



Words About Pictures: The Primacy of Text

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Brian Alderson on the principles of critical assessment.

What are the underlying principles which determine the critical assessment of picture books? In 1973 **Brian Alderson** was invited to curate an exhibition at the National Book League (now Booktrust) on the theme of words and images in picture books. His catalogue to the exhibition, **Looking at Picture Books 1973**, remains seminal. As Brian Alderson was unable to be at the **Words about Pictures** Workshop, the organisers invited him to send a written contribution. **BfK** is delighted to take this opportunity to bring it to a wider readership.<!--break-->

At risk of being found an intellectual sclerotic I would like to maintain, more or less unchanged, the critical position that I asserted (youch!) thirty years ago in my catalogue for an exhibition at the old National Book League: **Looking at Picture Books 1973**. Here I elaborated through thirteen chapters first the need to establish the primacy of text, and the adequacy of that text, in the critical estimate of a picture book, and second the importance of distinguishing the many variant subjects which may find themselves treated as picture-book texts. By text here I mean the narrative structure from front cover to back, even if it lack all words, or consists merely of letters of the alphabet or cardinal numbers, and if the composition and sequencing of that text is flawed it will not easily be redeemed by the most stirring or beautiful of illustrations.

The illustrator is servant of the text

Furthermore, insofar as texts differ either categorically (alphabet books, ?concept? books, story books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes etc.) or individually (the varying ?voices? of the text-makers) they place interpretative demands on those who seek to illustrate them. The illustrator is servant of the text, not its master, and the task of judging how sensitively illustrators have responded to the character of the text can be a demanding craft. (It is useless in this brief space to go on to articulate the importance of historical awareness: the place of one book within an illustrator?s oeuvre, or within a register of its genre, or even of alternative efforts to tackle the selfsame text ? cf. some strictures in the March **Books for Keeps** which I levelled at P J Lynch?s assault on **The Bee-Man of Orn**, Sendak?s illustrations for which happened to be singled out for their perfection in that old NBL exhibition.

What a lay person needs to know

All that has to do with the donnés of material within the public domain. Where the Workshop Day programme begins however is (I think) with questions relating to those events which take place before a work?s final publication, and what a lay person needs to know to enhance the authority of whatever judgments they may choose to make. These are questions concerning the technique adopted by illustrators ? perhaps in conjunction with authors and editors ? in determining the style and sequencing of their graphic contribution and the technology by which it is transferred to the page (which, importantly, includes the nature of the paper of which that page consists).

These are matters which I find endlessly fascinating (and very tricky) and which I have explored in my books on

Edward Ardizzone and Ezra Jack Keats* where I was concerned to look closely at the pre-publication history of individual books. That experience disposes me to believe that the fundamental elements in any picture book can only be elucidated (if at all) by access to material, records, and technical data which are not 'given' and may only be available by courtesy of the artists themselves, or their publishers, or the owners of national, local, academic, or private archives which are as often as not on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

A generalized awareness of the processes

For 'as I am sure most illustrators will agree' every book has a private history of its own, both of its conception and its execution 'and some of those histories turn out to be passing strange. They can hardly be a subject for a Workshop though' except by way of anecdotal diversion 'for what the working critic needs to get at is not so much the evolution of individual works as a generalized awareness of the processes that customarily pertain in most creative efforts. (At a conference at Exeter some years ago, a college lecturer specialising in picture books confessed to not realising how their form is governed by the need to fold sheets so that the gatherings turn out to be 'usually' in multiples of eight leaves.) Developing such an awareness will surely give vitality to the process of judgement 'and may encourage a greater respect for bibliographical studies' but it is, in the end, subsidiary to an articulation of the quality of the finished product: text and the distinction, or otherwise, of the illustrative accompaniment.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.

***Ezra Jack Keats, Artist and Picture-Book Maker** (Pelican Publishing, 1 56554 006 9, £43.50). **Ezra Jack Keats, A Bibliography and Catalogue** (Pelican Publishing, 1 56554 007 7, £35). Both available via Gazelle Books, 01524 68765.

Edward Ardizzone: A Bibliographic Commentary (0 7123 4759 3, £45) is published by The British Library.

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