



Sounding Off! Some noisy picture books

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[Jill Bennett](#) [1]

[173](#) [2]

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Other Articles

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Jill Bennett on picture books with phonic elements.

Now that the synthetic phonics approach to literacy is so all pervasive, how can teachers foster a love of reading and stories while also giving close attention to phonics? Perhaps books are needed that will provide children with fun and enjoyment alongside 'phonic' elements. **Jill Bennett** recommends picture books with built-in sound elements that will engage and enthuse young readers.

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The purpose of this article is not to argue at length with the imposition of synthetic phonics or the increasing extent of State as opposed to professional control in literacy teaching, particularly reading. (Henrietta Dombey has already done this in 'What happened to England's National Literacy Strategy?', **BfK** 169, March 2008.) However, since the Early Years Foundation Stage became statutory from September this year, all of us concerned with furthering the cause of fostering true literacy with young children, do need to ask ourselves important questions about the developmental appropriateness of the Early Learning reading goals that require such young children to:

Hear and say sounds in words in the order in which they occur.

Link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet.

Of course, there are some more holistic requirements too, those that concern themselves with meaningful reading such as:

Retell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.

Show an understanding of the elements of stories...

However, in my experience, several highly undesirable consequences are already evident:

1. Thanks to the media, many parents with children in or about to start the Foundation stage, have got the impression that there is only one approach to early reading, that approach being through the exclusive use of synthetic phonics.
2. Synthetic phonics is being used as the dominant, or even, in some cases, the only approach to beginning reading. As a consequence, both those who are already able to read when they enter reception classes, and those not at a developmental stage to benefit from synthetic phonics, are being subjected to a daily dose (often around 20 minutes) of boredom. This is time that could be better spent in activities with real, exciting texts that will help further true literacy in these children.
3. The notion of personalised learning, another government priority so we were led to believe, seems to have been overridden or at best forgotten.

The result is a reductive, mechanistic and simplistic view of early reading, treating it as merely decoding, saying the words and getting them off the page so to speak. Where does understanding of the text, let alone enjoyment of reading come in? Sorry, children, not until later when you have done all that oral blending and segmenting and are able to read, ie. decode some VC (vowel consonant) and CVC (consonant/vowel/consonant) words and learned some 'high-frequency' 'tricky' words such as *the, to, go* and *no*. Then you can start reading some captions that include those tricky words and after at least six weeks you will be able to decode such exciting and meaningful phrases as 'go to the log hut' or 'no lid on the pan' and a whole host of other such. These will 'provide a bridge between the reading of single words and the reading of books' thus enabling 'children to use and apply their decoding skills on simple materials fully compatible with the word-reading level they have reached.' I don't think so! If the medium is the message when it comes to choice of materials for reading (and after over 25 years' direct experience of working with early and beginning readers that is still what I believe) then what experience of reading are countless under-sixes now receiving?

What I want to do in this article is to suggest some books that will not only foster a love of reading and stories, but which also incorporate sound elements that provide the vital messages about fun and enjoyment alongside the required 'phonic' elements. I first decided there was a need for such a list after talking to a number of new nursery parents who had already been influenced by 'phonics rules' which they had picked up from the press and television.

Farmyard and animal tales

First on my list is Mike Rosen's **The Bear in the Cave**, with its *Do bee doo, splishety splash* and *splish, vroomy vroom chuffity chuff, whooshy whoosh* and *hee hee hee* sounds, not to mention the textual patterning and circular nature of the telling. What better example could I have wished for to put into the hands of these parents than this superb real story that is just perfect for getting children listening carefully, joining in with sound making and fostering a love of language for its own sake? A picture book such as this as well as Rosen's **We're Going on a Bear Hunt** also provides wonderful opportunities for movement and acting out the narrative. Thus I encouraged parents and carers to let go and enjoy themselves, to release the actor in each and every one of them. Needless to say, the children needed no encouragement.

Many picture books have animal characters of various shapes and sizes and the narratives therefore incorporate animal sounds and movement. The farmyard is a favourite setting for many authors and illustrators and their picture books have potential for joining in with sound making. Here are a few tried and tested examples.

[image:The Farmyard Jamboree.jpg:left]

Inspired by a folk tale from Chile, **The Farmyard Jamboree** is a very lively cumulative story, that starts when a small boy's Grandpa gives him a clucking red hen ('*Cluck! Cluck! Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!*'). Another seven animals join the parade each bringing a baby animal and adding another sound until there are sixteen animals making a great deal of noise.

[image:Stuck in the Mud.jpg:left]

Stuck in the Mud is told in rhyme with lots of repetition. A new day dawns peacefully down on the farm but then mother Hen discovers that one of her ten babies is missing, stuck in the deep, thick mud. There follows a host of willing helpers as one by one Cat, Dog, Sheep, Horse and even the farmer lend their weight to the ever noisier pulling and pushing chain of those stuck in the smelly mud until, that is, with a splat and a plop, a skip and a hop, the errant chick delivers his parting surprise.

Shoo! tells of a cat who wants some space for himself 'or thinks he does. This picture book is great for learning the names of farmyard animals and the sounds they make: Lots of 'Oinking' and 'Baaing' as well as 'Shooing' herein.

In **Animals Aboard!** a train decked out with balloons and lights can mean only one thing: there's a party aboard. As the train heads on down the clackety track that winds its way around the farmyard, it gradually fills up with mooing, quacking, neighing, squealing, clucking, miaowing animals. But, not content with singing, these animals are soon dancing and playing 'bopping and popping' into the night.

Told in rhyme and also featuring a train ride, this time aboard a toy train, is **Big Blue Train**. The train puffs and chugga chuffs, and clckety clacks its way from a children's playroom taking on board various animals bound for a birthday party as it chugs through snowy fields, a steamy jungle, past a farmyard, across the desert to the seaside where a birthday tea is laid out in celebration of Puppy Dog's third birthday. Then after tea and a romp in the waves it's back aboard the train and home just in time for bed.

A whole host of animals can be found in **Whoosh around the Mulberry Bush**. Taking its inspiration from 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush' (you can use the same rhythm) there are animals small and large: slimy, flippety flapping minibeasts that can be found close to home; scuttling, crawling, nipping, pinching seashore creatures; sucking, slurping, wallowing waterhole beasts further afield; and even slapping, clapping, slipping, splishing splashing arctic ones. Not strictly a story, this rhythmic picture book offers an enjoyable way to learn about the diversity of life on earth as well as providing countless opportunities to make lots of noise, and do some actions: flipping, swimming, swooping, darting and diving in the bubbly sea, yipping, slinking, sneaking and wooing in the scorching desert or clacking, slithering, squeezing and swinging in the hot sticky jungle. In similar vein from the same author/artist partnership and equally full of potential are **If you're happy and you know it!** and **Doing the Animal BOP**.

Another author/artist partnership which has created several picture books with inbuilt invitations for sound making are Margaret Mayo and Alex Ayliffe. Featuring wild animals and their young is **Roar!** wherein colourful collage lions roar and race, wrinkly elephants wallow, squish, squash, squelch, suck and shwoooosh in the muddy water, and bouncy kangaroos jump, hop, bound and bump (lots of playful alliteration here).

With a question and answer, alternating full and half page format and a picture cue on each right hand full page, **Who's that scratching at my door?** is great for joining in and guessing who is hiding behind that blue door, or for beginning reading. A small boy's wish for a real friend to play with results in a whole host of animals coming to the door making growling, munching, roaring, squeaking sounds and a whole lot more.

Set in a sleepy slimy marsh is **One Duck Stuck**. The story begins with one duck getting stuck in the mud by the marsh. Assorted animals from two fish (*Splish, splish*), five frogs (*Plop. Plop*) to ten zooming dragonflies (*Zing, zing*) respond to the call to help him out of his mucky predicament. With its bold, bright pictures this has all the ingredients of a wonderful book for promoting important messages about literacy and reading. Rhythmically told, this amusing tale is full of natural repetition, enjoyable rhymes and wonderful sounding words like *splish, clomp, pleep, plop, plunk, sloosh, slosh, slink, zing* and *splunk*. In addition it's a great counting book.

Told in rhyme and brimming over with glorious sounding alliterative phrases such as 'Now it is wodgy and wedgy and wriggly' is **There's an Ouch in my Pouch!** This is a very funny story about a little wallaby called Willaby who won't stop sobbing and throwing a wobbly. Young listeners love finding out what's making him grumpy and making him grouch, and at the same time joining in with his sneezing and boinging - make sure you've got space around you when you read this one. There's a surprise awaiting our bouncing friend when he discovers what gave him that terrible OUCH. Something that helps him realise that it's time to stand - or bounce - on his own two feet.

Family stories

A fun family story, the main character in **Ha Ha, Baby!** tests the limits of motherly love, and that of the rest of the family too. One day Baby has a face like thunder and it seems that no matter what other family members do, be it tickling, making the infant fly in the air, blowing bubbles, dancing, even doing tricks, Baby remains grouchy and grumpy. It takes big brother to bring about a change of mood; he decides to play the same game too. There is lots of potential for sound making and generally clowning about when this book is read.

Hot off the press is the absolutely hilarious, tongue twisting **Bubble Trouble**. Seemingly every kind of language lesson imaginable can be found in this romp of a story. It all starts when Little Mabel blows a bubble that causes 'bubble trouble in a bibble-bobble way'. The bubble breaks away from Mabel and wafts away with baby inside. In hot pursuit follow Mother, Chrysta Gribble and brother Greville, Tybal and his mother Sybil, Mr and Mrs Copple and feeble Mrs

Threeble who all come to a stop outside the chapel where the bubble encased baby is rising up its steeple. The kindly Canon and his choir come out to see what's amiss and soon their brains too become boggled with the problem of the fast disappearing baby. Then along comes rascally, rebellious Abel with his sling and a pebble, who climbs the steeple, takes aim and, amid groans, gasps and gargles from the horror-stricken crowd, bursts the bubble sending the infant plunging earthwards. Then, timely, *calculated catchwork* in Mrs Threeble's patchwork quilt from four of the crowd, saves the day and the babe from disaster.

The link between rhyming and reading

As far as I know, the results of longitudinal studies such as that of Bradley and Bryant (1983) highlighting the strong predictive relationship between early rhyming and later reading, latterly referred to by Usha Goswami in 'Rhyme in Children's Early Reading' (1995) have not been refuted. However such results were never given the same political importance as the phonics element of the Clackmannanshire study reflected in the current statutory **Early Years Foundation Stage framework**, and the Primary National Strategy **Letters and Sounds**. What is needed is determination by all involved in the education of young children to reclaim autonomy and to ensure that meaning making and exciting texts once again take prominence right from the start in the complex and one hopes, life-long, journey of becoming a reader. What is also needed is a study of young children in an environment where inspired texts such as those discussed above are to the forefront of the learning that takes place – books that have natural inbuilt lessons about rhyme and which can attune children to the delights of the sounds of language.

Teachers in training as well as those in the classroom need to know much more about:

- 1) Children's literature – because only then will they be able to make informed choices for themselves.
- 2) How to exploit the rich potential of particular picture books.
- 3) How children learn (ie child development) and the variety of learning styles – one size does not fit all.
- 4) How the reading process works: while there is a place for phonics and they are particularly beneficial for beginning writing, phonics are only a small piece of the jigsaw.

Titles featured

The Bear in the Cave, Michael Rosen, ill. Adrian Reynolds, Bloomsbury, 978 0 7475 7786 7, £6.99 pbk +CD (read by Michael Rosen)

The Farmyard Jamboree, Margaret Read MacDonald, ill. Sophie Fatus, Barefoot, 978 1 84686 030 X, £6.99 pbk + CD (sung by Bob King)

Stuck in the Mud, Jane Clarke, ill. Garry Parsons, Puffin, 978 0 14 150007 2, £5.99 pbk

Shoo! Michael Rosen, ill. Jonathan Langley, HarperCollins, 978 0 00 722556 9, £5.99 pbk

Animals Aboard! Andrew Fusek Peters, ill. Jim Coplestone, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84507 582 8, £10.99 hbk

Big Blue Train, Julia Jarman, ill. Adrian Reynolds, Orchard, 978 1 84616 436 1, £5.99 pbk

Whoosh around the Mulberry Bush, Jan Ormerod, ill. Lindsey Gardiner, Oxford, 978 0 19 279173 3, £5.99 pbk

Roar! Margaret Mayo, ill. Alex Ayliffe, Orchard, 978 1 84616 488 0, £5.99 pbk

Who's that scratching at my door? Amanda Leslie, Little Tiger Press, 978 1 85430 713 2, £4.99 pbk

One Duck Stuck, Phyllis Root, ill. Jane Chapman, Walker, 978 0 7445 6344 3, £4.99 pbk

There's an Ouch in my Pouch! Jeanne Willis, ill. Garry Parsons, Puffin, 978 0 14 150003 4, £5.99 pbk

Ha Ha, Baby! Kate Petty, ill. Georgie Birkett, Boxer Books, 978 1 905417 11 7, £11.99 hbk

Bubble Trouble, Margaret Mahy, ill. Polly Dunbar, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84507 758 7, £11.99 hbk

Early Years Foundation Stage framework, Department for Children, Schools and Families revised 2008

Goswami, U (1995) Rhyme in Children's Early Reading in **Rhyme Reading and Writing** ed. Roger Beard, Hodder & Stoughton 2005

Letters and Sounds, Primary National Strategy, Department for Children, Schools and Families

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[The Bear in the Cave.jpg](#) [3]



[The Farmyard Jamboree.jpg](#) [4]



[Stuck in the Mud.jpg](#) [5]

From The Bear in the Cave

Page Number:

3

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