

Choosing and Using Picturebooks – Key Considerations:

Adapted from *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books* by Jane Doonan (Thimble Press, 1993)

‘The very best picturebooks become timeless mini art galleries for the home – a coming together of concept, artwork, design, and production that gives pleasure to, and stimulates the imagination of both children and adults.’

Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles: *Children’s Picturebooks, The Art of Visual Storytelling* (Laurence King, 2012)

On first look: The picture book as an object

Size & Shape

The size and shape of the text can play a defining role. Consider the book as an object. Why is it the size and shape it is? Is it appropriate to the content, the form and the reader? Does the size encourage sharing or promote the idea of a closer one to one reading? Does the size suggest that the picture book is special because it is so large or small? Is the book presented as portrait or landscape? How suitable is this choice? Many narratives follow a landscape format, suggesting more of a journey, whilst illustrated poetry or information texts tend to be portrait or square.

Style, Design, Media, Quality of materials, Suitability of illustration for subject matter

Everything we see is affective, at times it sets our hearts knocking and always sets our brains ticking. What effect does the medium have on you as a reader? Does it complement the subject matter and tone of the text? Are the production values of a high quality? Does the way the book looks and feels entice you to pick it up?

Every mark matters. Pictures are made of simple basic ingredients: arrangements of interwoven lines and shapes and colours, which the artist sets down in a particular medium and, at the same time organises. The movement of the pen or brush, the placement of collage, the design of sculptures and the organisational decisions, made either consciously or unconsciously and the medium itself induce an experience in the beholder.

Initial engagement

Look at the cover illustrations, the title and the names of the author and illustrator. If you already know the work of either, you may have pre-conceived expectations and assumptions, which it may be better not to have at this stage but which are inevitable. What are we to make of the cover image? Come back to this after reading and explore what you can make from this after reading. What extra information are you given from the endpapers? How do they take you into the story? If the title page contains a further illustration, what more evidence shapes your reading? The first reading will ignite the compelling curiosity to read on to find out what happens next, but this works against the pictures, which would have you stop and search. This immediate tension can be resolved by skimming through to get a general idea of the book and what you might make from it followed by reading all over again. The third look should give you time to read the words and look at the pictures much more slowly to begin the process of discovering what relationship(s) they have using the deeper looking guidance below.

Looking deeper: A step beyond what pictures literally represent to having an idea of how pictures are able to express and metaphorically display what cannot be pictured directly; ideas, moods, abstract notions and qualities.

'Illustrators who understand their craft use all aspects of visual imagery to convey meaning.'

'The meaning conscious mindset required to appreciate such pictures fully is always conscious of and always in search of meanings.'

Perry Nodelman: **Words About Pictures** (University of Georgia Press, 1988)



From **Grandad's Island** by Benji Davies (Simon and Schuster 2015)

Composition

How are the elements in the scene held in balance? By drawing the horizontal, vertical and diagonal axes over a rectangular or square picture, you can consider how the elements are held in balance. Looking at a picture in this way invites the beholder to consider how the elements are held in balance so that they create the psychological and perceptual effect desired by the artist. An object in the upper part of the composition is perceived as heavier than one in the lower. Location on the right side of the picture makes for more weight than location on the left. Weight also depends on size: larger objects will be heavier than small ones.

The Lines and Patterns

Look at the quality of the lines; drawn, painted, created or shaped. These are a direct record of the artist's hand, describing objects and events. The line that tells you about the pictured world reveals at the same time something of the personality of the picture-maker and how they think and feel about what they are doing. Does this have an effect on you as a viewer?

Facial expression, Body Language, Props

How does the illustrator extend our thinking about characters using facial expression? The slightest change to the eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth can change and enhance emotion in an instant. How does body language enhance this and allow us to understand and empathise with characters and

their situations? Look at how characters hold themselves. What is happening with their arms, legs, hands, feet? What props are on or around the character that deepen this understanding further?

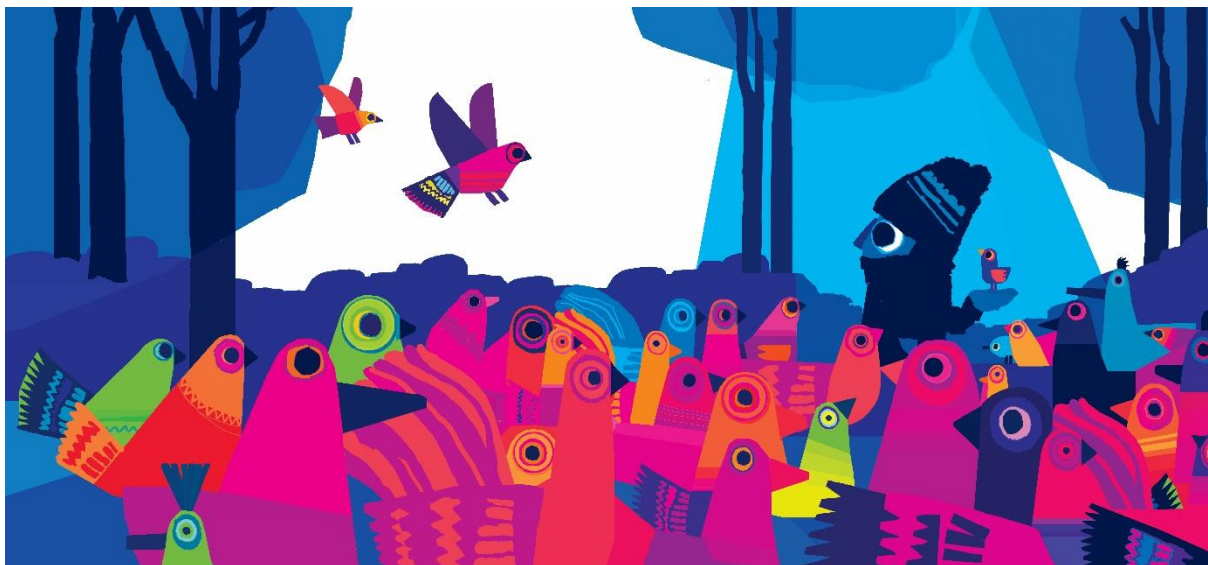
Perspective, Scale, Visual Links

The way that an artist controls space in a picture is extremely important. Establish the viewpoint of the beholder in relationship to the picture. Is the artist inviting us to look up to, or to look down upon the subject matter, or to look it in the eye? This has a marked psychological effect upon how we relate to what we are looking at.

Are there recurrent motifs that give signals to characters motives or actions? Do movements or placements of background characters or objects mirror or exemplify the main characters or action?

Layout, Framing and separation

Does the artist choose to use double page spreads, single page spreads or a combination of the two? How does the artist use framing and white space to open up or set scenes? Are frames deployed to move the narrative on or slow the narrative down? Does the positioning of character separate them from each other? What does this mean in the context of the story? Is white space used to separate, focusing our attention on a character's feelings or emotions or a particular incident that is taking place? Does the structure of the book, e.g. the page break or the page turn separate characters? What is the effect of this on the meaning of the story?



From *Shh! We Have a Plan* by Chris Haughton (Walker Books 2015)

Colour, shading and tone

Is the colour being used naturalistically, graphically or for emotional effect? Does the palette complement the subject matter or tone of the text? Does the colour symbolism have natural associations, conventional associations or associations particular to a specific book? Is it used consistently throughout the text or is it deployed for effect at points throughout? Light and dark not only represent lighting effects but also have symbolic and emotional associations for us. A colour scheme using light colours is able to suggest feelings of well-being whereas a scheme of dark colours

may well have a sombre effect. Do shading and tone bring objects to the forefront or set them into the background?

Journey

Look at the direction characters are looking and moving; usually the characters follow the direction of the story. If they don't, why not? What does this mean? We read the text from left to right, this gives a sense of moving on. Are the pictures doing the same? Do lines of different weight or thickness suggest movement?

The interaction between the words and the pictures:

'A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost an experience for a child.

As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page.'

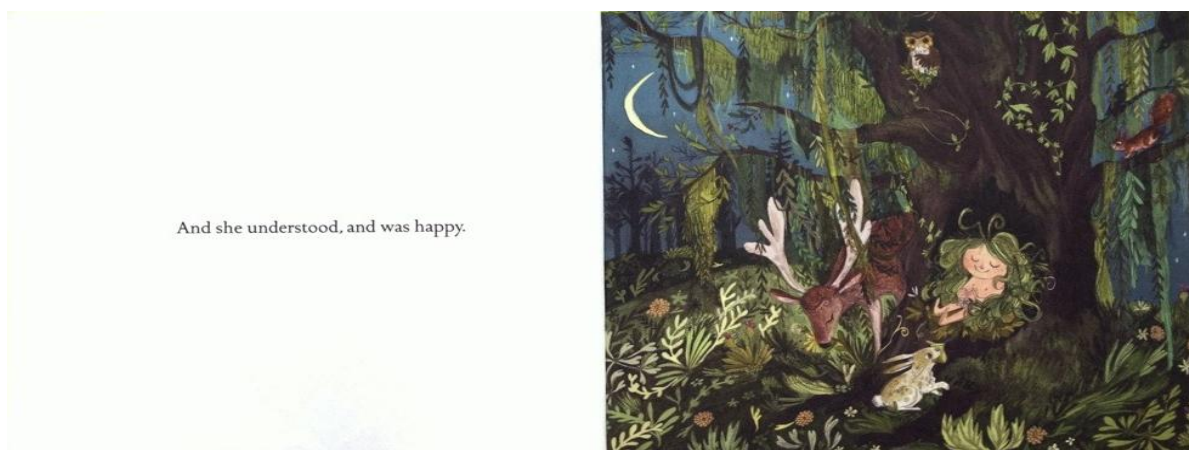
Barbara Bader: ***American Picture Books: From Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*** (Macmillan, 1976)

Focus on the story told by the words. Look at the pictures separately then read the words and pictures as a whole. Do the illustrations:

- Complement the text
- Elaborate and extend it
- Contradict the text
- Show feelings that the words may only imply

Adapted from Maria Nikolajeva & Carole Scott: ***How Picturebooks Work*** (Routledge, 2008)

How does the typography integrate with the illustration? How are the words arranged on the page alongside the illustrations? Does the effectiveness of the placement give the reader cause to pause and reflect on the illustrations or on concepts raised in the text?



From ***Wild*** by Emily Hughes (Flying Eye 2015)

'When we hold a picture book, we have in our hands a pictured world full of ideas. We play with these ideas and play with our own ideas around the pictured world. The more skilful we are, and the

more ideas the picture book contains, the more the ideas go on bouncing. And in the process we create something of our very own. Jane Doonan: **Looking at Pictures in Picture Books** (Thimble Press, 1993)