



Classics in Short No.75: The Very Hungry Caterpillar

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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on Eric Carle's **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**.

Brian Alderson

Forty years of munching herald?

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The Very Hungry Caterpillar

The queue (or line)

went right round the room and through the door at the end: teachers, librarians, school librarians, parents, children...They were all clutching picture books while sitting at the head of the line (or queue) was an elderly, slightly frail-looking gentleman in danger of giving himself serious hand-cramps as he signed and signed and signed the gaudy volumes that were reverently placed before him.

Welcome, Eric Carle,

to another children's book festival, another signing session, and the prospect of speech-making ahead. (On the occasion which I recall here, he spoke three times in two days, without repetition, deviation, and all the rest of it, but always with wisdom about the devising of his books and the responses of the children for whom they were composed.)

And it was the Caterpillar who began it.

His appearance out of the egg forty years ago did not quite signal the sudden emergence (like the butterfly) of a wholly unexpected phenomenon, for Carle had served a long apprenticeship, working as a graphic designer for almost twenty years. And there had been at least two portents of what was to follow: the picture book done with his friend Bill Martin, Junior in 1967, **Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?**, and his own first picture book a year later: **1, 2, 3 to the Zoo** ? the first with a minimum of text and the second without any text at all, apart from the cardinal numbers, and both fully-fledged in their exploitation of colour across their capacious double-page spreads.

But the Caterpillar made it new.

Its captivating transformations took place at a time when today's all-engulfing wave of novelty books was only beginning to gather itself up. In Britain, Roger Schlesinger was beginning to market the work of the newly christened 'paper engineers' of America, who were themselves inspired by that Czech master of the movable book, Vojtech Kubasta, but individual artists developing creative ideas ? such as John Burningham's fold-out posters in **Seasons** ? were uncommon and **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** revealed what could be done by an artist with books that played

games with themselves.

Its combination of ideas

was strikingly original. To begin with, we have the simple natural history lesson of the caterpillar's progress from egg to butterfly. Superimposed upon this though we have the quite unnatural ingestive adventures of the creature set out in a numerical sequence through the days of the week. Furthermore, it is all then presented to the reader through the book's complex structure with its inner leaves expanding one by one from a narrow strip to a full page which will accommodate the accumulating feast. Little holes show where the caterpillar has munched its way through a horrifying heap of calories until, via his dung-coloured pupa, he emerges as a resplendent butterfly.

(Those holes made for problems.

I recall opening one new copy of the book and being showered with a little storm of tiny circular discs, stamped out but still present in the pages, and it has been suggested that a like occurrence may have spurred the book's most notorious American advocate to devise a voting system based on hanging chads. Certainly, the precision hole-boring that is called for is a costly procedure and it comes as no surprise to learn that the goofy production staff for the first British paperback edition wanted to substitute printed dots where the holes should go. Fortunately they were dissuaded...)

[image:Holes in fruit - VHC.jpg:left]

Picture book lookers

have also praised Carle's kaleidoscopic use of colour through the book, especially at its dramatic climax. (This is very successfully done in the recent pop-up version of the story although too much pointless over-egging of the feast has gone on before ? why do publishers have to mess about with completely satisfying formulae?) Carle's gift for page design, already noted in his first two books, is complemented through the whole of his work by his versatility in the placing and patterning of his colour images. He regularly uses an array of collages, assembled according to his own recipe for working the surface of tissue paper so that he can achieve complex scratched, scraped, marbled effects alongside conventional brushed acrylics. (He's not averse to including brief technological explanations of such matters in the colophons or blurbs to his books.)

It must be said though

that, *en masse*, the barely changing sequences of flat, foregrounded images, often of variously contorted animals, take on a mechanical sameness despite their surface glow. Well-loved though his extensive output may be (hence those patient people waiting in the queue) it's necessary to recognize that the alluring collages are always in service to Carle's graphic narratives on whose success their own depends. The ingenuity of those narratives is at its best in such books as **1, 2, 3 to the Zoo** where a little black-and-white train fills up with animals at the bottom of each opening, or as **The Secret Birthday Message**, which is a sort of treasure-hunt through variously shaped, cut-through pages, or as **Papa, Please Get the Moon for Me**, with its huge flap extensions (my favourite of all his books). Colour may enhance effect but it is the freshness of the idea, its imaginative appeal, and its progress towards a satisfying, and sometimes surprising, conclusion that really matters. Just like **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**.

The illustrations are taken from the 2002 Picture Puffin edition (978 1 4056 932 2, £6.99 pbk). The recent pop-up version mentioned above is also published by Puffin (978 0 14 138506 8, £14.99).

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

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 [Holes in fruit - VHC.jpg](#)

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