



Picture Book Worlds

Article Author:

[Shirley Hughes](#) [1]

[14](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

'Like all the best entertainments, looking at a picture book calls as much out of the audience as they care to give.'

Shirley Hughes provides a personal guide.

'Like all the best entertainments, looking at a picture book calls as much out of the audience as they care to give.'

Shirley Hughes provides a guide to her

Picture Book Worlds

<!--break-->

If you're talking about picture-books, theatrical analogies crop up all the time. A picture-book is, after all, rather like a small stage. The reader opens it, and up goes the curtain on the action. The way the characters are grouped, for instance, or move across a double-page spread, their gestures and facial expressions, all help to tell the story just as much as the words. Considerations such as the source of light, clothes, landscapes and interiors are important to the whole business of trying to transform a flat piece of paper into a three-dimensional scene. But this theatre is a very detailed one, seen in close-up and lingered over at leisure.

Although most illustrators start by learning to draw and paint alongside their fellow art students, to manage inks and colour washes and work in the life-room, they are nevertheless developing within themselves a narrative turn of mind, with strong overtones of grease-paint. And if you delve further back into some of our early lives you are less likely to find a child curled up with its nose buried in a book than one who dotes on comics, queues up to see Buster Keaton, and tends to burst out from the living room curtains expecting applause. The literary bit comes later, along with the drawing technique.

Being read to is highly nutritious to the infant illustrator, as it is to every child. Recited to, even better. I got declaimed to quite a bit round about the age of four by a fifteen-year-old called Nellie, who had been winkled out of the Co-op and employed full-time looking after me. She relieved the tedium of the job by enacting, with vivid vocal effects, the whole of **The Highwayman** by Alfred Noyes, coached up to word perfect by the lady at the Friday evening Girls Friendly Society. They still did things like that at the Girls Friendly when I was a child. She had a passion for boys' adventure yarns, too, Henty, Ballantyne, **The Hotspur** and **The Wizard**. A bit above my head in parts, but thrilling stuff nevertheless.

But to get back to the point. The most important thing about a children's book, 'of course, is the story. This applies whether the reader is perceiving the whole thing in pictures, or in words, or any combination of the two. With a picture-book, not even the most dazzling display of design and colour-technique can make up for a weak story-line. Ideas for books usually float by like icebergs, mostly below the surface, for a long time before you start putting pencil to paper. In my case they float by in pictures, seen in my head while washing-up or mooning about. Getting it into words is the most crucial bit. The sentences that appear on the page eventually take as long to write as a more substantial piece. Onion-

like, the finished text should be smoothly rounded and lucidly simple, but it's the result of many layers of rigorous editing. The final test is in the reading and re-reading, the nightly encores from its young audience.

Next comes the making of the dummy, deploying the words and the roughs for pictures into a 32-page format (this is a magic number that has to do with printing machines). I cut up blocks of text and position and re-position them on the pages, drawing round them rather rapidly with a softish pencil or a felt pen. Then comes the period when my editor and I mull all this over, working very closely together. Between this and doing the finished artwork there may be a gap when I find myself doing some altogether different job. Once embarked, however, I get my head down and immerse myself for three or four months. It's a slow, meticulous process. Happily, using chalks, gouache and inks is a highly tactile pleasure as well as an intellectual one. I can even listen to records or the radio sometimes while I'm doing it (unthinkable when trying to write).

Even if things aren't going so well and deadlines are pressing, there's still no pleasure or excitement in the world to compare with sitting down in front of a blank piece of paper on the drawing-board. An added bonus is to know that a picture-book is going to be a shared experience. The people in the 'audience' look at the pictures together, point things out to one another and extend each other's visual range. It's very often the non-reader who's the best looker. He can take in the narrative at exactly the pace he wants to, can turn back the pages, compare and imagine. Like all the best entertainments, it's not a passive one, and calls as much out of the audience as they care to give.

I'm much too absorbed to think about all this when I'm actually drawing. Only when I meet children at the receiving end of books, in schools and libraries up and down the country, I sometimes feel an awesome weight of responsibility. In an era when visual reactions, even those of the very young, are hotted up to a lightening speed by television, picture-books may be the only non-photographic imagery they are going to be exposed to in a relaxed and intimate way. I'm always being pleasurably astonished by what children can actually *do* with a picture-book, the way they can use a wordless book like **Up and Up**, for instance, or **Dogger**, and make it their own, a way of reinforcing their own thoughts and experiences and as a starting point for their own stories and pictures.

With **Alfie Gets in First**, in which my small hero slams the front door and gets stuck inside while a frantic build-up ensues on the door-step, I was faced with the design problem of showing both inside and outside the house simultaneously. I found that I could use the actual *form* of the book, the gutter down the middle where the pages are sewn, as part of the story. So it became the great divide, and the pictures on each side of the spread hold a sort of double action in which the non-reader can be one ahead of the text by knowing how Alfie is going to resolve his problem. Recently, working on the artwork for **Alfie's Feet**, which is about the same little boy and his baby sister, Annie Rose, I've tried to give the reader things to discover in a leisurely way in the pictures; the time of year, for instance, and a detailed sense of place, as well as a great many (countable) feet.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of our job stems from that marvellous moment when a baby gets hold of a book and suddenly realises that the image on one page connects with the one overleaf. There's something here for him. The excitement is intense. To capitalise on this excitement, and to use visual imagery to bring him through the foothills of learning to read and on to the thrilling horizons beyond, is the aim. If I could, I'd like to bring about a time when visual ideas can be used as a counterpoint to all kinds of fiction, right up the age-range, in all kinds of ways, larky, informative, decorative, deeply moving, or simply wham! slurp! splat! pow!, just as the story demands. With **Here Comes Charlie Moon** and, more recently, **Charlie Moon and the Big Bonanza Bust-up** I've attempted to use picture-book wiles and apply them to a fast-moving narrative for older children, pacing the drawings with the action. In the latter Charlie's exploits get entangled with a Book Bonanza, organised by Linda, a lovely librarian (with a bit part played by a visiting Lady Artist). When I started writing it, the drawings got all over the page. A lot of work and glue was expended. It was a highly entertaining experience for me, at least, (and for the reader too, I hope).

In the end, of course, the most exciting pictures any child sees will be in his own head. But the ones he sees on the page will stay with him, too, for quite a while.

Shirley Hughes is one of our best loved and most talented artist/writers. As well as illustrating other people's work (The Corrins' anthologies and Dorothy Edwards' **My Naughty Little Sister** stories for two) Shirley Hughes has an impressive collection of her own picture books including **Lucy and Tom's Christmas**, **Helpers**, **Dogger**, which won the Kate Greenaway Award. Recently she has been breaking new ground in picture book terms - the wordless **Up and Up** is a masterpiece of visual storytelling and in **Alfie gets in First** the form of the book becomes part of the story.

Shirley's pet crusade is for pictures in books for older children and her latest Charlie Moon story certainly makes the point. The book is marvellously entertaining and cleverly designed so that pictures and text join together in telling the story - a delight for all and an especial boon for those daunted by solid chunks of unrelieved text.

Charlie Moon and the Big Bonanza Bust Up

Bodley Head, 0 370 30918 9, £4.50

Alfie gets in First

Bodley Head, 0 370 30417 9, £3.50

Alfie's Feet

Bodley Head, 0 370 30416 0, £4.25

Up and Up

Bodley Head, 0 370 30179 X, £3.50

Picture Lion, 0 00 661809 X, 90p

Here Comes Charlie Moon

Bodley Head. Lions, 0 00 671934 1, 95p

Page Number:

4

Source URL (retrieved on Feb '20): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/14/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/picture-book-worlds>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/shirley-hughes>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/14>