

In Praise of Illustration



The 6th Children's Laureate, Anthony Browne, in his acceptance speech said "Picture books are special – they're not like anything else. Sometimes I hear parents encouraging their children to read what they call proper books (books without pictures), at an earlier and earlier stage. This makes me sad, as picture books are perfect for sharing, and not just with the youngest children... We have in Britain some of the best picture book makers in the world, and I want to see their books appreciated for what they are – works of art."

This discussion has been continuing for many years. Elaine Moss in the excellent *Thimble Guide to Picture Books for Young People 9-13* (most recent edition 1992) wrote "what most children between eight and thirteen lack is the opportunity to see plenty of picture books all the time and as a matter of course." Little has changed. The Big Picture Initiative launched by Book Trust in 2008 to much acclaim let its news section on the website gather cobwebs for many months. On checking the news site this August it was well and truly stuck in early 2008. However it has now been updated but these long gaps do not encourage faith in the project. And if renewed action is planned then it is being kept a dark secret. The Book World is great at initiatives. What it seems to lack is the will and/or funding to continue after the razzmatazz has died away.

Much of the problem lies not in the quality of the books produced but in the stocking and displaying of them in libraries and bookshops. On an admittedly small survey no library stocked picture books separately for older children and in a chain bookshop Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* was shelved spine out between *My Cat Likes to Hide in Boxes* and *Marvin gets Mad*. What sane teacher or teenager would search for it there?

Toby Bourne, head of children's books at Waterstones and sponsors of the Children's Laureate said at the launch of the sixth Laureate "Each Laureate has brought something different to the role, with outgoing Laureate Michael Rosen proving a fantastic

ambassador for the written word through his poetry.

Anthony Browne will complement this perfectly with his passion for the power of illustration and we look forward to working with him." Well we'll wait and see the outcome, crossing fingers and toes – but not holding breath – that some radical thinking will take place.

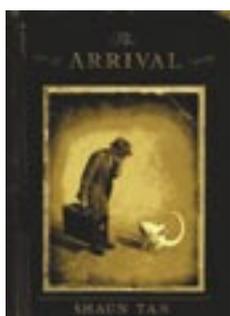
Somehow proponents of picture books for older children need to grasp Bertrand Russell's comment when he said "There are two motives for reading a book: one, that you enjoy it; the other, that you can boast about it." How do you get children who are assumed to have left picture books behind them to boast of reading the latest Neil Gaiman, Anthony Browne, Mini Grey, Shaun Tan? Not by shelving them next to books for the very young but perhaps by placing them with the older children's fiction.



A spread from Neil Gaiman's *The Wolves in the Walls*.

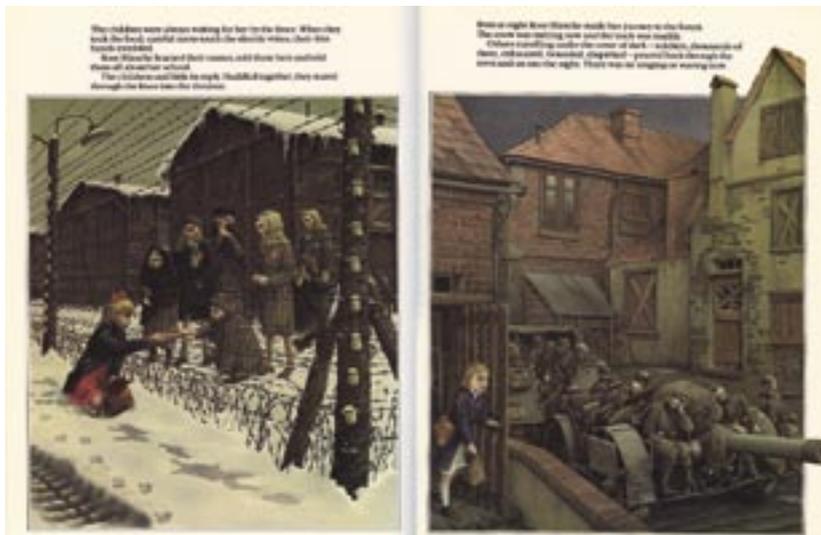
Graphic novels seem to have taken off and have perfectly respectable separate sections in bookshops adrift from children's books and, usually, scanned by youngish men. Is this a thought that some picture books should sneak in alongside these? Or is their often-generous size against them? They (as most art books) need to be large to do justice to the illustrations but maybe this very generosity is their undoing. I remember debating where to stock Raymond Briggs' *Where the Wind Blows* when it was published in 1982 and deciding on the flat base under the adult history/politics section.

Carousel last looked at this subject in issue 31 (Autumn 2005) and makes no apology for raising it again. Picture books aimed at the older child are often full of good intentions (often ecological) but that doesn't, perforce, make them good books. And you could say many books that wear their moral message too clearly fail by forgetting to tell a good story.



Here are a few books for you to look at and consider leaving around for older children to pick up:

The surreal *The Wolves in the Walls* written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean, published 2003. You can read an interview with Neil Gaiman in *Carousel*, issue 26 (back copies available by ringing the office on 0121 622 7458).



A spread from *Rose Blanche*.

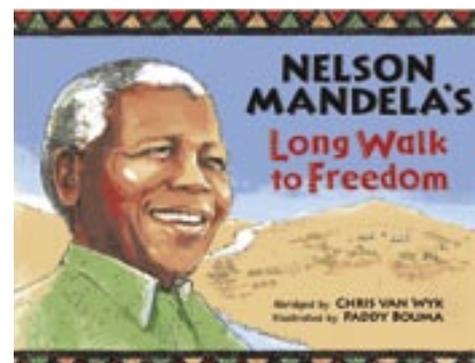
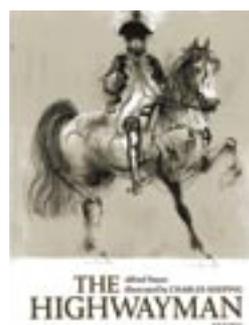
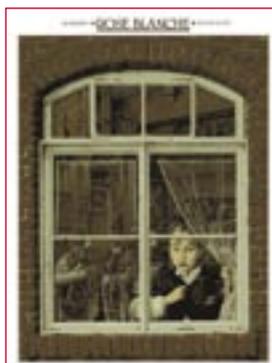
Rose Blanche written by Ian McEwan based on a story by Christophe Gallaz and illustrated by Roberto Innocenti published first in this country 1985. "In this book," writes Innocenti, "fascism is a day-to-day reality. Only the victims and the little girl have known its real face." A searing indictment of the brutality of war.

Emergency Mouse written by Bernard Stone illustrated by Ralph Steadman (1978.) Not at first sight an obvious book for anyone other than young children. It is the story of the hospital mouse which comes out in the ward after midnight. The humour is terrific. I once gave it to a man in one of those gloomy male hospital wards and it went the rounds making even the most grumpy smile!

We're back in surreal land with this fantastic book by Allan Ahlberg *The Pencil* illustrated with great gusto by Bruce Ingman (2008). Give it to anyone studying art...or life.

Alfred Noyes wrote *The Highwayman* in 1913 and it is hard to think of a more gripping poem. It has everything the romantic could wish for...a handsome highwayman, a lovely young girl, love and death. And there can have been no better choice of illustrator for this story poem than Charles Keeping whose edition was first published in 1981.

A diversion here...If you can seek out a copy of *Parlour Poems: 101 Improving Gems*



(1967) you'll find gathered together many gems of the declaimed poem. As the compiler Michael Turner said in his preface "Most people over the age of sixty can still recite chunks of them: these half-remembered scraps are the remnants of a curious verbal middle-class folk tradition. Is sentimental poetry bad verse? Only a literary snob would claim that the popular is automatically bad. Nevertheless a few of the pieces in this volume are magnificently appalling." "It is *Christmas Day in the Workhouse* And the cold bare walls are bright..." How does the next line run? How long is it since you gasped as Bessie swung out over the city, clinging to the tongue of the great bell and swearing, "Curfew shall not ring tonight" or shuddered at the hideous fate of Mad Carew who robbed the Little Yellow God of its Green Eye?

Back to picture books.

The Arrival by Shaun Tan (2007 in this country) is called a Wordless Graphic Novel. It is the story of every migrant, every refugee, every displaced person. The drawings are endlessly detailed and wonderfully strange. The tone sepia. A book to be read slowly and with care...And yes I say read although there are no words.

And then on a similar subject of the outsider is the magnificent *The Island* written and illustrated by Armin Greder (2008 in this country). "One morning the people of the island found a man on the beach, where fate and ocean currents had washed his raft ashore. When he saw them coming he stood up. He wasn't like them." An astonishing book about refugees, xenophobia, racism and human rights.

American publishing does provide much of its country's history in well illustrated, text light books. Our country tends to avoid this. Paddy Bouma (born in Cape Town) has illustrated Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* in an abridged version by Chris Van Wyk (born in Soweto). This will make his autobiography available to a wider and younger audience. It is a timely reminder of the life of an extraordinary man and of the achievements of the ANC at a time when their current star is somewhat tarnished. The words and pictures work together extremely well. Paddy Bouma says "As I have never seen Mandela in the flesh, I had to rely on photos for the likeness although there are large gaps in the record. For instance, there are no photos of him as a child (the first one probably dates

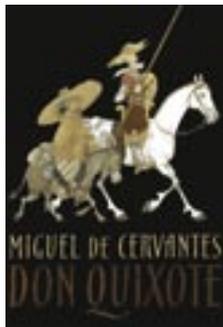
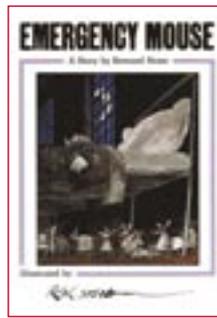
from his late teens) and almost none from the prison years, when his appearance changed dramatically. For the illustrations covering these times, I had to use a lot of imagination and try to capture his expression rather than the detail of the features. My husband, who fortunately is tall like Mandela (and very patient) had to be the body model!”

Shirley Hughes records a view of life during the first half of the 20th century in *A Brush with the Past 1900-1950*. Full colour spreads are interwoven with finely observed line illustrations and a succinct text. An engrossing snapshot of ‘ordinary’ lives and a starting point for many a family conversation and a rummage through the old photograph albums.

Victorians enjoyed novels with illustrations...who can really think of a Dickens novel without the illustrations of Phiz? The Folio Society has nobly kept this tradition alive and you can see the range of books at their website www.foliosociety.com or sometimes in second hand bookshops. They have published a few children’s books over the years tending towards the classic and have now issued a fine boxed set of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* superbly illustrated by Peter Bailey. Slip cases are not only for Folio Editions...Kes Gray has written and published a limited edition of short stories, *Fizzbomb*, aimed at the younger end of the age range we’re discussing here. Illustrated in full colour by Claudia Venturini and costing a pretty penny (£50), it is not one for sticky fingers. The book is a limited edition (750) and is perhaps aimed more at the adult collector of children’s books. It is certainly a one-off and if you wish to find out more contact kes@kesgray.com

Some books for older children have maintained this art form notably the range of novels by Paul Stewart, impeccably illustrated by Chris Riddell (who also manages to provide a timely weekly comment with his Sunday cartoon in *The Observer*). Timothée de Fombelle, whose first novel for younger readers *Toby Alone* won The Marsh Award for Children’s Literature in Translation, is enriched by the illustrations of François Place. The second and final part of the Toby saga was published this summer – *Toby and the Secrets of the Tree*. Philip Reeve together with illustrator David Wyatt have

An illustration from, right, Michael Foreman’s *Treasure Island* and, left, the cover of *Treasure Island*, illustrated by John Lawrence



created a fantastical space fantasy spanning, to date, four titles (the first being *Larklight*). As in all the best-illustrated novels the drawings comment on and add to the story. *King Kong* (1994) was a perfect choice of Anthony Browne with the large format giving scope to the atmospheric colour artwork.

Walker Books have a good track record of breathing new life into some of the classics whose titles are known but are seldom read. They are retold and, in the case of *Don Quixote*, for example, illustrated with great verve and gusto by Chris Riddell. And a treat awaits fans of *Treasure Island*. This autumn Walker are publishing an unabridged edition with bold dynamic woodcuts by that master of the art, John Lawrence. You can look and look and really dive into the illustrations there is so much glorious detail. You will be able to see the original artwork at an exhibition at the Illustration Cupboard, 22 Bury Street, London SW1Y 6AL from 20 October – 13 November. Well worth making a special visit to the capital. And for my money this is the best-illustrated book of the year.

However what should happen once I had written this article but *another* splendid version of *Treasure Island* should land on my desk. This time by Michael Foreman and published by Pavilion. Indeed Pavilion has, somewhat to my annoyance, called the book “Michael Foreman’s *Treasure Island*”. The two versions are very different. Michael Foreman uses his trademark blue in the majority of the pictures making for a gentler feel. The cover is faux leather with gold whereas the John Lawrence version has a robust illustrated paper cover and the binding has a splendid skull and crossbones. I think perhaps that those who would like to read the book themselves would choose the John Lawrence and those who are having it read aloud (and so somewhat younger) would choose Michael Foreman’s. But how nice to have a choice.

And where would I position these books? If I was a bookseller with decent space I would put them on a table in a prominent position (certainly for a while). And to underline the message I would display on the same table a graphic novel or two or three – perhaps *Ethel and Ernest* by Raymond Briggs, *Tamara Drewe* by



Posy Simmonds and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. Maybe a book of cartoons and a book of photographs.

Does this sound trivial? Well, the successful supermarkets take display extremely seriously and who knows how many subliminal marketing ploys end up as part of our shopping basket? Wouldn't it be nice to find an enticing and unusual display of books the next time you go into a bookshop? Oh yes, and of course none of these books should have age guidance on them. I rarely quote CS Lewis but I think he hit the nail on the head in 1952 when he said; "*The neat sorting-out of books into age ranges, so dear to publishers, has only a very sketchy relation with the habits of any real readers. Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us. No reader worth his salt trots along in obedience to a time-table.*"

Enid Stephenson



A spread from Raymond Briggs' *Ethel and Ernest*.

Several of the books mentioned are out of print but with so many second hand books available to purchase on line it is now not too frustrating to have them recommended.

NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG... Chris Powling

Number 29: Adrian Mitchell

...I don't expect every poet to be like Adrian Mitchell. On the contrary, when I learned of his death at the end of last year, much of my sadness came from knowing he'd always been a bit of a one-off. Who else would have declared so bluntly, and so succinctly, that "most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people"? Who else, for the last decade-or-so of his life, would have been dubbed The Shadow Poet Laureate? Who else would have insisted on this 'Educational Health and Safety Warning' at the front of his publications?

None of the work in this or any other of my books or plays is to be used in connection with any examination or test whatsoever. If you like a poem of mine, learn it, recite it, sing it or dance it – wherever you happen to be.

His final, posthumous collection of verse, *Tell Me Lies* (Bloodaxe £10.95) is full of poems you want to learn, recite, sing or dance to wherever you happen to be. The title-poem refers, of course, to his famous anti-war poem from the sixties about Vietnam...re-mixed in terms of a certain twenty-first century war to which he objected just as passionately. Not least of his attractions for me is his refusal to dissemble his

political opinions. See page 125 for his take on New Labour. My favourite, though, is the poem where he describes the ceiling of the tunnel at Kennedy airport which "reflects the red tail-lights/of a hundred moving automobiles":

*like a river of red light
I told my Albanian cabdriver
who never noticed it before*

*I said that's my job
noticing stuff like that –
I'm a poet*

*An upside down
river of red light,
he said laughing.*

*Now you're doing it,
I said.*

If Adrian had his way, we'd all be doing it. And if I had my way, he'd have been our official Poet Laureate not to mention, in his spare time, Secretary of State for Education.

Adrian Mitchell RIP.