

Still Invisible

Jane Ray, acclaimed children's illustrator, explains why she is supporting *In The Picture*



In 1995 I attended a conference organised by Save the Children and The Integration Alliance called *Invisible Children*. Its purpose was to address the reasons why children with disabilities of any kind were so rarely included in TV and radio drama, theatre, film and books.

Ten years on it seems that, with a few honourable exceptions, little has changed. I can't answer for film makers and playwrights but as an illustrator, who was genuinely inspired by that conference, I want to look at why I personally still don't feel I've addressed this issue satisfactorily and why, generally speaking, there are so few images of disabled children in picture books. I have made a few attempts to include disabled children in my illustrations but they often feel self-conscious and clumsy and too often get ditched somewhere in the lengthy process of a book's development. I suspect this is the case for other illustrators, many of whom were also at that conference.

I try to be aware of my audience when illustrating a story. I'm aware of the rich racial and social mix of the average classroom and am anxious for all those children to see and imagine themselves as princesses and villains, heroes, magicians and witches, both in the background and foreground of their books. I try to represent different ethnicities, heights, weights, colours and religions. Representing disability, however, seems to give rise to a whole raft of different problems. And because of these problems (rather than because of any lack of interest or concern amongst illustrators), the child with any kind of disability rarely sees him or herself represented.

So what are the problems? Why do my attempts so often stumble at the first hurdle? And what can we do to change things? I think part of the problem is that we are paralysed by the fear of causing offence, of somehow making it worse. But what could possibly be worse for a child than not being included, being ignored, having your very existence denied? One of the challenges facing you as an illustrator wanting to include such imagery is to understand the range of disability that there is. Every child is an individual and so is every disability. A physical disability is different from a learning disability, although they may occur together of course. And even if you have experience of some aspect of disability it doesn't necessarily give you much insight into other areas. It may be comparatively easy to show physical disability. There are the 'props' at our disposal – wheelchair, splints, glasses, hearing aids... and so on.

But how to indicate the learning or behaviourally disabled child? The child who is Autistic or has Downs' Syndrome, for example, without risking clumsy caricature? Or, as happened to me, the attempt being so subtle that nobody notices anyway. This can only be satisfactorily achieved by having some knowledge of those conditions, so that your representation isn't just of, say, physical characteristics, but of behavioural tendencies too – a child alone in the playground, an obsessive collector etc. It is also important to realise that, even if what you have done in your picture may seem to go unnoticed, the child directly (or indirectly) affected by it may very well have recognised something of themselves, which is, after all, the point.

I think that what is needed is casual and incidental inclusion. So that a picture book is not necessarily all about Ben who uses a wheelchair (although it might sometimes be) but that there are

children like Ben in the playground, in the street, friends, neighbours, teachers, parents who are disabled and are just simply part of the story.

While images like these continue to be so rare, and inclusion of Ben in his wheelchair becomes the centre of attention – editors and readers alike will ask "Why is he there? Why is he in a wheelchair? The story then becomes about the disability rather than about the child. And there can't ever be one book or series of books that 'does it all' – there should be such a wealth of different books that include references to disability that whether they are there or not ceases to be an issue.

At the moment the main types of books in this area are of the *Jasmine Gets a Hearing Aid* variety. This type of clear information book is very important and they are often very well done, but they run the risk of simply drawing attention to difference if there are no other books available. They are 'specialist books' when what is needed are 'ordinary books'. There needs to be story books, fairy tales and fantasy, a wealth of imagery and language that include disabled children, not necessarily as heroes and heroines, not being cured or showing their strength of character over adversity, not as sinister, or monstrous, or as props to make the able bodied look good, but just because they are there.

Another point, raised by several illustrators I have talked to, is that this issue must be tackled across the board by the whole publishing industry. It's no use the illustrator depicting a character with a disability if the editor doesn't appreciate the relevance, and then the sales team questions it and suggests it will hinder sales – the end result is that the illustrator gives up. So any change has to be taken on board by everyone in the process of publishing a book and decisions to include such imagery must be supported and encouraged at every level.

There is always a fear that anything like this becomes another 'ism' – another strand of Politically Correct thinking to tie us down and inhibit creativity. But with an open hearted, informed, sensitive approach any inclusion would be enriching for everybody. To this end a new project has come into being which aims to help writers, illustrators and publishers promote equality for disabled children. Called *In the Picture* it is, among other things, setting up a web site which will include an image bank. This will contain all sorts of imagery – photographic and drawn references for practical information (what does a wheelchair actually look like, how does a child wearing an arm splint hold a pencil or use a swing?). It will also have imagery of disabled adults too – people doing their jobs, in family settings, in crowds and on beaches. There will be examples of good practice (illustrations and books that 'work') and some idea of what to avoid. It will also have links to more information, such as the web site of, for example, the RNIB or Scope. Hopefully it will become a source of inspiration, of creative and profound thinking around this area and a forum for discussion.

It would be great to think that it won't take another ten years for children with any kind of disability to see themselves 'in the picture' along with everyone else.

IN THE PICTURE: "The Story So Far" October 11th 10.30 - 15.30
Novo Building Kings Cross London £80.00 + VAT includes buffet lunch
email: inthepicture@scope.org.uk tel: 0116 254 6751

For more information go to www.childreninthepicture.org.uk