

Writing a Picture Book Text

by Ian Bone

A magical World.

*Then the Elephant said to the Bad baby, "But you haven't once said please!"
And then he said, 'You haven't ONCE said please!' Then the Elephant sat
down suddenly in the middle of the road and the Bad Baby fell off.*

Elfrida Vipont & Raymond Briggs (illust), "The Elephant and the Bad Baby",
Hamish Hamilton, 1969

Picture books create magical worlds for young children, older children and adults. Sometimes these magical worlds seem real, but allow for a freedom of action or interaction that wouldn't normally happen in the real world. Sometimes these magical worlds have strange or imaginative elements to them. And sometimes these worlds are simply magical. Bears speak to birds. Mice are brave. Cows row boats. Heroes are one inch tall.

So, what is a picture book?

This is an ever changing art form. The Childrens Book Council of Australia introduced a special category for picture books in their annual Book of the Year awards. This was in response to picture books by authors such as Gary Crew and John Marsden that were clearly for a much older market than the traditional picture book market (pre-school and early childhood).

Picture books still appeal to young children, but there are also many examples out on the market made for older readers. Middle and upper primary school-aged children will read complex picture books as a form of entertainment. Adults will delight in books such as "The Rabbits" (Lothian) or any of Shaun Tan's more recent picture books.

Generally speaking, a picture book is a book where the text and the illustrations serve an equal function in conveying the story, theme, idea or emotions. They are not broken into chapters, but rather tell the story as a continual body of text. This distinction sets them apart from early readers and chapter books for early childhood students, which also have a rich illustrative component.

Picture books come in a variety of sizes, shapes and length. Anything from one, to ten, to 100, to 300 to 1,000 words can make a picture book. Just as long as the text and idea (and later, the illustrations) will sell to the market place.

Picture Books have Pictures

This might seem like an obvious statement, but many aspiring writers to this form neglect this crucial fact when plotting their story. Picture books are the showcase of any publishing house. Feel the paper. Look at the richness of their colour. See how much love and attention has gone into the cover, the font, the design, the layout. Picture books can be breathtakingly beautiful. They are gorgeous to hold, and even more gorgeous to behold.

The text for a picture book may take an author one week, one day, four weeks or three months to complete. The illustrations will take anything from months to years to complete. If you've ever read a picture book to a young child, you'll know that they pour over the pictures, and that most of their initial relationship to the book comes through the illustrations. It's the pictures that they look at as someone else reads the text. It's the pictures they look for to give meaning to what they are hearing.

Adults and older children are slightly different, but they still adore those pictures. They might talk about how clever the story was, or how rich the language, but they'll spend most of their time talking about the illustrations.

So, are the illustrations the most important part of a picture book?

The answer to that question depends on if you ask an author or an illustrator. The diplomatic line is that the text and the illustrations work in harmony, rather like the perfect marriage, enriching each other, complementing each other, and explaining each other. Certainly there are many picture books where the text and the illustrations *do* work together in this way. But there are just as many where the illustrations carry the main load and make the picture book successful. Think of some famous picture books that you are familiar with. What image comes to your mind. Is it the story? The language? Or is it the illustrations?

The pictures in a picture book 'brand' that picture book for the consumer. Just as the swoosh means Nike, the pictures will become the most recognizable symbol of most picture books. But that doesn't mean that text isn't important.

Most picture books start with a story, not an illustration

Generally speaking, picture books that are created by both an author and illustrator (two different people) start with the author's imagination. The author invents a wonderful story, or has a brilliant idea, then sits at his or her computer and scratches out the text ... again and again and again! When it is simply wonderful and grabs the reader's attention, (not to mention the publisher's) then it is sent to the illustrator by the publisher. Not all illustrators want to

work on text that's been handed to them. Sometimes they're not inspired by the story. Sometimes they don't feel that there's any 'room' for their input. Sometimes they can't see the illustrations forming in their imagination. A publisher might go through several illustrators before one is found for a text. And that's probably after an extensive process of elimination in the first place.

Not every illustrator is going to be right for a certain text.

Illustrators have their own styles. Some do realistic illustrations but are not very good with characterization. Some have marvelous cartoon styles, but are limited when it comes to representing drama, or deeper emotions. Some just draw the way they draw no matter what the text is. Have a look in a childrens book shop at illustrated picture books and chapter books. See if you can find several works by the same illustrator. How varied are they?

Animal, Human, Mythical or a Bear?

Picture books for young children have a huge variety of main characters. As the heading suggests, they can be a tortoise, a dog, a girl, a boy, a dragon, a giant or a bear. There are so many picture books with bears as the main character that they do deserve to have their own classification. Generally speaking, picture books that come from Europe or America will have more animal and bear characters than picture books from Australia. We have our possums and koalas and kangaroos, but we don't have a rich tradition of successful picture books with native Australian animals as characters. "Possum Magic" is the notable exception to this, but there are precious few other examples of picture books that have sold well using our own beasts.

Whether a picture book features a bear or a gerbil, the most important factor is the child's empathy with that character. This leads to a variety of tools that an author can use to create a strong emotional involvement from the reader for a non-human character. The animal might be given human characteristics – speech, reasoning, emotions – which help the child to identify. The animal (or whatever) might be placed in situations where the child can transfer their own feelings onto it. For example, a young joey becomes lost from its mother's pouch. The joey doesn't speak, or do anything out of the ordinary, but the child relates to its sense of abandonment and fear.

The non-human character might do something extraordinary, or beyond its normal capabilities. Lassie was a classic example of this. Many stories feature dogs that drag their

owners to safety, or towards an injured child etc.

Some picture book structures

No matter what your character, the aim is to engage the child's imagination and create a marvelous, compelling, gripping, funny or magical time for them. There is no limitation to imagination, but it may be useful to explore a couple of tried and true structures of picture books to begin with.

Turning the ritual into magic

An every day ritual, such as bath-time, preparing for bed, going to the shops, going to playgroup, walking the dog, is somehow transformed into something special, either through circumstance or magic. "Can't You Sleep Little Bear" is an example of this. The older bear and the younger bear obviously have a going to bed ritual. But this night the younger bear is restless. The older bear keeps coming up with normal, expected solutions to the younger bear's problem, until finally he does something out of the ordinary. He takes the bear outside to the DARK. And it works. The younger bear falls asleep. There is nothing unusual in the plot (apart from the fact that they're bears). No fairies put Little Bear to sleep. No moon dust falls on his head. The simple warmth between the caring adult and the vulnerable child is what gives this story magic. Little Bear finally gets what he's been wanting all along – a cuddle.

Even the structure of this story is ritualistic. The little lantern, the bigger one, the gigantic one until Big Bear has no other lantern to produce from the cupboard. This is a structure based around three escalating repeats, leading to an unexpected, yet logical, conclusion.

Tickling the funny bone

Young children have a great sense of humour. They love the absurd, the ridiculous and the silly. Stories that plug into this humour, and present them funny situations that they can understand are quite successful. However, even more successful are the ones that preserve a bit of humour for the adults as well. After all, it's mostly adults who buy picture books.

The ordinary

A child's ordinary world is represented in these types of picture books. Examples such as

“You’ll Wake the Baby”, or “Victoria’s Market” show children in ordinary situations. Two older kids play loudly and the mother keeps asking them to be quiet lest they wake the baby. The kids try to be quiet, but they just can’t help making noise. Eventually they tire themselves out trying not to make noise, and fall asleep. This then lends the book to a satisfying ending with a humorous twist – the baby wakes and makes so much noise she’ll wake the kids. In “Victoria’s Market” Victoria becomes lost from Dad. The magic in this story comes from the illustrations, where a parade in the market has a series of strange characters such as goblins and ghosts walking around. However, in a nice twist, it is Dad who becomes increasingly frantic as the calm and happy Victoria roams round the market having fun.

A Quest

The characters in these picture books set out to find something out, to prove something, to save something or to simply get to the other side. (The bear went over the mountain....) “Where Does Thursday Go?” by Janeen Brian is an example of this. Splodge has a birthday on Thursday (Birthdays are a regular theme in picture books). At the end of the day, he wonders where Thursday, and therefore his special birthday, goes. Splodge and a friend set out to find where Thursday goes. This then creates a delightful, magical journey full of simple philosophies in the vein of Pooh.

Problem Solving

In this type of picture book the character has a problem and sets out to solve it. This style is closer to the novel style. “Buffy” by Bob Graham is an example, where Buffy is badly treated so he escapes and goes out on the road. His problem is he has no home, until he finds the delightful Mary Kelly who lives in exactly the type of family where Buffy would fit in. Another example is “Bear’s Bargain” by Frank Asch. Bear wants to fly, Bird wants to be strong. Bear teaches Bird how to be strong, Bird teaches Bear how to fly. The story is simple yet delicate. At no time does the author over-work the idea. He allows the characters to conclude that ‘it’s not working’. But they don’t give up. Both characters come up with child-like and touching ways to help the other solve their problem and fulfill their aspiration.

Rhyming

Many picture book texts consist of simple rhymes. They can be pleasing to the ear, and can make for lots of fun. However, rhymes can create mountains of problems for the author trying to come up with the perfect rhyme to ‘purple’. Another note of caution. Rhyming text means

less chance of overseas sale into non-English speaking countries.

There are obviously many more types of picture book structures out on the market. Because picture books are generally short, it is easy to break them down and see how they've been constructed. If you are stuck for a picture book idea, it might help to take a favourite picture book and analyse its structure, then emulate that for your own story.

A final word on language

Text is obviously important to picture books, so make every word count. Read your story out loud. Read them to other people. Read them to children. Are you over-writing? Being too verbose? Have you under-stated too much? Can you put it better? Can you make it sound lyrical or magical without exceeding the child's vocabulary range by too much?