



Writing Texts for Picture Books

Article Author:

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Martin Waddell talks about the process.

Martin Waddell

A picture book tells a story, at least mine do. Storytelling is what interests me, because I am a storyteller.

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The working difference between writing a story and writing a picture book is that when I write a story and finish it, it is finished. When I write a picture book text I am just at the beginning of a long process, in which the whole structure and meaning of the story will be re-interpreted by someone else, an artist who deals in images.

I once boasted to David Lloyd, my editor at Walker Books, that I wrote 'in images'. 'You do,' he replied, 'But you are very bad at it!' It was a neat put-down, but also true. I am a writer, not an image-maker. The danger of thinking you write 'in images' is when it leads to the expectation that the artist will faithfully reproduce those images ... will 'illustrate' the story you have written.

This is the way to produce a *bad* picture book, because the images have been imposed on the artist by a non-specialist - someone who writes. I know this to be so from my own experience, but it is still difficult to come to terms with.

A case in point is **The Hidden House** recently published by Walker.

I began the story in a bedsit above the Conservative Party Offices in Ladbroke Grove in 1958 (this is not a political statement, I just happened to be camped there). I was in bed with a heavy case of 'flu. and the 'Dollmaker' idea came to me. Out of bed, off with the 'flu, on with the story, back to bed. It was then called 'Dominic'. The manuscript is lost to me, but I suppose it lies within whatever vault holds the rejects from Hutchinson New Authors Ltd, an imprint from which I received great encouragement, short of being published. An old man makes dolls to keep him company, that was roughly the story.

Twenty-five years later, walking up a lane from Tipperary woods towards the Mourne, I discovered the Dollmaker's house, choked with weeds and ivy, grimy windows still intact.

Glorious moment ... the thing is a picture hook text, full of images! White heat stage . . . lovely . . . the story was written in about an hour.

'Good story!' David Lloyd said.

Happy puffs on pipe from cheery author, expecting big . . . well, biggish ... cheque.

'You got the end wrong,' he added. 'If it isn't the end, it's something else.'

Distressed puffs on pipe, then excitement. We tweaked the story here and there, working and re-working, until it came right, and it was still my story, my possession.

'Angela Barrett,' Amelia Edwards, Walker Art Director, said. They showed me **The Snow Queen**.

Two reactions: 'She is good. Very good.'

'What has she got to do with *my* story?' Big Question Mark. (Note the possessive adjective.)

I agreed nervously to go ahead.

Moment of maximum pain. The first pictures laid on the desk, with David and Amelia doing their David-and-Amelia Act, gazing at me gazing at it, and waiting for the pipe to twitch.

Oh God! I have been nearly thirty years getting *my* story right, a story full of ideas about warmth and togetherness and love and renewal, and look-what-this-woman-has-done-to-it! A strange image, an old child-scaring man on a bench with three huge elongated dolls. Help me somebody! What do I say to them?

'Oh-er,' or words to that effect.

Pipe clenched, while over-heating brain clicks. What is this *Angela* doing! This image is something from inside her, not anything to do with me. Get rid of it! I don't want it in my book.

David: 'I think it *is* brilliant.'

Pipe puffed furiously.

Amelia, defiantly, as the smoke ascends: 'It is brilliant.'

Crushed Author: 'Y-e-s, it is, but ...'

Chorus (What a double act): '*Look* at it, Martin!'

And I did.

I looked for a long time.

It is brilliant. It is how the book should be, not as I saw it. As I saw it, it would have been a safe book about cuddly dollies, albeit dealing with life and death, but this book is altogether different; it has a whole new dimension. It *works*.

My story became ourbook . . . a picture book, not just a text. 'A perfect blend,' somebody was nice enough to say, but it wasn't just a blend, because blending conveys intermingling, and there is more to it than that. A picture book grows somewhere in the process. In the end it doesn't belong to either the writer or the artist, but both together, and *them* ... the people whose names are not on the cover: editor, designer, whoever chose the paper, all the people who add the little hits that make it work.

The writer's sense of possessiveness is the first great danger to a picture book. I am, and always will be, very possessive about my picture book texts, but this can be taken no further than protecting them against the 'wrong' artist. This means the artist who is plain bad, or the artist who is technically good, but brings nothing of his or her self to the story.

The key moment is when you realise that the artist has taken over ... unfortunately that is usually the moment when the possessive writer feels most hurt. It's a funny mix of feeling, because the hurt is mingled with a feeling of joy and a sense of wonder. '*Look what has happened to it!*' followed by, '*It works!*'

More and more I am writing now without indications to the artist that come from my own sense of image ... it is an

inferior sense, it only gets in the way.

The Park in the Dark is an example of the right way to do it. 'Me and Loopy and Little Gee.'

Editor to Writer: 'What are they?'

Writer to Editor: 'Don't know. Just words.'

Neither of us needed to know, we are wordsmen. The toys in **The Park in the Dark** were in Barbara Firth. They came from her own childhood, they belonged to her, and so when she drew them, she felt them, and that feeling comes over in the pictures.

So the writer just writes little stories, and after that it is all up to the artist, and the design department? Not so . . . not 'little' stories; a picture book is often much more than that. A really good picture book is a 'big' story, written in very few words, often layered so that many meanings lie within it.

What does 'big' mean? It can mean 'about-something-that-matters': ideas like the wheel of life, as in **Once There Were Giants** (a terribly difficult book for Penny Dale to make work); ideas like fear of the unknown as in **Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?**. Those are big 'adult' ideas, we recognise them as big easily, and the craft of the thing is to render them comprehensible to very small children.

How about 'Justice'? Children say, 'It isn't fair!' and they mean it, it *matters* to them.

There once was a duck Who had the bad luck

To live with a lazy old Farmer

The duck did the work,

For the farmer stayed all day in bed.

Justice for the Duck! And the right artist! Helen Oxenbury is doing **Farmer Duck**.

There are other 'big' ideas, which are big for the very small. How about splashing? The sheer joy of splash-splash-splashing in cool water on a warm day ... a big celebration of a very small thing that children love.

One day Neligan went into town.

It was hot. It was dry.

The sun shone in the sky.

Neligan's pig sat by Neligan's pond.

A fat, steamy pig. A duck and goose splashing in the pond, teasing the pig with quacks and honks of pure pleasure then ...

SPLAAASH!

The pig's in the pond!

The pig's in the pond!

The pig's in the pond!

The word spread about,

Above and beyond,

At Neligan's farm,

The pig's in the pond.

Pig in the Pond. Jill Barton's pig now.

Noise . . . that's another celebration one. 'Tum-tum-te-tum, diddle-diddle-dum, ratta-tat-tat-boom!' **The Happy Hedgehog Band.** Jill again.

So big ideas can be small from an adult point of view, but then an adult point of view is not very helpful. A 'big' idea is something which instantly interests a child, and if you can shade in some more subtle themes alongside it, so much the better.

I work on the principle that the eventual book will usually be read one-to-one, a shared thing, often at the end of a difficult day. The day may have thrown up harriers between the adult and the child, and the picture book, particularly the old familiar picture book, can bring them together again. It may even open the possibility of airing whatever the matter is.

A picture book text is a script for performance by the reader, performing to a very personally involved audience that wants to stop, ask questions, look, and point things out. There should be words to work on for that performance, lots of rhythm and rhyme and alliteration and fun and jokes and things happening, a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, a story that often says something about loving relationships between 'big' and 'small'.

No problem! You have three to five hundred words to do it in, ideally less.

Finished'?

Get it to the *right* artist.

Martin Waddell's (and his illustrators') hooks mentioned in this piece are:

The Hidden House, 0 7445 1266 2, £7.99

The Park in the Dark, 0 7445 0716 2, 0.99; 0 7445 1740 0, £3.99 pbk

Once There Were Giants, 0 7445 0484 8, £7.99; 0 7445 1791 5, £3.99 pbk

Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?, 0 7445 0796 0, £7.99; 0 7445 1316 2, £3.99 pbk

Farmer Duck and **The Happy Hedgehog Band** will both be published later this year, but you'll have to wait until 1992 for **Pig in the Pond**.

All published by Walker Books.

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