

“... what is the use of a book,” thought Alice,
 “without pictures ...”

Picture from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
 Illustrated by Helen Oxenbury Walker Books
 ISBN: 0 7445 8267 9 £9.99



Alice had her priorities sorted out. On the other hand – and as Max Miller used to say – here’s a funny thing. When the five-member *Carousel* editorial team were compiling their illustrated anthology of stories, *Eating Candyfloss Upside Down*, they wanted, as seemed only right and proper, to include brief biographies of all the contributors. What, asked the somewhat fazed publisher, *illustrators as well?*

If we look to the very beginning, which is a very good and logical place to start, picture books loom large and should, therefore, occupy a dominant position in the scheme of things. (Always assuming, of course, that we’re prepared to treat childhood seriously rather than just pay it lip service.) And, anyway, surely nothing epitomises the whole concept of Children’s Books (books for *children*) more than picture books?

A Freudian slip perhaps, reflecting the position of illustrators in the pecking order; further confirmation of the two-tier system holding sway in the Children’s Book World (that hegemony of movers and shakers: publicists, opinion-moulders, book-selling conglomerates, and many – not all – publishers). A system whereby books for older children (especially the ‘young adult’ and ‘crossover’ markets) occupy the premium ‘upper’ levels and those for younger readers have to lump it in whatever space remains.

So why are picture books (except in the occasional, isolated instance) not given their due? Why, for example, are press reviews of them so measly – often occupying the same thumbnail space as the ‘Also Noticed’ – in comparison with fiction? Where within easy access are the critical appraisals of illustrators’ – as opposed to novelists’ – intentions and techniques? It’s all very well for a book reviewer to flick through a picture book in the blink of an eye (well, they’re only short!) and pronounce it ‘delightful’ or ‘charming’, when for the true reader, the *intended* reader, it represents worlds to discover, examine and explore.

It’s little wonder that these guiding principles (more properly Carlyle’s “Midas-eared philosophies”) have tipped the balance as far as received opinions about children’s books are concerned and established a damaging hierarchy where there shouldn’t be one. Even allowing for the customary woefully-inadequate press interest in the Greenaway and Carnegie awards, consider the relative lack of attention given to the former (picture books = usually younger) vis-à-vis the wider (though again relative) coverage extended to the latter (novels = usually older).

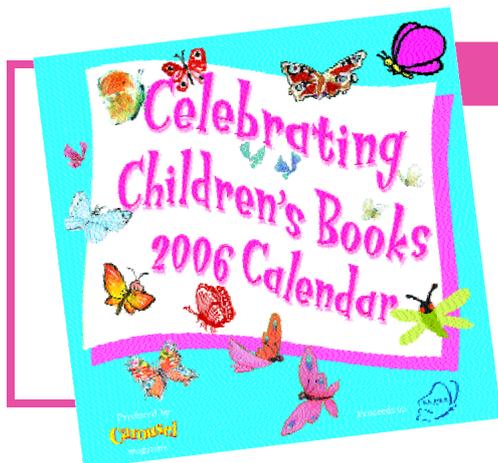
The truth is that words, no matter how well or ill chosen (it seems to be all one), hold sway; and children’s fiction – good, bad and indifferent – commands a respect (invariably commerce-led) that is often way above its station.

And now we learn that the people in charge of central buying at Waterstones have issued a Herodian decree severely limiting the number of books for the under 8s – story and picture books – to be sold in their shops. (In hindsight, of course, this no-doubt-commercially-viable move can be seen as one of the consequences stemming from the moment starry-eyed publishers kow-towed to the blandishments of the chains, turned a blind eye to the Net Book Agreement, and their backs to independent bookshops, many of whom – precisely because they *were* independent and in it for the books – had been willing to take ‘risks’, particularly when it came to picture books.)

But if this is the much-vaunted new ‘golden age’ of children’s books then I suggest that it is picture books that lead the way. And have done so since the 1960s and 70s, when a more sophisticated technology made it possible for full colour artwork to be reproduced comparatively cheaply and so encouraged illustrators to produce picture books that combined vibrant colour and formidable graphic techniques with a clear, purposeful narrative and edge.

And (providing restrictive commercial policies don’t blow it) so it continues. We have the writers and the illustrators, who are not just keepers of the flame but – as the truly talented must always be – pioneers, explorers, stakers-out of new territories; an embarrassment of riches. But let’s not be embarrassed – let’s celebrate!

Chris Stephenson



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Picture Books Today – and Tomorrow?



There has been a sad decline in picture book publishing this year and while Andersen Press, unlike some other publishers, has not yet reduced the number of titles produced but we are certainly finding it much harder to publish them profitably. The expense of full colour printing and colour separation requires that picture books are first published in hardback and the market for hardbacks has shrunk considerably – libraries are spending less and less money on books and booksellers prefer selling paperbacks. Waterstone's has cut the number of picture books drastically with all titles now needing sanction by Head Office. Ever fewer independent booksellers have dedicated children's book departments and with even fewer children's book specialists this has also affected sales.

Famous and established picture book creators can still find a market – albeit smaller – but new talent is finding it more and more difficult to get published. British publishers have also traditionally depended on the sale of international coproductions; with the US concentrating on home grown talent and many European countries also suffering from cuts in library spending, many British publishers have reduced their picture book lists or postponed titles indefinitely. No longer is Great Britain leading the world in the publishing of quality picture books so I also feel that the reduced selection of books available will affect the emotional and intellectual development of the youngest in this country, despite the admirable creation of the BOOKSTART programme.

Andersen Press will be 30 next year and thanks to favourites like *Elmer*, *The Little Princess* and *Blue Kangaroo* we will be able to publish outstanding picture books for some time yet even if we are forced to reduce our hardback publishing programme.

Klaus Flugge – Andersen Press

I'm surprised that it is not proving commercially attractive for Waterstone's to carry a wider selection of books for children under eight. This age group includes new and improving readers whose parents and teachers need plenty of choice and individual advice from informed professionals; there can never be enough access to good quality books for this age group. In particular, picture and storybooks that will help five to seven-year-olds grow as readers are crucial to developing future keen bookstore customers and again, there needs to be plenty of choice. These books are under-represented in the media and book awards, and buyers rely on bookstores for information about them. The central buying system that has been outlined also hampers individual stores who want to respond to the needs of their community.

Geraldine Brennan – Times Ed

It appears that a major book selling chain intends to reduce its stock of children's picture books dramatically in the near future. This action seems tantamount to shooting themselves in the foot, and one wonders why they are taking such a short-sighted step.

Perhaps the space to profit ratio doesn't work. Picture books are notoriously difficult to display effectively as they come in all shapes and sizes. They are also vulnerable to damage by small hands. Given that their average price is around £6.00 there is little margin for making a substantial profit or price promotion – both crucial to modern chain book selling.

Could it be that these large organisations are unable to shelve picture books properly because they find them difficult to classify? Admittedly, it is not easy to determine the age and interest range of many. They are as variable as the children who enjoy them. Frequently they appeal on different levels to a broad age range. Some of the darker, quirky, more subtle books, such as *Way Home* are really suitable for 9 year olds and even older. Surely a competent, experienced bookseller given the responsibility of the children's department could decide on an intelligent classification – provided of course, that such an individual remains in post long enough to gain the necessary knowledge.

If these are the reasons for not stocking more picture books, they are not convincing, given the considerable resources of space and spending power at the command of the chains.

Before they go too far down this road, perhaps they should consider the impact their decision will have on authors, illustrators, publishers and their representatives plus, of course, the end user – teachers, parents, and children. Lack of availability means lack of choice. Without the perfect book a small child loses interest. Early reading foundations will be threatened, jeopardising the next generation of readers. Some will seek out the internet, but a picture book has a visual and tactile quality which, as yet, cannot be demonstrated on a computer. So sales will decline, publishers will bring out fewer books and an appalling downward spiral will be set in motion.

To avoid this bleak prospect becoming reality, **all those** with an interest and appreciation of illustrated children's books need to exercise their customer power. Pester your bookshop to order the titles in which you are interested. Vote with your feet; seek out and patronise the few remaining independents and larger high street stores with good children's departments.

Hopefully, what goes round comes round. Independents will be strengthened with increased trade. Publishers will recognise that their market place is not confined to big stores and continue to produce high quality picture books. Choice, both in the books available and the places to browse, will be maintained. Eventually gurus at remote Head Offices will note a reduction in footfall and decide that diversity at the younger end is what they should be offering their book-buyers and reintroduce variety. We'll see...

*Sonia Benster
The Children's Bookshop*