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Julia Eccleshare on 30 years of **Rosie's Walk**.

Published in 1968 with a daringly minimal text and flat, stylised illustrations, **Rosie's Walk** was not only a picture book that was interactive in an innovative way with its young 'readers' but it was delightfully comic. **Julia Eccleshare** looks at the history of children's literature's favourite hen.

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When, on the advice of Susan Hirshman, children's books editor at Greenwillow in the USA, Pat Hutchins cut down the lengthy text of her first picture book to the famous 36 words that **Rosie's Walk** has now become and took it back for re-examination, she was rewarded by Hirshman announcing that, 'This is going to be a classic.'

A classic

Thirty years on, **Rosie's Walk** is, indeed, a classic. To celebrate the life of a book which has gone through countless hardback and paperback editions, first in Puffin and currently in Red Fox, The Bodley Head are publishing a neat board book version making it freshly available to a new and slightly younger generation of children.

The story of Rosie the hen who steps out on a simple journey around the farmyard, apparently oblivious of the fox who is following her, is only partly told by the text. The pictures reveal a great deal more which allows a child to enjoy the story with the author, long before they can read all the words. This collusion between the author and child, combined with the way the pictures tell the story, explain why, very swiftly after its publication, **Rosie's Walk** was seized upon as *the* perfect picture book for teaching children to read.

Readers and non readers

In **On Being Literate** Margaret Meek wrote, 'The child who understands that she and the author of **Rosie's Walk** know that the fox is chasing Rosie but Rosie may not know, has already begun to learn the distinctive kind of sharing that readers and writers engage in.'

For the non reader, following the story through the pictures enables him/her to tell the story in far greater detail than the reader can achieve. It is this possession that makes **Rosie's Walk** such a gem for the teacher because it is all about enabling the child to take charge of the story. (Perhaps it was fortunate that **Rosie's Walk** was published coincidentally with a commitment to child-centred learning. It might not have fared so favourably in the era of the Literacy Hour.) Of course, Pat Hutchins did not set out to write a book that would become the core title in helping children to learn to read.

Thinking filmically

As a young illustrator with a couple of years as an assistant art director at the advertising agency J Walter Thompson

behind her, she had her sights on writing and illustrating a picture book. From her years in advertising she had 'learnt to put ideas in a simple way' which is probably why she was able to respond to Hirshman's suggestion that she jettison almost everything in her original draft for the book and concentrate instead on the one interesting character 'the silent fox who observes his prey.

It may also have been instrumental in her vision of how the book should work. 'I was trying to think of it filmically,' says Pat Hutchins. 'I set it up on each page so that it is the child turning the page who makes the drama.'

How simply she describes it. And how accurately. Try turning the page and it becomes clear that it is in that turning of it that the story is told, giving the reader a role to play in the unfolding of the story. Judged alone, neither the words nor the simple illustrations are so exceptional, but the interplay between the two is remarkable. 'The type of story I write dictates the artwork. The good thing about doing the artwork for Rosie in separated colour is that the line is so sharp. It makes it very stylised which fits the story well.'

Dramatic irony

But, it is not just the structure of **Rosie's Walk** that has made it endure. It is also the superb use of dramatic irony that makes what could be a common enough story in children's books into a masterpiece. Rosie's brainless insouciance as she goes about her daily business and the very closeness of her encounters continue to entertain long after the joke is understood.

None of this is chance. Pat Hutchins thinks about each of her books as a whole and, surprisingly for a winner of the Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration, the stories come to her first. **Rosie's Walk** took a year to create after Pat had been sent away to work on it. Even then there were details to perfect. 'Susan Hirshman and I practised the scene where the bag of flour is going to fall on the fox's head ' just to make sure that it really could happen.' And if you follow the winding string ' as all young readers do ' you will find that it would unwind neatly and easily, dropping the flour sack smack on the top of the fox.

Pat Hutchins followed **Rosie's Walk** with a quick succession of other titles. And no, there never was to be a sequel. 'Rosie was a one off. I moved on to other stories after that. Sometimes other illustrators feel that they've copied Rosie but, after all, it's only the story of a chase.' Or is it?

For what it leaves out, as much for what it has in it, **Rosie's Walk** deserves to celebrate its thirtieth birthday.

The thirtieth anniversary special edition board book of **Rosie's Walk** by Pat Hutchins is published this month by The Bodley Head (0 370 32446 3, £3.99).

Julia Eccleshare is the children's books editor of the **Guardian**.

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