly, the African art of *Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky* is the main attraction of the

book as complemented by the story, and there are many other picture books where either the text or the illustrations dominate the other in their appealing elements.

All the same, I feel, the best ones have always conveyed hints of conspiracy between author and illustrator. *Owliver* by Robert Kraus is a story which will get nowhere without the bountiful colours and expressive cartoon - art illustrations of Jose Aruego and Arine Dewey. This is the story of an Owl, Owliver, whose mother wanted him to be an actor but whose father preferred him to be a lawyer. But he had a mind of his own, and what he became when he grew up came as a complete surprise to both his parents. The techniques used by both the author and illustrator complement each other beautifully. The tantrums thrown by Owliver, his juvenility, are all very appealing to children because they are easily identifiable. As one turns the pages, it is hard not to feel the spontaneous delight of seeing nifty illustrations together with just as nifty lines accompanying ..... Owliver's father gave him doctor toys and lawyer toys. Owliver's mother gave him acting lessons, including tap-dancing. 'Talent should be encouraged,' she said.

The technique used produces the illusion of an action taking place swiftly and rapidly, to represent vivid, sudden events occurring in very brief time-spans. This is commendable as supported by Joseph H. Schwarcz (1982) in *Ways of the Illustrator* – Visual Communication in Children's Literature:

> The illustrator of children's books has to be especially inventive in representing motion and the passage of time because kinetic experiences are vital for children at all ages and, consequently, an emphasis on action-in-time characterises the literature created for them .....

One can imagine the excitement of children, especially the younger ones with fast-moving pictures and an equally fast-paced action of the stories. This technique is also employed in the earlier mentioned The King's Trousers. Especially intriguing in this respect are books whose layout fluctuates considerably from one page to the next, creating a dynamic, arousing, sometimes hectic atmosphere. One has only to leaf through *The King's Trousers, Striding Slippers* and Hans Fisher's *The Birthday*, or even *Owliver* itself to see how the illustrator evokes the ever changing scenes and how the text is moved around and has to

accommodate itself to the requirements of the visual patterns. Thus in *Owliver*, we see

But
when
Owliver
grew
up,
guess
what
he
became .....

this accompanies the lone figure of Owliver "flying towards the reader", thus producing the effect of something moving nearer and nearer.

But as we read picture books, we also connect in our mind the partial contents which we assemble as we go along with the intention of understanding them as a whole – the page, the story,the chapter etc. We remember simultaneously what we have read consecutively. Similarly, soon after we have taken in the first overall impression of a picture, our eyes begin to meander, lingering over some spots in the picture and hurrying past others. It is remarkable that children are impressed by the combined verbal and visual messages early in their lives and learn to appreciate them, sometimes to choose and reject but above all, and more inspiring, to have ever more of them.

On this point of a mutual game where words and pictures play together, the pictures do not simply double or parallel what is said in the text. There is never complete redundancy because the picture is more concrete than the word. Thus when Leo Lionni describes the cheese mouse – in *Geraldine, the Music Mouse*, the reader reads

> To its puckered lips it held a flute. Geraldine gnawed and gnawed until she had uncovered the entire mouse. Then she realised that the flute was really the tip of the mouse's tail .....

without much insight into what it really looks like until the picture looms into focus on the next page. Thus, without wishing to do so, the artist elaborates the text, guiding it to a complete whole. The combination of these two forms of communication into a com-

mon fabric where they complement each other creates conditions of dependence and interdependence. This blending of two components is intriguing because each is a rich system of expression and communication-language (with its vocabulary, grammar, syntax) and on the other hand the picture (with contour, shape, size, colour, texture etc.) – to mention but the simplest ones.

When the two systems work together, they produce the best work of art – fine picture books that 'liberate' children through art – books whose potential lie in their being around, to be taken up, loved and preferred. This is when they leave a mark on the child's mind.

Hence, the potential importance of picture-books for the aesthetic experience of the child is considerable. In my opinion, they are at their best when the illustrations and the text are in harmony.

Suggested activities in the Classroom

Picture books stimulate a profusion of ideas for creativity in the classroom. This is especially true of *First and Second Graders* (The Primary School). I believe that any picture book can offer the teacher starting points for creative activities.

However, before beginning to use the books,one should generate love for the books, for, once children have affection for something, commitment to it comes naturally - there will be a wealth of imagination triggered.

Firstly – for First Graders or Primary One pupils picture books should be used to introduce them to literature. *Reading aloud* is the best way to begin. As the teacher reads aloud, she should also show the pictures to the children, modelling excitement and awe as the stories are read. For instance, in reading *Make Way for Ducklings* – Robert Mc Closkey's Caldecot winner – the teacher could point out who Mr and Mrs Mallard are, stagger in surprise when Mrs Mallard is nearly run over, show excitement when the ducklings are hatched and act the part of the policeman trying to hold the traffic for the ducks to cross the street. On the other hand, in reading Leo Lionni's Frederick, the teacher could get the pupils to participate by asking them to point out Frederick, the old mouse and then get them to guess the reasons for his strange behaviour. Then when Frederick finally speaks out, the teacher can guide the students toward the wonder of his wisdom. By doing this, the students are indirectly involved in the stories and thus interest is built.

After the initial introduction to the books, the teacher can ask these students to each read maybe three picture books a week. Then, she can proceed with using the books creatively.

(a) For instance the teacher could read stories aloud up to a turning point and then ask children to conclude stories like *Boris Bad Enough* by Robert Kraus, De Paola's *Strega Nona* to mention a few.

(b) Besides that, students can also be encouraged to revise familiar story-tales, changing the characters from bad to good and vice versa,.

(c) Things can also be done by making use of themes in books. The theme of *greed does not pay* from *The Biggest House in the World* and *Two Pairs of Shoes* can be used to stimulate children to tell their own tales on the same theme.

(d) One other thing that can be done is to introduce onomatopoeic words – words which resemble or imitate the sounds associated with the object or action concerned. These words can make exciting picture-stories. Students can use the words and draw pictures to form stories – which brings us to another possible activity –

(e) that of getting them to work in pairs – one student creating a story and the other illustrating it. For those who prefer to work on their own, they can cut out pictures from magazines or newspapers and form a story out of those picture cuttings. The teacher can help here by bringing pictures which are all jumbled and asking the students to rearrange them in sequence and then writing a story.

(f) For students who have gone through the above activities, the teacher could organise a Festival of Drama on a small scale. Each student could dress himself as his favourite character from a book he has read and go up the stage and tell the audience all about the character. They can be allowed a week of practice prior to performance.

(g) Another thing they can do is to `build' a scene from a favourite book. This can be done by giving them each a box

to work on. They can, for example, create a country scene by using twigs and leaves and sticking them onto the box. Houses can be built using match sticks or wood splinters.

Thus it is obvious that it is not difficult to be creative, but I would strongly recommend reading aloud before anything else because by doing so, we expose children to the beauty of language besides encouraging them to want to read for themselves.

In order to create a nurturing environment, teachers should make books available and immediately accessible to children, read them everyday, regularly discuss books with whole groups, small groups or individuals and then provide them activities as mentioned above, to work with literature.

In sum, cumulative experiences with literature should be well-planned, giving children the chance to experience aesthetic beauty and wonder.

Books Evaluated

1. *Geraldine, the Music Mouse*
   Written and illustrated by Lee Lionni. Pantheon Books 1979.
2. *The King's Trousers*
   Story-Robert Kraus,illustration – Fred Gwynne Windmill Books Inc. 1981.
3. *Two Pairs of Shoes*
   Retold by P.L. Travers, illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. Viking Press 1980.
4. *Move over, Twerp*
   Written and illustrated by Martha Alexander. The Dial Press, New York 1981.
5. *Make way for Ducklings*
   Written and illustrated by Robert Mc Closkey. Rae Publishing Inc. 1981.
6. *Owliver*
   Story-Robert Kraus, illustration – Jose Aruego and Ariane Dew. Windmill Books Inc. 1974.
7. *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses*
   Written and illustrated by Paul Goble. Broadbury Press 1978.
8. *Striding Slippers*
   Written and illustrated by Mirra Ginnsburg, McMillan 1978.

9. *The Biggest House in the World*
   Written and illustrated by Leo Lionni. Pantheon Books 1967.
10. *Awake and Dreaming*
    Written by Harve Zemach, illustrated by Margot Zemach Farrar, Straus and Girou. New York 1970.
11. *Whistle for Willie*
    Written and illustrated by Ezra Jack Keats. Viking Press 1964.

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