

Benefits of picture books for children



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Picture books are intended to show children how to derive pleasure from reading. They fuse humorous plots with captivating illustrations in order to hold the attention of the child. The addition of pictures can increase the longevity of a book's interest; they are designed to be read over and over again and thus the child needs to be provided with something more than a simplistic storyline. Picture books also encourage verbal interaction and reading aloud with a parent in order to develop a child's confidence before the inevitable 'reading aloud' lessons at school. Verbal dexterity is an important skill to develop and compliments literacy. The role of illustrations in this medium is mainly to provide extra stimulus although, like music and lyrics, they each become as important as the other. Some authors are synonymous with illustration styles such as Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake who form a cohesive force in stimulating literature for older children. It is in this very stimulation that the role of picture books in the development of literacy can truly be seen. Art and literature are effective forms of expression, which can be combined to great effect to improve understanding, and as E. M. Forster pondered "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?"

The opposition to picture books, a seemingly inoffensive artistic endeavour to the untrained eye, is surprisingly vehement. Protheroe (1992, p. 7) considers picture books the "banner at the head of the present relentless progression towards educational failure" which originated to suppress the vocabulary of the working classes. She voices concern that by providing children with pictures they are being discouraged to visualise things for themselves; their imagination is stunted. Yet, a John Vernon Lord explains in

his lecture, the majority of his images are born from his imagination rather than from life so how could something so innately imaginative dissuade similar thought?

In addition, even with the most seemingly basic of picture books, such as *Rosie's Walk*, there is always something else to add. For example, *Rosie's Walk*, has seemingly little plot (it is a matter of pages long and simply accounts a hen walking through a farmyard) however, the pictures provide a whole new realms of possibility for the imagination. Although Rosie does not interact with any other animals, she passes several, many of whom witness the tribulations of the fox. As a child studies the pictures they can invent reactions and entire lives for the sub-characters. The frogs are sent flying as the fox fumbles and plunges into the pool – did the frogs think this was rude? Did the fox apologise? The goat who grazes by the haystack is seen in the background of a later scene, watching the fox get struck by the descending flour – was the goat amused? Concerned for Rosie? Vernon Lord and Burroway demonstrate a keen eye for detail and provide the child with an opportunity to think outside the information with which they are initially presented. This is especially true of a brief story like *Rosie's Walk* as the child will almost certainly grow accustomed to the plot after several readings and look for other stimulus in the tale. In direct contrast to Protheroe's concerns, it seems that pictures, used skillfully, could in fact encourage a higher level of perspicacity from a child who would have long become tired of the few words in *Rosie's Walk* if it lacked pictures.

However, to presume that a picture book may be entirely simplistic or patronise the potential of a child perhaps underestimates the author. For

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example, in *Rosie's Walk*, the child is placed in a senior position of knowledge in comparison to the protagonist. Hutchins credits the reader as the omniscient being while Rosie remains blissfully unaware of her pursuer.

The comedy of this story also provides many levels. On the surface, there is the classic slapstick comedy as the fox collides with a rake. Slapstick creates the instantaneous humour and appeals to child-like love of clowning in both child and adult. But it is not simply physical comedy. The closing line “and got back home safely” creates humour out of anticlimax as well as relief. The story is tension built upon tension with the successive predicaments reminiscent of the subsequent *Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner* cartoons created by Warner Brothers in which a ravenous coyote pursues a fast paced bird with increasingly elaborate stunts in each episode but to no avail. However, this structure seems more suited to the picture book as even the action of turning the page drives the story and dictates a slower pace. The pages serve as a divider, creating small succinct scenes which help build the layers before the climax. The interesting structure is rooted in this unity of several dangerous scenes married with the closing line which, like Rosie, seems unaware that there was ever any danger.

Similarly, John Vernon Lord explains the importance of the collaboration between text and picture placement in his lecture regarding *The Giant Jam Sandwich*:

...when text and picture are describing the same episode in the story I prefer to enforce their physical relationship by placing them on the same page wherever possible. The breaks in the text and the pictorial presentation on

each page need to follow the natural stages of the storyline. The pacing of the illustrations with the narrative is of the utmost importance...

This demonstrates how the story, text and picture intertwine, complimenting one another in both style and pace, to create a whole. This will be explored in greater depth later.

The most basic principle of picture books is to promote literacy by making books more appealing to children. By making the books not only visually enticing, but by providing pictures to aid less able readers, literature is made all the more accessible. Cullingford (1998, p. 12-13) recognises that those children who struggle with reading initially can feel like failures at a very young age which can effect their relationship with reading for life. They can start to view literature as exclusive. By providing children with familiar picture stories rather than disconcerting wedges of text, they can slowly build the foundation for a love of reading which, as their confidence improves, will motivate them to approach more “unreliable”, challenging tomes in later life. Bettina Hurlimann expresses her view that pictures are the universal language and thus encompass all children regardless of academic ability or language: by optimizing accessibility children will have a healthier relationship with books.

Protheroe (1992 p. 111) accepts the premise of the picture book to advertise reading a pleasurable but also accuses this particular avenue of denying the potential of books and language by suggesting that words only have one meaning. This, however, seems a little dramatic. Picture books aimed at 0-5 year olds learning to read do often only have one meaning, any more than

that is usually directed at the adult. For example, in *The Giant Jam Sandwich* the town of Itching Down is described as “not a very waspish town”. As they have just rid themselves of thousands of wasps, the child will take that section to mean that the town did not appreciate being overrun by wasps; they were not pro-wasps. It is unlikely that a child under five would be familiar with the “petulantly spiteful” definition of waspish but the adult might derive some pleasure from the word play. Hunt (1991, p. 175) accepts and admires the simplicity of the language but feels that “much of the complexity is expressed by the visual elements”. He suggests that literary techniques such as metaphor can be much more effectively demonstrated through the use of pictures although, like Protheroe, he does acknowledge the subsequent risk that it “fix[es] words into a restrictive, mundane interpretation” leaving the child no room to impart their own meaning onto words; there is no room for manoeuvre.

The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle, in which a caterpillar munches his way through a veritable smorgasbord of tasty treats, eats two pears. The play on the word “pair” and “pear” was almost certainly not intended for the three year old but rather the person helping them to read. In addition, this particular volume can be seen to incorporate not only verbal dexterity but mathematical and elements of natural science. The caterpillar eats an increasing number of foods, which employs basic numeracy, and subsequently transforms into a chrysalis, then into a butterfly as is the natural order. It seems that without pictures, this might be a hard concept to explain to a very young child. The vocabulary required with no visual aid might be quite taxing and alienating (not least due to the word chrysalis!)

and thus the pictures make it a more accessible notion. As Hunt (1991, p. 176) aptly notes, it allows us to “cross the boundary between the verbal and the pre-verbal”. It allows children to advance in other subject areas at a younger age.

However, Protheroe (1992, p. 74) would argue that children need to learn to cope with “uncertainty and accept ambiguity” as it allows them to practise inference. Hunt (1991, p. 181) seems to feel that there is a happy medium, however, in which meaning is limited but not prescribed. He feels that this is applicable to both pictures and words as each form can be used in a way which is stilted or one that opens the floodgates of interpretation and creativity.

As Hunt (1991, p. 185) attests the “absence of words would have provided a ‘gap’ which takes intelligence and imagination to fill” as would the absence of pictures; working together, both serve their purpose. Jane Doonan expresses the importance that pictures talk for themselves and not simply reinforce the words and this notion is the idea of the picture book versus that of the illustrated story.

Moebius (1986, p. 132) articulates that “in the picture book, we read the images and text together as the mutually complementary story of consciousness” with the “story ‘behind’ the image often supplied by the illustrator. He expresses certainty that picture books are like any form of literature: “[the structure] is not accidental or fortuitous phenomena”. Every word and every brush stroke have a purpose. Edmund Evans pioneered the

total design of the picture book, making it a single cohesive mechanism rather than simply some text with some pictures.

This duality can be seen in *The Giant Jam Sandwich* in which most of the scenes depict the entire town. The moral of the story is less to do with the nuisance of wasps and more about community spirit and working together. For this reason, John Vernon Lord has ensured that the majority of the colourful scenes incorporate most of the town, each doing their job: from the small girl with pigtails heaving one small jar of jam along; to the man crouching, trying to get a photograph of the bread transportation for posterity. It is these tiny details that engage the child time after time – as well as the adult. John Vernon Lord criticises his own work in his lecture, however, claiming “with hindsight I feel that the colour scheme adopted for these pictures is too similar throughout the book” and it is with constant variation and bustling images that a child becomes entranced.

However, the pictures do not have to be busy to be stimulating. *Rosie’s Walk* employs seemingly simplistic illustrations and, although attention is paid to the background action, the focus is far more on the fox and the hen. These two characters are at the forefront of most of the scenes with the occasionally cameo from characters, such as the goat, who hover in the background. This, like in *The Giant Jam Sandwich*, mimics the content of the piece which is very self-contained about Rosie’s movements. She does not engage with the other characters and neither does the text.

The style is also much more fantastical with the large exaggerated ears of the fox and the bold use of colour contrasts. The vibrant yellows and pinks

clash in the most aesthetically pleasing way which provides visual stimulation for the child. They are unusual colour combinations, new and intriguing. Similarly, the bulbous trees are decorated with apples in regimented lines rather than the natural sporadic scattering; the fine line between faithful interpretations of familiar images with fantasy has been beautifully encapsulated.

Furthermore *The Sick Cow*, by H. E. Todd and Val Biro, adopt all the muted browns of a bucolic paradise. Of the three books, this is the most ‘realistic’ in style as *The Giant Jam Sandwich* shies from too much facial detail with the concentration being on large, busy scenes. Biro specializes in detail from the tread of the tractor tyres to the mane of the horse although allows the background foliage to blur into rural tranquility. Strangely, however, despite being the most visually ‘naturalistic’, its content is perhaps the most unorthodox covering, as it does, the ailments of a barking cow who is cured by sitting in some nettles. However, in *The Sick Cow*, although the pictures beautifully capture the provincial scenery, they do essentially illustrate the text. There is no sense, as Moebius (1986, p. 137) demands, of the “unseen over the seen” as with *Rosie’s Walk*. The same could, perhaps, be said of *The Giant Jam Sandwich*; the difference being that, in the latter, there is simply lots to see.

Fisher (2005, p. 192) rallies the benefits of exposing children to pictures as “art can help assimilation by developing perceptual sensitivity and discrimination through the study of form, colour, shape and texture”. This suggests that the blurring in *The Sick Cow* or the vibrancy of *The Giant Jam*

Sandwich could provide stimulation which specifically develops the academic capacity of the child.

Pat Hutchins, author of *Rosie's Walk*, is also responsible for *The House That Sailed Away* and *I'm the King of the Castle: and Other Plays for Children* which are far wordier examples of children's literature, set out as plays. Blythe (2005, p. 82) notes that encouraging children to articulate is crucial for development as vocal experience supports learning by incorporating language into the self. Similar encouragement can be seen in the direct speech in *The Giant Jam Sandwich* as well as the animal noises in *The Sick Cow*. Learning is believed to be received through the senses and thus books which encourage verbal interaction are beneficial as are picture books which engage the visual sense.

In addition to art and vocal experience, music is considered to be a powerful tool in mental well being and learning demonstrating that stimulus is not restricted to literature alone. It can be found in a number of artistic pursuits. Tame (1984) outlines Dr. Tartchanoff's scientific studies into the effect of music noting that "music exercises a powerful influence on muscular activity... sounds are dynamogenic" and the tempo of rock music, for example, can be detrimental to the digestive system. This physical manifestation is seconded by Blythe (2005, p. 82) who covers the neurological changes when people sing or speak as a group:

...the central nervous system activity becomes synchronous... stress hormones decrease, muscle tension decreases, more oxygen enters the

system. They feel high; have a certain clarity of mind and sometimes physical vision...

- Taking into account the ‘reading aloud together’ aspect of picture books which, according to this research, stimulates the brain for physical well-being as well as the work on sensual learning, the picture book is potentially an essential learning tool.
- Taking this idea further, the lyrical nature of many picture books should also be noted. For example, *The Giant Jam Sandwich* employs strict couplet rhyme scheme:

...Bap gave the instructions for the making of the dough. “ Mix the flour from above and yeast from below. Salt from the seaside, water from the spout. Now thump it! Bump it! Bang it about!...

Even if this technique is not directly mentioned to the child, it is instilling knowledge of rhythm into their subconscious. This could influence a love of music which, according to Dr. Tartchanoff, could be beneficial – depending on the genre. If it developed into a passion for group singing then Blythe certainly notes the increased potential for learning, molding the mind to a relaxed state of peace and readiness. If nothing else, the verse makes the story flow and engages the senses – which child would not enjoy joining in with those imperatives?

In the pursuit of sensual stimulation, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* can be seen to attack the visual sense and that of touch. The thick pages display the holes through which the caterpillar has eaten. The child can poke fingers through the gap and feel as if the story is unraveling before their eyes. This

is a very tame example compared to the modern books which employ sound effects and fluffy bits. Where does it end? Books on which the child can have a nibble? Perhaps the sight of reading itself is being lost in favour of instant gratification as is the nature of our society. One must question if this matters as long as children are being engaged in literature in some way. And whose face did not light up at the sight of a pop-up book? Making learning fun and interactive is no new phenomena and should not necessarily be seen as threatening. Peter Hollindale (1997, p. 75) has faith that “ children take from a story what they want and need” so perhaps our constant manipulation of sensual stimulation is futile. Some children may simply be predisposed to reading and others not regardless of whether books have pictures. It may simply be a case of nurturing existing talent by tailoring learning to the demands of the individual child.

Protheroe (1992, p. 48-49) has further concerns that picture books can be detrimental to the development of a child's memory. She argues that it has “ long been established that in human language lexical usage involves a link between a symbol and a concept, not a symbol and referent” (p. 73). She cites that Bower and Winzenz conducted tests which linked memory to active discovery and depiction. Although there is a school of thought which rejects the idea that picture books stunt imagination, Bower and Winzenz's findings cannot be dismissed. Picture books work on the principle of memory association. One of the aims, as well as general stimulus, is to provide the child with a word and an image which they can link in their brain so that the word and its meaning will be easier to retain. Bower and Winzenz suggest that by depriving the child the personal image creation, the link with their

memory will be broken. Word and picture association is a common way to strengthen memory retention as is repetition or the use of active imagination: applying a personal image to what the word signifies to you. There are many recommended revision techniques because memory works differently from person to person and thus Protheroe may be right in some cases but it seems prudent to assume that picture association will also help some children when learning to read.

After such lengthy discussion about the importance of stimulating and advancing the knowledge of a child comes Alfred Adler (1998, p. 181) and his opinion to embrace the simplicity of children's books. He recognises that to try and accelerate the learning of a child at a young age can be counter-productive: " All mentally indigestible pulp ought to be kept out of children's reading until they have reached a certain age of maturity. Unsuitable literature may either be misunderstood, or it may throttle developing social interest". While Protheroe flies the flag for interpretation, Adler highlights the potential pitfalls of such a stance: the risk of misunderstanding leading to fear or alienation. And perhaps Adler highlights an interesting point about the aging process. Betty Friedan (1993, p. 50 & p. 74) explains that social research has indicated that those who show the most tenacity in holding on to the values they developed in childhood were most susceptible to mental instability later in life. This links with Freud's theories of the importance of childhood and the in which people develop much of their personality very rapidly in childhood and subsequent changes in adulthood are often no more than superficial. By speeding up this process even more by presenting children with increasingly complex literature before they have reached that "

certain age of maturity” that Adler alludes to, children might develop too quickly before they are ready to understand the ramifications thus putting them in a vulnerable psychological position in their adult years. Conversely, if Freud’s theories about the importance of childhood development are to be subscribed to, it would also be dangerous to stunt a child’s knowledge and understanding at such a crucial time in their psychological growth. As Moebius (1986) notes, the picture book should be preserved as “ the last frontier of innocence” and, as such, should not be corrupted by being held under excessive scrutiny. In the pursuit of literacy the importance of stimulus must be stressed.

An active brain will promote literacy or, at least, a thirst for education whether that is artistic, mathematical or scientific. Literacy is achieved through developing children with a healthy relationship with books, whether they grow up to read Crime and Punishment or with a penchant for Mills and Boone; to implement a literary hierarchy would be a demonstration of snobbery and artistic ignorance. Literacy is independent from the literary canon.

Denying children colourful pictures also seems to suggest that visual art is not as valuable as literature which is similarly unbalanced. Children should learn that art is about equality and, although they can embrace their preferred medium, they should not discount other forms of expression or consider them inadequate. Combining literature with pictures demonstrates the way in which art forms can effectively interact. Art forms are not exclusive. Furthermore, if employing pictures to captivate a child also inexplicably entwines their mind with the text then, what is the harm?

Many adults reserve a special place in their hearts for their childhood favourites: from Noddy to The Very Jolly Postman; from The Mr. Men books to The Velveteen Rabbit: their love of reading may be pinpointed to these very affairs. It seems unfair to deny young readers of today these warm, fuzzy memories of bright funny pictures and exciting colours for fear of patronising them. Children should be allowed to be children before the age of five rather than constantly pushing them to develop more rapidly - if they are ready to advance then that could be nurtured on an individual basis. The fact is, with children, with people even, the way in which a mind works varies from person to person so it seems futile to prescribe an overall right or wrong on picture books. The marriage of text and pictures will spark the imagination of some children while others will derive stimulation from constructing mud pies in the garden. Modern children should not be robbed of the colours of innocence; even if the modern colours of innocence come in the form of The Tweenies.