



Early Years Reading: the power of the picture book

Article Author:

[Helen Bromley](#) [1]

[152](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Helen Bromley on books with a narrative drive.

Picture books combine the verbal with the visual to inspire young learners, first as listeners and 'lookers' and then as readers. In this third article in BfK's 'Learning to Read' series, **Helen Bromley** reflects on the importance of visual literacy while sharing her knowledge of intriguing and fascinating picture books which have the narrative drive to draw in the very young.<!--break-->

To get an idea of the importance of the narrative power of picture books in the life of a young reader, you need look no further than Herb. Herb is Lauren Child's boy hero, an enthusiastic reader by all accounts. First introduced to us in **Beware of the Storybook Wolves**, Herb reappears in **Who's Afraid of The Big Bad Book?** where his passion for reading is explained on the first page: 'Herb loved storybooks. Although he wasn't a very good reader, it didn't matter because he could tell a lot from the pictures.'

Lauren Child may have underestimated Herb's capabilities. Being able to 'tell a lot from the pictures' is an invaluable talent in its own right. Reading picture books requires an intellectual and emotional engagement with the rich visual images as well as with the text. The act of looking is a primary experience and most children learn to read visual images long before they learn to read the written word. This fact alone should place picture books at the very heart of learning to read. Their use recognises children's visual literacy and provides equality of access for all children to the powerful pleasures that involvement with narrative can bring.

Reading as a quest for meaning

The process of learning to read has long been described as a quest for meaning (Barrs, Ellis & Thomas, 1991). A 'quest' suggests the challenge and excitement of a journey and the promise of a reward at the end. Picture books written and illustrated to intrigue, engage and entertain children can provide the starting point, path and landscape of such a quest. The journey travelled should not only involve making meaning of the narrative itself, but also initiate children into the process of using reading as a tool for finding out about themselves and their world. Children need to discover what reading is good for, what it means to them as individuals and to see it as an inherently pleasurable activity 'just as Herb, who takes his books everywhere, does.

Inspiration for boys: dinosaurs, vampires and a naughty bus

Educators selecting books to use in the Early Years need to create the broadest possible reading landscape. This is particularly true where boys are concerned. Their preferred reading landscape may not mirror that of their teacher. Reflect on Herb's tastes: he likes scary books best, those containing voracious dinosaurs and vampires. Hardly the stuff that most teachers would choose! It is possible to offer books that will engage the likes of Herb and which will offer intrinsically fascinating ways of narrating a story.

Naughty Bus is one such book. This story of a boy and his toy bus offers a combination of visual and textual devices

that will capture the interest of most young readers. The story is told through photographs that represent familiar situations in unfamiliar ways, through a challenging array of viewpoints. The voice of the narrator changes throughout, offering further opportunities for meaning making. Interrogation of the text by the reader is an integral part of experiencing this book, and would undoubtedly encourage children to return to it many times. The structure of the book is not dissimilar to either **Rosie's Walk** or **Handa's Surprise**, where text and illustrations combine to teach young readers invaluable lessons about how narrative works. **Naughty Bus** also shows that a story can be told in a variety of ways, and that there is always more than one side to a story.

Building collections of favourites

Young readers should be encouraged to build a collection of favourite picture books that they can return to again and again. This might be for emotional satisfaction or intellectual challenge, or indeed a combination of both. Such collections give children the chance to wallow in the language structures of narrative and to learn about plot, character and setting in a pleasurable way, from those who know how to orchestrate narrative devices to best effect. Author/illustrators such as Anthony Browne, John Burningham, Satoshi Kitamura, David McKee, Tony Ross and many others construct narratives ? combining words and pictures ? that are accessible to young readers but have an intellectual complexity that does not patronise or underestimate them. Children at both Key Stages 1 and 2 (5-7 and 7-11 year-olds) make meanings from complex narratives such as Browne's **Zoo**, relating what they read to their own lives and experiences (Arizpe and Styles, 2003). For bilingual learners too, Browne's pictures provided a platform for debate and even the beginnings of literary criticism.

Developing empathy

Developing empathy with characters portrayed in picture books is one way in which children will be encouraged to return to particular books. Reading body language is an important skill and Reception class children are only too aware of Bill's concerns about his mother's return in **Owl Babies**, superbly illustrated by Patrick Benson. Ostensibly about baby owls, it is a book with which young children identify as it highlights the concerns they feel when separated from their parents and carers. Used in conjunction with Lauren Child's **I Am Too Absolutely Small for School**, it would offer an opportunity for children to explore some of the most important lessons of all.

Body language is also used to great effect by John Burningham in **The Magic Bed**. No words could adequately represent the feelings of the young boy who returns from holiday to discover that his Nan has disposed of his travelling bed. It is the pictures which convey the distress with a use of line and colour that is masterly. The young reader is encouraged to pore over the pages and a sensitive adult can take the opportunity to discuss adult motivations and issues of the rights of children to have their views respected. This book also offers a myriad of ways into drama and role play, should there be a desire to explore it in this fashion.

Reading aloud

We need to read aloud to children so that they can hear narratives of a greater complexity than those which they can manage themselves and be tantalised by what is waiting around the corner. Books need to be presented with enthusiasm and excitement, and not merely used as a vehicle for analysis and deconstruction. A book such as **Let's Get a Pup!** by Bob Graham, ravishingly illustrated and sensitively written, is far more than a sum of its parts and demands to be enjoyed primarily because of the emotional highs and lows that it brings the reader, not because of how many ?key words? it might happen to contain.

Quentin Blake's **The Green Ship** is another picture book that deserves to be available to all children in the Early Years, either as a read-aloud or, for more fluent readers, as an independent read. The story sends out powerful messages about the value of play as a tool for developing the imagination, and indeed as a vehicle for learning, and offers a view of childhood adventure and exploration that is immediately alluring. The adults in this book never appropriate the children's play in order to test them or to use it for their own ends. Instead, through co-operation and collaboration, they support, enhance and extend the imaginary games in a way that could usefully be replicated throughout the education

system.

Tackling the 'small shapes'?

Picture books can help children to tackle the 'small shapes' of reading or 'word level' skills (Barrs & Ellis 1997). The acquisition of a collection of known picture books where reading skills can be rehearsed, revisited and reinforced is an essential part of learning to read. Rhyming texts in such classic picture books as **Each Peach Pear Plum** and **Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?** and in the timeless Dr Seuss books and resources, bathe children in the tunes and patterns of language in an entertaining way. And there are more recent favourites such as **Night Monkey, Day Monkey** and **The Snail and the Whale**.

Alphabet books of quality demonstrate that learning sound/letter relationships can be amusing, engaging and intellectually challenging for all the right reasons. **Animalia** by Graeme Base is one such book: the alliterative text in its incredible array of fonts works to great effect with the powerful illustrations. Searching for Graeme on each page added to the attraction for the children in my Reception class. **Ellsworth's Extraordinary Electric Ears** is a wonderful addition to the genre, with a juxtaposition of words and images that is as hilarious as it is thought provoking. **A is for Artist** also offers a view of the alphabet that is visually satisfying, and one that would stimulate a lot of discussion. Children who acquire alphabetic knowledge in such contexts are far more likely to view it in a positive light and to begin to be intrigued by the possibilities of representing written language.

For the emergent writer picture books offer excellent role models. Possible worlds painted in both words and pictures open up before them, increasing the choices that they can make themselves as writers of their own texts. Story structures of the widest variety from Sally Grindley's **Shhh!** to Kes Gray's **Eat Your Peas** show children that anything is possible. As adults encouraging children to write we need to ensure that children are given opportunities to combine pictures and words in ways that reflect the authors and illustrators mentioned above. If looking is a prime way of divining meaning, then drawing has to be valued as one way of encoding it. To deny children the opportunity to draw is to limit the ways in which they can express their knowledge of narrative structure effectively and to deny the value of their experiences with picture books.

Final thoughts

The reading landscape of the Early Years classroom would be a barren place without picture books. In the quest for meaning that is the essence of learning to read, teachers need to be clear about the path they wish the children to tread, and about how to make it one that can be trodden lightly by all children. We would be wise to give visual literacy the status that it deserves. In mapping the path to reading, access to picture books is an entitlement, not a luxury.

Helen Bromley has been a teacher of young children and is now an Early Years consultant and researcher.

Children's Books and Resources

Beware of the Storybook Wolves, Lauren Child, Hodder, 32pp, 0 340 77916 0, £5.99 pbk

Who's Afraid of The Big Bad Book? Lauren Child, Hodder, 32pp, 0 340 80555 2, £6.99 pbk

Naughty Bus, Jan and Jerry Oke, Little Knowall Publishing, 48pp, 0 9547921 0 6, £9.99 pbk

Rosie's Walk, Pat Hutchins, Red Fox, 32pp, 0 09 941399 X, £4.99 pbk

Handa's Surprise, Eileen Browne, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 3634 0, £4.99 pbk

Zoo, Anthony Browne, Red Fox, 32pp, 0 09 921901 8, £5.99 pbk

Owl Babies, Martin Waddell, ill. Patrick Benson, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 3167 5, £4.99 pbk

I Am Too Absolutely Small for School , Lauren Child, Orchard, 32pp, 1 84362 366 8, £5.99 pbk

The Magic Bed , John Burningham, Red Fox, 40pp, 0 09 943969 7, £4.99 pbk

Let?s Get a Pup! Bob Graham, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 9441 3, £4.99 pbk

Each Peach Pear Plum , Allan Ahlberg, ill. Janet Ahlberg, Puffin, 32pp, 0 14 050919 4, £4.99 pbk

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? Bill Martin, ill. Eric Carle, Puffin, 32pp, 0 14 050296 3, £5.99 pbk

Night Monkey, Day Monkey , Julia Donaldson, ill. Lucy Richards, Egmont, 32pp, 0 7497 4893 1, £5.99 pbk

The Snail and the Whale , Julia Donaldson, ill. Axel Scheffler, Macmillan, 32pp, 0 333 98224 X, £5.99 pbk

The Green Ship , Quentin Blake, Red Fox, 32pp, 0 09 925332 1, £5.99 pbk

Animalia , Graeme Base, Picture Puffins, 32pp, 0 14 054112 8, sadly out of print

Ellsworth?s Extraordinary Electric Ears: and other Amazing Alphabet Anecdotes , Valorie Fisher, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 0 689 83736 4, £9.99 hbk

A is for Artist , photography Ella Doran, Tate Publishing, 56pp 1 85437 556 3, £12.99 hbk

Shhh! Sally Grindley, ill. Peter Utton, Hodder, 32pp, 0 340 74662 9, £5.99 pbk

Eat Your Peas , Kes Gray, ill. Nick Sharratt, Red Fox, 32pp, 0 09 940467 2, £4.99 pbk

References

Barrs, Myra, Ellis, Sue & Thomas, Anne (eds.) (1991) **The Reading Book** , London: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

Arizpe, E & Styles, M (2003) **Children Reading Pictures** , London: Routledge Falmer

Barrs, Myra & Ellis, Sue (eds.) (1997) **Core Booklist: A book to accompany ? The Core Book?** , London: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

In the next article in the series **Margaret Mallett** , Visiting Tutor in Primary English in the Education Department at Goldsmiths? College, explores how we support children?s early non-fiction reading, embedding it in all the other things that are happening in the Early Years classroom.

This article is part of a series about Early Years Reading. Click on these links to read companion articles:

[1. From hornbooks to electronic texts](#) [3]

[2. Getting young readers passionate about books](#) [4]

[4. First encounters with non-fiction](#) [5]

[5. ICT and early literacy: multiple literacies at work](#) [6]

Page Number:

11

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/152/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/early-years-reading-the-power-of-the-picture-book>

Links:

- [1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/helen-bromley>
- [2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/152>
- [3] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/./150/161>
- [4] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/./151/145>
- [5] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/./153/115>
- [6] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/./154/102>