



# Picture Books with Something to Say

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**Joanna Carey** finds titles of quality and originality.

So many picture books are published these days that quality and originality can often give way to quantity. But there are gems lurking in the piles of spring titles. **Joanna Carey** seeks them out.<!--break-->

With such large numbers of picture books today, it is interesting to note that until the eighteenth century there were no children's books as such. Children had to make do with suitable adult books, of a religious, educational or generally improving nature. The idea of books for pleasure rather than instruction was frowned upon and it was only with the advent of people like Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll that entertaining books of an entirely non-didactic nature began to appear.

But there's a problem when entertainment is prized above other considerations and today, sadly, there are mountains of unmemorable books full of frenetic, wacky humour, brash colours and ugly design that after an initial skim through don't merit a second glance. It's a mystery how they get published alongside the work of so many authors and artists of genuine integrity, who really do have something to say; who can be funny and entertaining without being patronizing, who dazzle us with their skills and, without threatening us with *issues*, give a little insight whether it's serious, thought provoking, humorous or surreal into the problems, the delights and the uncertainties of the world we live in.

## The nature of independence

**Don't Let Go!**, for example, by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross, is, on the surface, about a little girl, Sophie, learning to ride her bike, with her father running frantically alongside, trying to judge the moment at which she'll be able to get her balance, and ride safely. He's longing for her to get the hang of it, but at the same time he's nervously anticipating the years ahead when she'll be looking for an even greater independence. While the bicycle is an eloquent metaphor, smaller children will enjoy this at face value and the illustrations offer a wealth of detail about Sophie's family. Ross is a hugely entertaining draughtsman and while his loose limbed figures can be wonderfully funny, he can evoke a subtle range of emotions with just a loose wash and the swish of a scratchy nib.

Both father and daughter in **Don't Let Go!** know that one day Sophie will want to make her own way in life but in **Loveykins** Quentin Blake describes a relationship which, for all the comfortable, daffy humour of the opening pages, offers a really rather startling, thought provoking reflection on the nature of dependence. When Angela, a kindly, rather old-fashioned, middle-aged lady, finds a helpless baby bird that has fallen from his nest, she is delighted to have someone to care for, and she smothers him with attention. Swaddled to within an inch of his life with shawls, cardigans and eiderdowns, and safely strapped in a pushchair, Augustus endures her kindness and, although we can see him looking hungrily at a passing beetle, he allows her the pleasure of satisfying his prodigious appetite with an endless supply of buns, cream cakes and chocolates. Sadly in denial of the fact that her protégé is growing up fast, Angela is shocked one morning to find he's become a colossal ferocious looking bird of prey, and has escaped his shackles. He spreads his wings and, for the first time in his life, he flies and suddenly *we're* up there, getting a bird's eye view of

Augustus? mighty shadow as it passes over the scenes of his cosseted youth. Free at last to enjoy a natural diet, we see Augustus ripping the entrails from a dead squirrel ? Blake?s drawing is, as ever, economical with the line, but not the *facts* and the image manages to be both discreet and explicit. Later when he calls on Angela, with the gift of a dead mouse, we realize that throughout their relationship food has been their sole means of communication. They remain friends, but she sensibly turns her attention to nurturing cactuses.

## Heaven and earth

**Up In Heaven** by Emma Chichester Clark looks at the reaction of a child to the death of a pet dog. Arthur is lonely without Daisy. His sadness is gently suggested in his forlorn posture and his preoccupied expression ? he can?t stop thinking about her. ?Where is she now?? he asks. And up in heaven Daisy is worried; she can?t get on with enjoying her afterlife until she knows Arthur is happy again. The other dogs in this heaven ? a sort of celestial ?dog area? ? advise Daisy to send him some dreams to show him how nice it is up there, and to let him know that it?s fine by her if he wants to get another dog.

It?s a touching story which by virtue of its sincerity and straightforward simplicity avoids any sentimentality. Chichester Clark uses colour with great sensitivity; as ever she excels in moonlit scenes and with her shady veils of colour, heightened with the subtle luminosity of the crayon line, the picture of Daisy?s last night on earth has a magical solemnity. And although heaven is depicted as a shimmering light filled place (seething with dancing dogs and tulips), Arthur?s home, in a leafy suburb, with loving parents, and a beautiful garden, full of growing things, is clearly something of an earthly paradise, and clutching his new puppy Arthur realizes that life is good, life is for living.

Daisy was lucky ? she found heaven to be full of her own sort. But when the tiny yellow, three-eyed rabbit from outer space, in Alexis Deacon?s **Beegu**, crashlands on earth she has great difficulty because of her alien appearance. Although she?s readily accepted by the children she meets, the adults she encounters ? i.e. those in authority ? seem unmoved by the fact that she?s lost, and seriously in need of help, and she just gets moved on. There?s not much of a story here, but there?s a real message in this beautifully produced book and the darkly enchanting illustrations with their strangely overcast skies, give it maximum impact. With her prehensile ears, the eloquent gestures she makes with her stumpy little arms and the subtle wit of her hieroglyphic speech bubbles, Beegu is a memorable creation and whether she?s mooching along a busy street, lost in a forest of human legs or sleeping under the light of the moon, her sense of isolation is palpable. Deacon draws with a gentle textured line and the children he draws, who befriend Beegu, are full of character with an individuality: recalling a style somewhere between the early Sendak and Paula Rego.

**In Borka, The Adventures of a Goose with no Feathers** by John Burningham Borka, too, is something of an outsider. Because she has no feathers, and has to wear a knitted jumper to keep warm, she is ridiculed and ostracized by the other geese. Consequently she never learns to fly and is therefore unable to migrate with the rest of the family. Making use of colour in a bold, painterly way, Burningham?s illustrations have a tragi-comic power that really makes you believe in the plight of this goose and they evoke a powerful response at every turn in the story ... you feel genuinely outraged that her mother has abandoned Borka, enormous gratitude to the dog who befriends her, and great respect for the captain of the boat who delivers her safely to a new home in Kew Gardens ? and what a relief that the London geese accept her unconditionally, regardless of her soggy jumper. A heart-warming, award-winning story that was ahead of its time when it was first published 40 years ago, and which has now been honoured with a special anniversary edition.

## The futility of war

War is perhaps an unlikely theme for a picture book, but Vladimir Radunsky attacks it with panache, using pure, bright primary colours, and symbolically juxtaposing crude, roughly torn paper images with elegant brush drawings in **Manneken Pis, The Simple Story of a Boy Who Peed on a War**. With a minimal, but EMPHATIC text it tells the legend behind the famous statue in Brussels. Within the walls of a beautiful medieval city that?s in the throes of an ugly war, a little boy searches desperately for his parents ... high up on the ramparts, lost and frightened by the sound of fighting, he suddenly needs to pee ? and he does so, by chance, directly on to the battleground below. Everyone is astonished, the fighting stops, weapons are laid aside ... and (to borrow from Sassoon) everyone suddenly bursts out

laughing ... and the futility of war is exposed.

Pratima Mitchell's story, **Petar's Song**, illustrated by Caroline Binch, is set against a backdrop of war somewhere in Eastern Europe. When war breaks out, the family has to leave their farm and flee across the border to safety. Petar takes his violin he's often played for village celebrations, but now, hungry and homeless in the snow amongst hundreds of other refugees, he no longer has the heart to play. But as Christmas approaches, things look up; there's an air of hope and optimism. The story is plainly told and Binch is that rare thing, a wholly *naturalistic* illustrator. She takes a very different approach from any of the other artists here: seeking a very particular sort of authenticity, she makes no secret of the fact that a camera is central to her work in recording the children, the landscapes and the animals. What she loses in freedom and spontaneity she makes up for with telling detail that speaks volumes about the reality of the children's situation. With close reference to the photos and a meticulously controlled watercolour technique, Binch documents every nuance in the anxious intensity of the children's facial expressions, every last detail of their clothing – their trainers, their crumpled jeans and tracksuits, the texture of their anoraks and nylon rucksacks ... There's a much freer atmosphere though in the illustrations for the endpapers – both show the same war-torn landscape, but there are subtle, symbolic differences in the light ... at the very end of the book, you can see that summer is coming and the swallows are returning to the valley.

After the close-up actuality of Binch's illustrations, which will chime so readily with the images children have seen on news reports, Quentin Blake approaches a similar theme on a much broader canvas. Addressing all sorts of global problems – not just war, but pollution, prejudice and injustice, **A Sailing Boat in the Sky** is the result of a remarkable – and unique – collaborative project for which Blake enlisted the help of no fewer than 1,800 school children from all round the world. It was the children's compassion and imagination that developed this fantasy about a magical sailing boat, and, with his customary breadth and economy, Blake's drawings give it instant lift-off as, with two children at the helm, it sets out on its rescue mission. Whizzing round the world from one front-line emergency to another, the vigorous illustrations give the impression of having been daringly dashed off on the spot. While backgrounds are vividly suggested, often with no more than a series of semi abstract squiggles, the figure drawing – and there is no end to the variety of people the children haul safely on board – is rich in characterisation and gesture. And along with all the dramatic rescues and the 'derring-do', there are those oases of calm so vital to the rhythm and coherence of any picture book – a tender drawing of a refugee mother and child, for example, resting under an upturned boat, or the homely scene on a far flung beach where a reassuring sense of order and companionship is established as the motley crew sit round the table for a fish supper.

In **Bad News I'm in Charge!** Bruce Ingman takes a look at government, and the art of leadership. Danny, out hunting with his soopadoopa metal detector, digs up an old treasure chest. It contains a charter entitling him to rule the land, so he sets to work immediately, giving top jobs to all his friends, making radical changes to things like school rules, television viewing, bedtime and chocolate consumption. At first it all goes swimmingly, but gradually he realizes that he's responsible for a lot more than he bargained for ... Ingman's very knowing illustrations are a glorious combination of faux-naïf childlike painting and line drawings some of which, against their richly coloured backgrounds, have a curiously languid Matisse like quality. The loud, exclamatory text is set in an eye-catching variety of typefaces, some of it back to front: there's handwriting, a bit of collage here and there, some borrowed textures, decorative twiddles and graphic 'asides'. At the end, it tells you to start again – but you won't really need telling.

**Joanna Carey** is a writer and illustrator.

## **Books discussed**

**Don't Let Go!**, Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross, Andersen, 1 84270 071 5, £9.99 hbk

**Loveykins**, Quentin Blake, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 06471 1, £10.99 hbk

**Up In Heaven**, Emma Chichester Clark, Andersen, 1 84270 046 4, £9.99 hbk

**Beegu**, Alexis Deacon, Hutchinson, 0 09 176829 2, £10.99 hbk

**Borka, The Adventures of a Goose with no Feathers**, John Burningham, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 06494 0, £10.99 hbk

**Manneken Pis**, Vladimir Radunsky, Walker, 0 7445 9683 1, £10.99 hbk

**Petar's Song**, Pratima Mitchell and Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 2063 8, £10.99 hbk

**A Sailing Boat in the Sky**, Quentin Blake, Red Fox, 0 09 943959 X, £5.99 pbk

**Bad News I'm in Charge!**, Bruce Ingman, Walker, 0 7445 5553 1, £10.99 hbk

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