



Wordless Picture Books

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Jeff Hynds on Books Without Words and **Philippe Dupasquier** on Writing Pictures.

The wordless picture book is a genre of the picture book proper which has only very gradually emerged over the last 25 years. The first British originated work was a book entitled **Vicki** by Renate Meyer, the widow of Charles Keeping, published in 1968 by The Bodley Head, but now out of print. The origins of the textless picture book are almost certainly European with titles appearing only a few years before **Vicki**. It is interesting that Renate Meyer herself is German. Not surprisingly, there is very little material or research about this unique form of children's book. What we offer here is a brief overview from Jeff Hynds of some of the best wordless picture books which increasingly adorn our bookshelves, followed by insights on how it's done by one of its leading exponents, Philippe Dupasquier, who was born in Switzerland and brought up in France.

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Books Without Words

Jeff Hynds

Maybe the first thing to say about wordless picture books, or 'stories without words' as they are sometimes sub-titled, is that although they may appear to be wordless, they are not likely to remain so for long. You have only to see two or three children with Jan Ormerod's **Sunshine**, for example, to realise that seemingly wordless books are liable to generate words in abundance! It is quite usual for a great deal of commentary to ensue - questioning, speculating or even arguing. One seven-year-old, encountering the double-page spread in **Sunshine** where the little girl gets dressed, declared 'You can't read this: there's too many words on these pages'.

I usually try to make this point by describing the genre as 'Books Without Printed Words', meaning that, although not printed, the books will inevitably be mediated by words, spoken or simply thought. But it is not even quite true to say that these books are without *printed* words. They all have titles, for example, and the title frequently has quite an effect on the impact of the book. Consider **The Story of a Little Mouse Trapped in a Book**, by Monique Felix. We are straightaway introduced to a sophisticated metafictional device, a clever interplay between the book's actual physical layout and the charming fiction of the mouse's escape. Because the book uses this literary trick so successfully, I have found it to be enormously popular with adults and children alike. Monique Felix has developed the mouse-book theme in a number of sequels, most recently in **Wind, Colours and House**, the latter being especially captivating.

Some wordless books, like Peter Spier's **The Great Flood**, begin and end with printed words. At the beginning we find 'But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord' and at the end '... and he planted a vineyard'. On one page near the beginning appears a seventeenth-century poem called 'The Flood', but otherwise there are no other printed words. The whole detailed story, sometimes touching, often humorous, is carried in some 60 of Spier's typical illustrations. This classic book is a model of its kind, and when it was first published in 1978 set new standards for the wordless picture

book.

Amanda's Butterfly, by Nick Butterworth, also begins with a few words, this time about Amanda's 'brilliant idea'. Thereafter this gentle tale proceeds entirely in framed pictures, a characteristic technique enabling the artist, after the manner of the comic strip, to make telling use of close-up. There are some printed words, too, at the start of **Large as Life**, by Julia Finzel, as a ladybird sets out on a series of animal adventures. This is indeed a 'large' book, with breathtaking paintings throughout. The ladybird is to be found, not always easily, in every picture.

Linkage like this is not unusual in wordless books. There are, for example, two kittens in all the pictures of **The Twelve Days of Christmas** by Jane Molineaux, a homely but busy version of the traditional song. This book uses to good effect another construction of the wordless picture book, which I could almost call 'parallel distributed processing' (if I borrowed a piece of jargon from the reading specialists, normally applied to reading print, not pictures). As you turn the pages of such a book, you find that there are several interlinked stories developing at the same time, and side by side with one another. You have to read the pages synoptically. A splendid example of this is **The Great Green Mouse Disaster** by Martin Waddell and Philippe Dupasquier. You can spend hours with this book and still not see everything, let alone comprehend everything. There is, however, a set of questions at the end to help, as there is at the end of **Full Moon Soup** by Alastair Graham, another book of similar design, also requiring synoptic viewing. This book, by the way, starts quietly enough, but ends in total, if wordless, disaster.

The full moon appears to be riding high in wordless books at the moment, for it is featured in two other recent books, **I Can't Sleep** by Philippe Dupasquier. and **When the World Sleeps** by Cliff Wright. Both are, as might be conjectured, night-time adventures, the one entirely domestic and all too true to life, the other cosmic and, one hopes, unlikely before armageddon. In Dupasquier's book the human situation is beautifully caught in the expressions and postures of the characters, while a delightfully surrealist atmosphere, though occasionally alarming, is conveyed by Cliff Wright's lively watercolours.

A particular myth that I often encounter about wordless books is that they are 'easy' to read. Not long ago I heard a group of teachers being advised that books without words would be very appropriate for children 'at the beginning of the reading programme'. Some reading schemes, of course, are designed to reflect this simplistic notion. But, as must be evident from what I said earlier, no beginner would cope easily with many of today's wordless books. For instance, the dream sequences of Peter Collington's books, as in **The Angel and the Soldier Boy**, are a challenge to any reader. His books demand very close attention to details, and the ability to read subtle signs and understand delicate significances. The same is true of Dieter Schubert's **Where is Monkey?** and Philippe Dupasquier's **The Great Escape** which, although hilarious from beginning to end, is so involved, detailed and, in fact, long that it takes considerable maturity and staying power to manage it.

These books are taxing, and require in their readers experience of a variety of narrative structures and techniques. It is possible that some children will have gained some help from television viewing and involvement with other media, for there is no doubt that visual literacy can be strengthened in this way, but young readers without much background in other books and the media generally will not necessarily find in wordless books the full satisfactions that they can provide. As Judith Graham observes in her penetrating analysis of Shirley Hughes' **Up and Up**, 'if you are an inexperienced reader, you do not know what to look for in the pictures'.

* Reference: Graham, J (1990), **Pictures on the Page**, published by The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE). Send cheque (£6.95 members; £7.50 non-members) to NATE, Birley School Annexe, Fox Lane Site, Frecheville, Sheffield S12 4WY.

Jeff Hynds is a major figure in the movement to promote 'real' reading. After retiring from Thames Polytechnic in South London, where he ran a famous reading course, he began a new career as a freelance lecturer and is now much in demand for in-service work with teachers all over Britain.

Books mentioned in the text:

Sunshine, Jan Ormerod, Viking, 0 670 80353 7, £7.99; **Picture Puffin**, 014 050362 5, £3.50 pbk

The Story of a Little Mouse Trapped in a Book, 185103 105 7, **Another Story of the Little Mouse Trapped in a Book**, 185103 106 5, Monique Felix, Moonlight, £3.50 each

The House, 155670 225 6, **Colours**, 155670 227 2, **The Wind**, 155670 226 4, Monique Felix, Little Brown & Co, £4.99 each

The Great Flood, Peter Spier, Heinemann, 0 434 96414 X, £6.50; **Mammoth**, 0 7497 0574 4, £2.99 pbk

Amanda's Butterfly, Nick Butterworth, Collins, 0 00 1913212, £6.95

Large as Life, Julia Finzel, Collins, 0 00184961 1, £8.99

The Twelve Days of Christmas, Jane Molineaux, Collins Educational, 0 00 313910 7, £12.00

The Great Green Mouse Disaster, Martin Waddell and Philippe Dumasquier, Red Fox, 0 09 966630 8, £2.99 pbk

Full Moon Soup, Alastair Graham, Kingfisher/Bennett, 0 86272 687 5, £8.95

I Can't Sleep, Philippe Dumasquier, Walker, 0 7445 1284 0, £6.95; 0 7445 20614, £2.99 pbk

When the World Sleeps, Cliff Wright, Hutchinson, 0 09 174117 3, £6.99; Red Fox, 0 09 980920 6, £3.99 pbk

The Angel and the Soldier Boy, Peter Collington, Methuen, 0 416 96870 8, £6.95; 0 416 16662 8 (mini ed.) £2.99; **Mammoth**, 0 7497 00661, £3.50 pbk

Where is Monkey?, Dieter Schubert, Red Fox, 0 09 955360 0, £2.99

The Great Escape, Philippe Dumasquier, Walker, 0 7445 1365 0, £3.99 pbk

Up and Up, Shirley Hughes, Bodley Head, 0 370 30179 X, £6.99; Red Fox, 0 09 992250 9, £3.50 pbk

Writing Pictures

Philippe Dumasquier

When you think of a story for a picture book, there are probably three different possible approaches:

Either you come up with the text first and work on the pictures later (in that case you are probably more a natural writer than an illustrator)

Or you come up with the text and the pictures at the same time (which is much more difficult but can be quite handy for us author/ illustrators)

Or thirdly, your visual conception of the story is so strong that you cannot help coming up with the pictures first, leaving the text for later ...

You could say that most of the time I fall very much in that last category ... particularly since I often have ideas which are visually so strong that pictures have a tendency to take over completely, leaving only a very small and difficult role for the text to play. It got to the point where I felt that sometimes I was spoiling my pictures and my books by adding inadequate words or adding a text which was clearly not necessary. So naturally I started to develop wordless picture books more seriously, making sure there would be no place for the text by using techniques which would literally kill the words, making them a nonsense.

The technique is very simple and largely an extension of that used in comic strips (i.e. the strip itself when you can follow a story reading one picture after the other). It also has strong connections with movies and the way films are directed. (It should be no surprise to learn that I spent a lot of my younger years reading comics and going to the movies!)

The fact that it is completely wordless (and bubbleless) means there are certain rules to respect. Probably the most important is that you must always maintain a connection between one picture and the next. The two pictures must fit together like pieces of a puzzle otherwise you are likely to confuse your readers and they will soon lose interest.

There is obviously a certain skill that you develop with time and experience, consisting mostly in economising a maximum of pictures while still showing a lot of things or happenings (comic strip illustration can be very time-consuming and you don't want to waste it on unnecessary pictures). For example, I can often think, at first, of five or six pictures for progressing the story from A to B- ... but with a little bit of reorganisation and imagination I can end up with only one or two which tell exactly the same thing.

Another aspect of the use of the strip which I find attractive is that not only can you create that special relationship between two pictures but also, by playing with the size and the shape of each picture, you can control the story even further. The drama of a situation can be emphasised by suddenly introducing a very large picture ... and so on. You can also give a sense of timing to the story by putting different sizes of picture in a certain order or by creating a pattern with it. There are many possibilities in that sense and I am discovering new things all the time.

All of this is obviously completely instinctive, and it is only when faced with having to justify it that I can come up with such complicated (and boring) explanations ... To cut it short, I would say that most of all it is the love and fascination I have for any kind of picture which led me in this direction.

For me, looking at a picture is a bit like reading the page of a book ... shape, details, colours, perspective, contrast, etc., etc., so many things contribute to tell a story (add another picture next to it and there you are with a bit more of the story).

I guess you could say that as much as I enjoy `reading' pictures, I enjoy `writing' them as well ... and that's what I am trying to do with my wordless picture books.

Philippe Dupasquier was born in 1955. He trained at art school in Dijon and later in Lyons. His move to England in 1979 followed a visit to the great children's book fair in Bologna where much interest was shown in his portfolio by British publishers but none by the French! Philippe came to notice with his second book **The Great Green Mouse Disaster** `written' in collaboration with Martin Waddell - a brilliant example of a highly complex, hugely entertaining wordless picture book. With well over 20 titles to his credit, Philippe's current preoccupation is the `Follow that Chimp' strip, appearing every month in **SNAP** but eventually to be published in book form by Walker. Philippe lives in Sussex with his wife, Sylvie, and their two children.

SNAP

The children's monthly magazine from Walker Books

If you haven't come across **SNAP** (launched in September 1991), it's well worth taking a close look. It is only the second magazine written especially for children from a children's book publisher; you have to go all the way back to the original **Puffin Post** as edited by Kaye Webb to find an approximate equivalent. The great difference between the two is that the **Post** was almost exclusively text dependent, whereas **SNAP** is virtually all illustration - Walker make good use of their unrivalled stable of illustrators/ authors as contributors. It's lively, very colourful and crammed with cartoons, puzzles, activities and competitions. Our infant/junior testers love it! As you would expect, coming from Walker, the editorial and production standards are excellent. Available from good newsagents, WHS, Sainsbury's or direct from Walker Books, 87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ. Price £1.45 per issue.

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