



Words About Pictures: Continuing the Conversation

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Martin Salisbury on challenging illustration.

Most dictionary definitions of the verb 'to illustrate' include the likes of 'elucidate', 'explain', and 'shed light on' (or even more prosaically, 'provide with pictures?'). But in picture books at least, illustration is now performing a far more complex and less easily definable role, sometimes purposely contradicting or playfully challenging the meaning of the text. But is it suitable for children? **Martin Salisbury**, a participant in the Words About Pictures workshop, continues the debate.<!--break-->

There was a time when you knew where you stood with illustration. In John Ryder's delightful little book **Artists of a Certain Line, A Selection of Illustrators for Children's Books** (Bodley Head, 1960), a cross section of artists of the day is presented in the form of a succession of single images arranged in an orderly fashion alongside each respective potted biography. All are in black and white, and beautifully printed through the by then moribund letterpress process, with that lovely, slightly embossed finish. The important names are all there, Ardizzone, Einzig, Lamb, Jacques, Keeping, Wildsmith; each displaying excellent draughtsmanship and awareness of design, most having received a rigorous academic training in these areas within the British art school system of the time.

In those days, it seems, illustration knew its place. It usually took the form of an elegant, well-drawn, essentially representational visual interpretation of a text. Many of these illustrators were (and in some cases happily still are) also painters and printmakers, exhibiting in private galleries and perhaps the annual Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Book illustration would, for many of them, be seen as a closely related activity that was informed by work for exhibition, and yet was at the same time entirely separate. 'Commercial art' was the term, reasonably enough, in common usage. A scan of children's book illustration today reveals a rather different landscape. An increasing number of artists are recognising the potential of the picture book as an outlet for self-expression, choosing to indulge their own visual and conceptual preoccupations in this particular arena. The range of stylistic approaches of artists working today is vast, reflecting and exploiting the breadth of media now available, traditional and digital. It seems unlikely that a future review of early 21st-century children's book illustration would identify a 'style' or movement in the way that the Arts and Crafts movement was embodied by Walter Crane and Kate Greenaway a century or so before.

Pushing at the boundaries

In some other areas of the graphic arts today, editorial, advertising and design for example, illustration has suffered from being regarded as the 'graphic designer's plaything', often commissioned and used unimaginatively as 'ambient' decoration, or deeply predictably as in the annual wheeling out of Ralph Steadman to provide a newspaper image for the budget/war. In some ways this may have been to the benefit of the world of children's books. Illustrators looking for ways to assert a more authorial approach have found their way to the picture book and many are pushing at the boundaries of what we think of as 'suitable for children?.'

Questioning the relationship to text

The relationship between 'art' and illustration has ebbed and flowed over the years. Recently, perceptions of 'fine' and applied art have drifted further and further apart with the *concept* becoming everything in the world of gallery art. Some feel that skill or craft disqualifies art. A few years ago, in a wonderfully apposite and articulate rant under the ironic heading 'That's Not Art, That's Illustration'*, the leading American illustrator, Brad Holland expressed the view that the word *art* had become totally devalued; 'Everybody is an artist these days. Rock and roll singers are artists. So are movie directors, performance artists, make-up artists, tattoo artists, con artists and rap artists.' He went on to describe the ever-expanding categories of activity that lead to the perpetrators being described as 'artists' and concludes dejectedly, 'The only people left in America who seem not to be artists are illustrators.' In the three or four years since these sentiments were expressed, I have become conscious of a shift in attitudes, at least in this country, toward illustrators for children's books, and their endeavours. The brightening spotlight on children's literature has spread to the increasingly sophisticated visual feast that accompanies it. And not only are the pictures themselves becoming more and more demanding for the reader/viewer, the nature of their relationship to text is being questioned, challenged and redefined. Most dictionary definitions of the verb 'to illustrate' include the likes of 'elucidate?', 'explain?', and 'shed light on?' (or even more prosaically, 'provide with pictures?'). But in picture books at least, illustration is now performing a far more complex and less easily definable role, sometimes purposely contradicting or playfully challenging the meaning of the text.

So how important is the actual artistic quality, or integrity of the image, and of the book as whole in this context? How do we evaluate its aesthetic merit? Do such things matter? Working with advanced level art students who have a particular interest in the children's book, involves nurturing in students the highest possible levels of personal engagement with their subject matter. The theory being that if the artist isn't satisfying himself, he is unlikely to be satisfying the child. There is no doubt in my mind as to the importance of providing children with a truly nourishing pictorial diet. Bombarded as they (and we) are by quick-hit trash imagery through a range of screen-based media, the finely illustrated book provides a stimulus that can be absorbed and relished at a reflective pace. It can be a child's first contact with the arts, and the intellectually demanding and rewarding activity of reading pictures. But each time my heart misses a beat as I marvel at a truly original and inventive piece of student work, a little voice is nagging away in my head telling me to prepare her for that first contact with the publisher, and the possibility of the all-too-frequent, 'brighten up your colours and make your characters cuter?.'

Negligent of cultural goals?

Despite the expanding pool of talent in illustration in this country, there does still seem to be an excessive level of preconception among publishers and booksellers about the kind of imagery that is deemed 'appropriate' for various age groups. A tour around the Bologna Children's Book Fair reveals wide differences between countries in the levels of respect accorded to their children in terms of picture book art. In France for example, the wonderful little publishing house, Editions du Rouergue has been producing illustrated books of the highest quality since the mid 1980s. Its mission to give children a diet of something visually sustaining was initially met with widespread scepticism, but the company's distinctive approach has become highly influential and is now much imitated. A glance at the Scandinavian stands reveals a sophisticated visual world, albeit one that appears somewhat preoccupied with introducing children to death, sex, devils and trolls. Books from Spain and Portugal seem to be awash with graphic invention, and of course Eastern Europe has been for many years in a different class as far as innovation, invention and design goes. The extraordinarily rich heritage of book illustration from these countries was highlighted at Bologna last year by the choice of Poland as guest of honour. This meant an opportunity to marvel at the original artwork of the great József Wilkón, and to come away clutching a copy of the specially published **Almanach Polscy Ilustratorzy dla Dzieci**, a beautifully produced if hideously translated tour of contemporary Polish picture book art. The political transformation in Eastern Europe though, is threatening this glorious tradition, as the newly discovered rush for profit drives publishing houses to be 'negligent of cultural goals?', the book tells us. Before 1989, Polish children's books, in terms of creativity, had been 'a reserve of relative freedom' and 'had set as their peculiar priority education through art and for art?.'

Perhaps the greatest living example of this threatened heritage is the Czech artist Květa Pacovská, another guest at last year's fair. Pacovská's work blurs boundaries between fine and applied art. Her passion for colour, paper and

letterforms is communicated through both children's books and gallery based installation art. She says, "Without drawing I cannot exist. It is like breathing. A drawing is such as it is. It should not and cannot pretend it expresses our feelings and our thoughts."*

Such integrity as this leads to the creation of very special books. But we are unlikely to be fortunate enough to find many of them on the shelves of our bookshops. The most common explanation for this is "they're all well and good but they don't sell". It is very difficult to test this theory as it is something of a self-fulfilling prophesy. The chain of people whose tastes come between the book and the child (from commissioning editor right through to teacher, librarian or parent) means that most children never have the chance to demonstrate a preference, and are too often plied with the visually patronising and sentimental. It is an unfair burden on the wonderful Sara Fanelli that she tends to be batted to and fro as something of a football in this argument, but I have to say it took me far too long to find a copy of her version of **Pinocchio** (Walker Books 2003), one of the loveliest children's books published in recent years. This, despite the fact that I live in a city full of bookshops.

But I like to think that the sheer weight of talent around at the moment is going to gradually force a change. I happen to know that at the present time, there are a number of truly original picture books in preparation for publication by some of the more enlightened publishing houses in this country. Let's get them on the shelves.

*1 **The Education of an Illustrator**, edited by Steven Heller and Marshall Arisman (Allworth Press/School of Visual Arts, New York 2000)

*2 **The Art of Kveta Pacovska** (Michael Neugebauer, Zurich 1993)

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