



Learning to Read with Picture Books

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Guidance from **Jill Bennett** on how to choose books for this approach.

'What do we need to look for when choosing books for this approach?' A question asked by many readers enthusiastic about getting children reading with 'real' books but wanting some help in getting started.

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Jill Bennett offers some guidance with examples from recent publications.

Children begin to develop literary competence long before the question of literacy looms on the horizon: from their first encounters with nursery rhymes and stories, they are starting to develop a tacit understanding of how stories work, and this is something we must not lose sight of in our endeavours to help them to learn to read. Just watch a young child 'reading' a favourite picture book to him or herself, recounting the main events or maybe following the activities of the main character through each picture as she/he turns the pages.

Books to look out for first of all are those which draw on and extend this ability. These are the ones to use in helping children learn to read themselves. Nursery rhymes and traditional tales in picture book format are especially appropriate. Tomie de Paola's **The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog** is a delightful rendition of a rhyme that many children will know. This offers great support as readers gradually fit the familiar words to those on the page. This is not the same as rote recall, though memory does play a part: what is already in the reader's head has to be brought to the printed words. And in the very beginning, if it is no more than memorisation of loved words, no matter: the child is behaving like a reader and gaining satisfaction and confidence by so doing. This particular version, as well as the main rhyme, has numerous others contained within the illustrations - children love identifying these - and it encourages them to 'read the pictures' carefully.

Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain by Verna Aardema with pictures by Beatriz Vidal also has the strong rhymes and rhythms so important for developing readers: 'This is the grass,/all brown and dead,/That needed the rain/from the cloud overhead -/The big, black cloud/all heavy with rain,/That shadowed the ground/on Kapiti Plain.' But this book uses a familiar pattern to introduce a different, African, story so we move from the known to the new; such narratives are really a chain of events, paralleling the development of children's own storytelling.

Also drawing on and extending children's own storytelling ability are wordless picture books. The simplest of these can also be used to help children come to know about book conventions such as left to right directional sequencing. Not all wordless books are necessarily appropriate for beginners. Jan Ormerod's **Sunshine** is; it relates, in strip format, the domestic details of the early morning activities of a small girl and her parents.

Anticipation and prediction are essential for successful reading, and stories with patterned language structures help their development. **Where Does the Sun Go at Night?** by Mirra Ginsburg, illustrated by Jose Aruego and Ariane Dewey, is a good example of this sort of book. Based on an Armenian folksong, it works on a question and answer format: 'Where

does the sun go at night? To his grandma's house. Where does he sleep? In his grandma's bed. Who is his grandma?'. With its single line of text per page, in large print, this is an ideal one for the beginning stage.

So too is **Ready, Steady, Go!** by Shigeo Watanabe and Yasuo Ohtomo, about a small bear's athletic endeavours. Here it is the pictures which act as context cues for the concise text. This is exactly the sort of book with which very young children teach themselves to read.

Design is important in books for learner readers; besides aesthetic considerations, aspects of format such as placing of text in relation to pictures, size of print, the amount of leading, length of reading lines and line breaks can work positively to help those in the early stages. Let me stress however, that these must not be the overriding considerations: a strong story is THE most important criterion: children seem able to overcome potential obstacles if the story is one they are really determined to read.

Increasingly more picture books are, happily, combining all the elements one would ask for on behalf of children learning to read. Susanna Gretz's **Teddybears Moving Day** is such a one. The colourful pictures are full of lovely, humorous touches; the large, clear, well-spaced, well-leaded text is helpfully phrased; there is bubble talk and other words besides the main narrative; but above all, the story is such that it engages and holds the reader's attention throughout.

Fin M'Coul by Tomie de Paola, the traditional Irish tale of a giant with a clever wife, is another. And the activities within the pictures, of a number of tiny beings - animal and faery - can introduce to the child reader the notion of a subplot.

Learner involvement is very important at all stages of reading development and those books which positively encourage this are a great boon.

Eric Hill's **Where's Spot?** with its opening question, and the clever use of flaps, doors and lids to open, ensures immediate involvement; and moreover, this device is not mere gimmickry as is the case with many pop-up type books; the movable parts are an integral part of the narrative sequence.

This is also the case with Jan Pienkowski's **Dinner Time** whose marvellous, gaping-mouthed animals snap at each turn of the page. Its two basic language structures are highly predictable as indeed is the page layout itself. All in all this one offers maximum incentive to the learner.

Something that seems to bother people about this approach to reading is that the focus on meaning, rather than on the absolute accuracy of the surface language, can lead to carelessness and misunderstandings. What we need to encourage is flexibility in our children's reading. Seuss, I think, can help. Rhyming nonsense such as that in **There's a Wocket in My Pocket** focuses the reader's attention on the words themselves; whilst the 'dibbles', 'dopps' and 'eeks' in **Mr Brown Can Moo, Can You?**, another Beginner Book, present a variety of letter/sound correspondences in a hilarious context.

Alphabet books can help towards an understanding of sound/symbol relationships: the better ones also contribute towards children's imaginative development. Arnold and Anita Lobel's **On Market Street** does just that: a small boy goes shopping, and every letter represents an item on his list of purchases: in each case a figure is made up entirely of the relevant articles. This book's appeal is likely to last long after a child has learnt his ABC or come to know the potential role of initial sounds in words.

Through contact with books like these children gradually become skilled and confident enough to tackle longer stories. At this stage books with several stories, or chapters, and less emphasis on illustrations, help build up stamina. World's Work I Can Reads, with the king of kings Arnold Lobel and his 'Frog and Toad' and 'Mouse' stories heading the list, have long reigned supreme. Other publishers are now joining the field and Bodley Head have Lobel as illustrator of one of the titles in the new Bodley Beginners series. (What a pity the series name is so prominently displayed on the cover. Who wants to be labelled 'Beginner'?) So far there are four titles available, all with plenty of pictures and an

unforbiddingly presented text.

Tales of Oliver Pig by Jean van Leeuwen, which has the Lobel pictures. contains five short stories full of charming domestic detail: "Grandmother likes to read in bed," said Mother... Oliver got his monster book and his elephant. "Grandmother can read my monster book," he said. "And she can hug my elephant when she goes to sleep."

Increasingly longer stories build on this stamina and at this stage children are well on the way to becoming committed and responsive readers, which is what we are all working towards.

The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog

Tomie de Paola, Methuen, 0 416 21350 2, £3.95

Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain

Verna Aardema, pictures by Beatriz Vidal, Macmillan, 0 333 32009 3, £3.95

Sunshine

Jan Ormerod, Kestrel, 0 7226 5736 6, £3.95

Where Does the Sun Go at Night?

Mirra Ginsburg, ill. Jose Aruego and Ariane Dewey, Julia MacRae, 0 86203 058 7. £4.25

Ready, Steady, Go!

Shigeo Watanabe and Yasuo Ohtomo, Bodley Head. 0 370 30406 3. £2.95

Teddybears Moving Day

Susanna Gretz. Benn, 0 510 12402 X, £3.95

Fin M'Coul

Tomie de Paola, Andersen Press, 0 862640 00 8. £3.95

Where's Spot?

Erie Hill, Heinemann, - 0 434 94288 X, £2.95

Dinner Time

Jan Pienkowski, Gallery Five, 0 95072 140 9, £2.95

There's a Wocket in My Pocket

(Dr Seuss), Collins Beginner Books, 0 00 171272 1, £1.25

Mr Brown Can Moo, Can You?

(Dr Seuss), Collins Beginner Books, 0 00 171275 6, £1.25

On Market Street

Arnold and Anita Lobel, Benn, 0 510 001181,£3.95

Tales of Oliver Pig

Jean van Leeuwen, ill. Arnold Lobel, Bodley Head. 0 370 30409 8, £3.25

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