

What happens next. . .

From time to time when I was a kid, my brother and I were taken to the Science Museum. In those days the rooms were filled with glass cabinets full of electric scale models that would whirr into action at the press of a button. Always within minutes we would be running up and down pressing buttons, leaving a line of busy little machines going about their business, completely ignored.

Storytelling relies on a simple agreement between the storyteller and the reader. 'You sit quietly, and the words I have written will tell you what happens next'. In the peculiar case of the picture book, digital technology threatens to undo that relationship. It threatens the 'quietness' in which that unequal bond forms.

Digital interactivity has the power to place control of the story in the wrong hands. It can offer hundreds of ways to interrupt the story; it can even offer alternative endings. But the temptation towards button pressing, made inevitable by the competition amongst authors and publishers to add value, is something of a poisoned apple. This is especially true of the touch screen, which makes everything so deliciously easy, so intuitive.



The moment we start to wrest control of the story from the storyteller the story begins to vanish. Alternative plot lines and alternative endings only serve to convince us that nothing really happened at all. Too many invitations to press this button, or tap this image, or follow this trail or play this tune render the book a mere game.

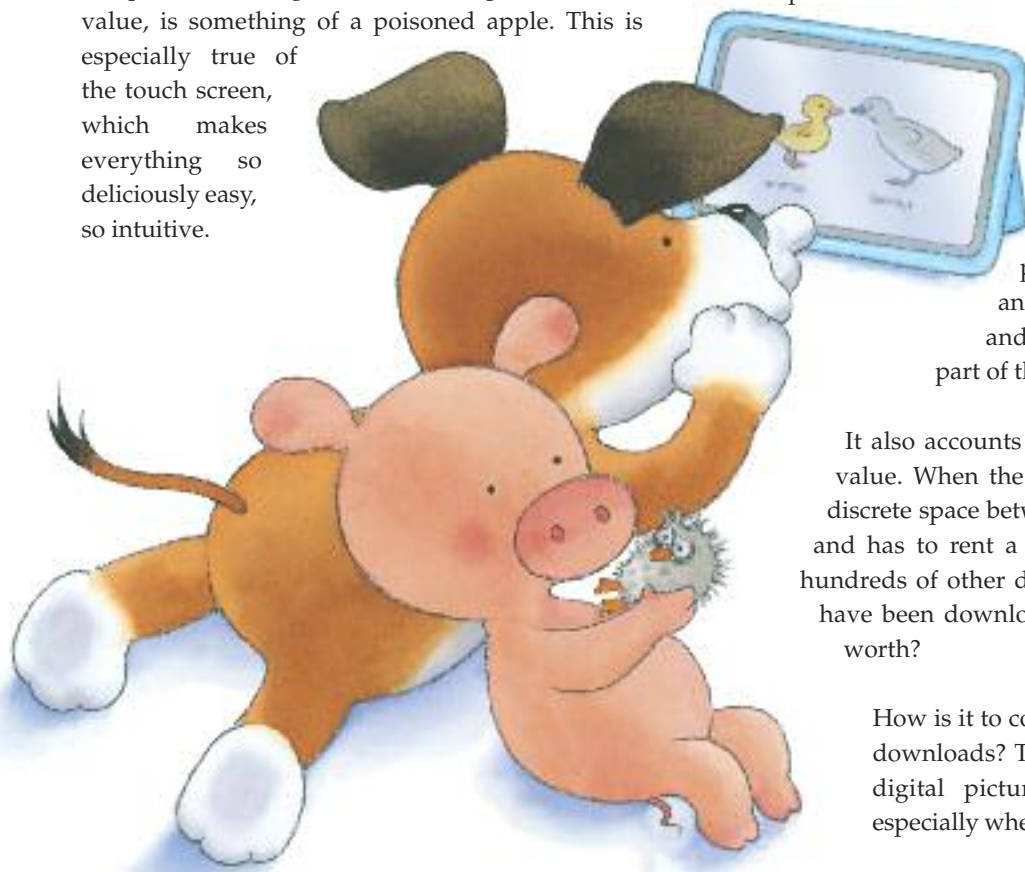
No such dilemma exists for junior and adult fiction. Unlike picture books, in which the illustrations anchor the story within the book itself, stories without pictures exist wholly within the imaginations of the writer and the reader, and as such they are already virtual. So provided the technology works well, they can make the transition from page to screen very easily, and are hardly changed in the process. The imagined pictures in our heads remain the same.

The same is not true for picture books. The size and shape of a picture book matter. So does the spatial relationship between the text and pictures. So do the page turns. Tablet devices don't have the luxury of space that picture books afford, so spreads must be squeezed to fit.

More importantly the pictures in a picture book turn it into a concrete object, and this blurs the line between the book and the story, which accounts for a large part of the child's ownership of both.

It also accounts for much of its perceived commercial value. When the story in a picture book loses its own discrete space between covers, its own place on the shelf, and has to rent a kind of timeshare of the screen with hundreds of other digital downloads, many of which will have been downloaded free, how much will it really be worth?

How is it to compete in its virtual form with all those downloads? The market won't for very long tolerate digital picture books that don't 'do' anything, especially when apps already exist that do a very great





deal to entertain children. Which brings us back to the radical change they must undergo if they are to compete.

I don't know what will happen to the picture book in the age of the touch screen. Maybe it will evolve into something vibrant and exciting. Digital technology in particular seems to spawn unlikely progeny. Who could have predicted with any degree of confidence the explosion of tweeting? Or maybe paper picture books will survive as the rest of publishing decamps to the screen.

Perhaps new generations of children's writers and illustrator-animators will find ways of making a living, using affordable software to create a new kind of digital children's format, much simpler and cheaper than film animation, and full of the kind of wit and invention we've seen in 20th century picture books.

But the format will only carve a niche for itself if its creators have the wit to see that the story is central. The digital picture book will only come into being if we can find ways to create the necessary quietness amongst all that button pressing for the magic of storytelling to happen.

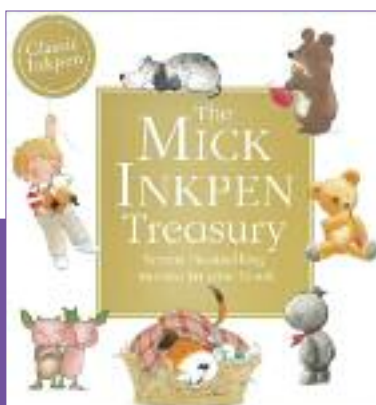
Mick Inkpen

Books published by Hodder Children's Books

The Mick Inkpen Treasury £20.00 ISBN: 978-1444913064

Kipper's Little Friends £11.99 ISBN: 978-1444918182

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Reviews . . . Poetry

reviewed by Elaine Chant



A First Book of Nature

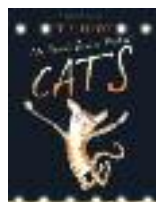
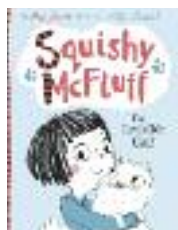
Written by Nicola Davies Illustrated by Mark Hearld
Walker £12.99 ISBN: 987-1406349160

This gorgeous miscellany, newly issued in paperback, is packed with little poems which celebrate the sights and sounds of nature through the seasons. Each poem successfully captures the wonder and curiosity of a child's first response to the features, and sometimes dramatic changes, in the world around them. Not just a poetry collection, the blending of factual fragments, stunning illustrations and imaginative words makes this a truly wonderful creation. Young minds will be stimulated by this unique presentation of the natural world.

Squishy McFluff The Invisible Cat!

Written by Pip Jones Illustrated by Ella Okstad
Faber & Faber £5.99 ISBN 978-0571302505

Ava is delighted to find in the garden one day, an invisible cat! Cute and tiny, the kitten is taken home and given the name of Squishy McFluff. With her invisible friend as a constant companion, Anna engages in a host of games involving much naughtiness - all, of course, Squishy's fault. The comic, rhyming verse flows smoothly and is an ideal vehicle for this charming tale which celebrates the pleasures of having an imaginary friend. A wealth of expressive and amusing illustrations adds to the fun, and we are promised further Squishy McFluff adventures to come.



Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats

Written by TS Eliot Illustrated by Rebecca Ashdown
Faber & Faber £5.99 ISBN: 978-0571311866

T S Eliot's much loved classic is now seventy-five years young. To mark the occasion, this new edition has fresh illustrations which skilfully capture the character traits of Eliot's loveable felines; Rum Tum Tugger lies in a bureau drawer with one eye open - not quite content, whilst Macavity, the mystery cat, is depicted with his bag of spoils disappearing off the page leaving a trail of debris behind. Youngsters will enjoy spotting features which find their way from Eliot's delightful verses into the lively drawings. If, like me, you haven't read the collection for many years, this edition is perfect for reacquainting yourself and introducing the poems to a new young audience.

I And I Bob Marley

Written by Tony Medina Illustrated by Jesse Joshua Watson
Lee & Low £7.99 ISBN 978-1620140307

The extraordinary life and music of Bob Marley is the inspiration for this collection of verse. Each poem corresponds to an aspect of Marley's life from his simple beginnings in his Jamaican homeland to his international success as a musician and his personal and political beliefs. Marley's own idiolect can be detected in some of the poems with traces of his lyrics to be found in *I am the Boy from Nine Miles*. Bold and expressive illustrations accompany each poem and combine to create a vivid impression of Marley's life. There are extensive reading notes which provide a detailed context for each poem.

