



Picture Books for Everyone

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Janice Morris discusses picture books for older readers.

During her career as a children's librarian Janice Morris's constant book companion has been Elaine Moss's annotated bibliography, **Picture Books for Young People 9-13**. This grew out of Moss's deep conviction that picture books are not merely a tool to introduce children to reading but instead have a great deal to offer the older child. But do we still assume that illustrated books are only for the very young? **Janice Morris** discusses.

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Trained as a teacher and working in the 1970s as a librarian, Elaine Moss witnessed a radical new departure in picture books which had previously been aimed, for the most part, at infants. Now new authors were coming on the scene with a very different perspective. Michael Foreman, Anthony Browne and Colin McNaughton among others began to create picture books for the older, more sophisticated and questioning reader. As Moss explains, they were themselves 'politically and socially aware' (1985: 7) and this was reflected in the books they wrote. They challenged readers to consider and reflect and come to their own conclusions. For instance, in **Dinosaurs and All That Rubbish** Foreman examines the distribution of power in society and questions the right of those in authority to wield it.

Moss noticed that these books, 'clearly *not* for infants', were being dismissed by teachers and 'threatened with extinction because they were failing to find their rightful, older, readership' (1992: 8). Moss argued that 'hard pressed' teachers were remaining oblivious because librarians failed to bring these books to their attention (1978a: 66).

Taking up the cause in 1978, Moss wrote a two-part article for the children's literature journal **Signal** entitled 'Them' for the Infants, Miss'. She argued that not only teachers held the mistaken belief that five-year-olds begin with picture books and progress to un-illustrated novels at eleven but that older children shared this belief. Referring in detail to books by author-illustrators Anthony Browne, Charles Keeping, Michael Foreman, John Burningham, Raymond Briggs and others, she made a powerful case for using picture books with children in junior and secondary schools.

This was followed in 1981 by **Picture Books for Young People 9-13**. A second edition appeared in 1985 and a third in 1992, testifying to its success. Moss's purpose was to promote books that would encourage discussion among young people and their teachers, to ensure that these books reached their intended audience and to 'highlight those artists whose work was political in that it explored social questions ' Third World famine, prejudice, the environment, family relationships, emotions ' lightly but deeply' (1992: 9).

Inspired and informed by Moss's bibliography, many librarians and library authorities began actively promoting picture books for older readers to teachers. Some authorities supplied sets of the recommended books to middle and secondary schools. By the second edition the idea of picture books for older readers had begun to capture the imagination of many involved with the children's book world.

I first came across the book in 1986 while working for Wiltshire School Library Service. I remember being amazed and

delighted by the idea that picture books weren't just for learning to read and that I was allowed to read them too! I have had a copy ever since. I have contacted Thimble Press and unfortunately a fourth edition seems unlikely. More recently, however, I have used the leaflet produced by The Federation of Children's Book Groups 'Picture Books for Older Readers'.

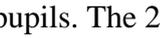
Are picture books now for everyone?

Looking back over the years, I wonder just how successful we as librarians have been in communicating to teachers that picture books are for everyone, not just developing readers. Have we let things slide?

Moss wrote: 'What most children between eight and thirteen lack is the opportunity to see plenty of picture books all the time and as a matter of course?' (1978a: 148). Thirty years on, do children have this opportunity? I think not. In public libraries picture books are still most often consigned to the kinder box - pretty off-putting for the streetwise peer-conscious kid. My experience suggests that picture books in top junior classrooms are rare. Talking to students who have recently emerged from the school system, few are aware of these authors.

There is no doubt that these picture books still have something to offer. Themes explored by Browne and Foreman remain relevant. Judging from the response of students and family friends, **Piggybook** continues to raise issues regarding the division of labour that many households have yet to address. And if only we had heeded the sentiments explored in Foreman's **Dinosaurs and All That Rubbish** perhaps we would be further on the road to a sustainable future.

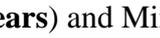
Perhaps it is this challenge and the implicit threat to the status quo that leads to these books being overlooked or buried in the kinder box. Infantilizing the contents makes them 'safe' and the very real issues they address can be ignored. Other potentially subversive books have had the same fate - **Huckleberry Finn** and **Gulliver's Travels** were also repackaged as children's books and given to children, an audience that was unlikely to rock the establishment boat. At the March 2008 UK Literacy Association conference, Children's Literature and the Creative Curriculum, Elizabeth Laird commented on how fairy tales had been prettified and Disneyfied to offer child-friendly versions.

Hampshire is the only county I have found that actively promotes picture books for older children. The Hampshire Illustrated Book Award is open to all primary schools subscribing to the School Library Service. The books are judged by Year 5 pupils. The 2007 winner was Colin Thompson for  **Castles**. One specific aim of the award is to draw attention to the genre of picture books for older readers. In general however, children's book award categories still reflect the misguided belief that children should be 'seen climbing a ladder away from pictures into the 'more demanding' world of print' (Moss, 1981: 3). I am not aware of any book award that mixes picture book and longer narratives in the older age categories.

Questioning how we look at the world

However, I have high hopes for the Big Picture, launched last year by Booktrust. This national initiative aims to draw attention to the significance and importance of picture books and illustrators. Perhaps the Big Picture initiative will provide the inspiration needed to promote picture books for older readers to the 'hard pressed' teachers of the 21st century in the same way Elaine Moss's bibliographies did for their 'hard pressed' counterparts in the 20th.



In March the Big Picture announced the ten winners of the UK's Best New Illustrators competition. Among them: Oliver Jeffers (**The  Incredible Book Eating Boy**), Emily Gravett (**Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears**) and Mini Grey (**Traction Man is Here**). These authors are  following in the footsteps of Browne, Foreman and McNaughton, producing entertaining and thought provoking books for the older child. To reiterate/paraphrase Moss, **Traction Man is Here** is political in that it explores social questions - consumerism, identity, gender, and family relationships - lightly but deeply.

[image:Daft Bat.jpg:left]

Authors and illustrators working in partnership have also produced wonderful picture books for older readers; for instance, David McKean and Neil Gaiman, John Marsden and Shaun Tan and, my own particular favourites, Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross. Their **Daft Bat** invites the reader to consider looking at the world from another's perspective. Reminiscent of Ruth Brown's **If At First You Do Not See**, it requires the reader to turn the book round and read it upside down. Children I shared this book with recently were delighted by this. They had been taught from an early age the 'correct' way to read a book and yet these picture books were demanding that they do it 'wrong'. Both books ask children to question the way they look at the world and to reflect on and question what they are taught to accept as 'correct'. These are important lessons for citizens of a diverse society with a whole world of different perspectives to appreciate and learn from.

In the meantime, is Hampshire the only library service championing picture books for older readers?

[image:Janice Morris.jpg:left]

Janice Morris is an Assistant Librarian at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln, with responsibility for the Children's Literature and Teaching Resources Collections.

References

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For further information on The Big Picture see Booktrust's website, www.bigpicture.org.uk [3]

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