



Two children tell: The Cow, the Canal and Rebecca

Article Author:

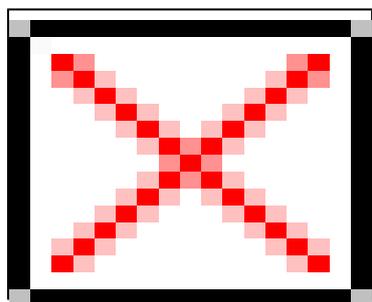
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Byline:

by Virginia Lowe.

In her latest article drawing on her records of her children's responses to literature, **Virginia Lowe** observes her young daughter Rebecca grasping picturebook conventions.



"We're somewhere at last!?" As the plane approached Amsterdam, the early morning light was reflected on the canals, leading to Rebecca's relieved outburst after flying for 32 hours. She had loved **The Cow who Fell in the Canal** by Phyllis Krasilovsky and Peter Spier, since she was one year one month (1y1m) old. Now (4y4m) she was overjoyed to see real canals shining below.

Two months later, we visited Alkmaar's cheese market, and, just like Hendrika the cow, we watched men in white run with heavy pallets stacked with huge cheeses, and, yes, wearing coloured straw hats with streamers. We saw cobbled streets, houses with "staircased roofs" and of course the open canals. Rebecca posed for a photo with the book held open to the almost identical scene. It was the first time she had the experience (later repeated at Beatrix Potter's Hilltop Farm) of seeing the original scene of an illustration.

When she had first been given the book (1y4m) she loved the detail, and could pick out the horses, dogs and cats, the ball, the baby, all the birds from the V-shaped marks in the sky and could name the ducks and hens. When asked she could locate the minuscule boy running.

Soon she added the words to her vocabulary. At 2y4m, waking in a hotel room overlooking boats at piers, she announced "I want to go in a boat to market?". Me: Who wanted to do that? R: "Drika!?" Two months later, on a country trip, all black and white cows were "like "Drika?". At 3y11m she was building with blocks and asked me:

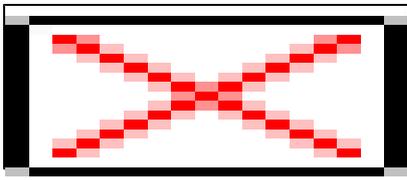
R: "A row of staircased roofs passed by? ? where does that come from, Mummy??"

She knew of course, and was just testing me.

At 4y7m, she earnestly implored Nicholas in his highchair to "Eat, eat, Hendrika." and another day, out of the blue,

R: Cows prance! Me: (surprised) Do they?

R: Yes, Hendrika "pranced into yards!?"



I'd like to look in further depth at one time we were reading the book, just before her third birthday, to show what a child can glean from a book with such detailed pictures. Rebecca rarely asked questions about her books, preferring to work things out for herself, but by 2y11m she had started to query the most familiar of her stories. One morning she requested **The Cow** for the first time in three months. There were many queries and comments, of which these are just a sample.

Of the last duckling on the page where Hendrika falls in the canal:

R: Why has he got his wings up?

Me: Perhaps he's hurrying to catch up.

R: Or perhaps he's badly printed.

I had never given this as an explanation ? **The Cow** was a Picture Puffin, and perfectly well printed. On the next page:

R: That duckling is looking at Hendrika.

Me: I guess it's surprised to see a cow in the water.

R: I can't see its eyebrows up. (Indicating surprise to her)

She counted the ducks, commented on the waterlilies and daisies and the colours of the tulips. She asked of the boy sitting on the pier, "Why doesn't he fall into the water?" I explained he's used to living near the water, and he can certainly swim.

And of rubbish floating in the canal:

R: What was in that tin? Me: You tell me.

R: Chocolates! Me: Yes, or maybe peaches.

R: The water has washed off the picture of peaches from the outside.

At the cheese market she asked how it was "painted?". Then she pointed to the nearest pile of cheeses (drawn biggest) and said "those are the closest" ? she didn't remark on the size at all.

These questions and comments show that, before she was three, Rebecca was expecting a logical reason for the pictures to fit with the words; comparing it with her own life; demonstrating her understanding of picture conventions ? perspective, missing parts, noting the direction of regard and the expression of emotion; and was interested in the book as an artefact.

There were no vocabulary queries, and all the comments originated with her. Also, even when I was really impressed with something (her grasp of perspective) I didn't praise her. Praise for her ability would have been contrived and broken her concentration.

I am saddened by the recent passing of Phyllis Krasilovsky who gave so much to my children's childhood.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of Create a Kids' Book, a manuscript

assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. See [3]www.createakidsbook.com.au [4] for further details. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978 0 415 39724 7, £29.99 pbk).

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