



Two Children Tell: Nick and the Crazy Cowboy

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by **Virginia Lowe**

In the latest of her regular series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** observes her four-year-old son's ability to recognise and identify different artists.

It was a mistake of his mother's which led Nicholas to observe and articulate the different styles of two artists. He had borrowed (and passionately loved) Guillermo Mordillo's **Crazy Cowboy** several times over the previous six months, when we found Jean-Jacques Loup's **Patatrac** in a bookshop. They are the same size and shape hardback, black cover, dozens of little brightly coloured cartoon people doing odd things on each opening, and wordless, so I presumed they were by the same person.

I was soon corrected by Nicholas aged four years and two months (4y2m). 'In **Cowboy Crazy** [sic] they have long eyes. When he shuts them they're long like that' (demonstrates with his hand out from his own eye, to represent the bulging eyes of the characters). He continued: 'Cos **Cowboy Crazy** hasn't got long noses? see, there's a long nose. There aren't any of those in **Cowboy Crazy**.' (Loup depicts long pointy noses, Mordillo large fat ones.)

One month later he acquired what he described as a new '**Crazy Cowboy** book'. I agreed that it was, but he went on to correct himself (and me?) saying: 'It's more like **Patatrac**'; and indeed **The Architect** is by Loup, not Mordillo. He pursued his investigation of style in **The Architect** on this occasion by noticing that 'their feet haven't got those holes!' I glossed this stylistic device in **Crazy Cowboy** as heels on the shoes, and Nicholas went on to remark 'they haven't got heels here, either?' (in **Patatrac**). I pointed out the author statements on **Crazy Cowboy** and **The Architect** as final confirmation. Nicholas's summation was:

'All of them could have been written by the same man but they just didn't do long eyes. Because? do you know what? It's got the same pictures as his, and because it must be the same. Another [reason] is because that hasn't got any words and this hasn't.'

These were more or less the arguments I had given for thinking they had the same illustrator.

The illustrator's name had been the name for a series of similar books at first? 'More Bee-ix Potters' (to a pile of them on the floor), or 'A quick Dick Bruna' (offered by his parents on rushed nights, but soon as a statement by him as well, bringing one or several **Miffy** books) were both used in this way at 3y3m. Other series that were physically similar, but had a specific character throughout, were called by the character's name? 'Orlandos' rather than Hales, for instance (**Orlando the Marmalade Cat** series by Kathleen Hale). We weren't consistent in series naming, but we always read the author's and illustrator's names on the title page, and often on the cover as well, so the names themselves were familiar

At 3y0m when we had read the title opening of the very familiar **Rosie's Walk**, Nicholas asked 'Where's Pat Hutchins??' and carefully studied the picture. Finding the door in the windmill he announced. 'I think she's in there!' As this is the only example of this behaviour, he was probably playing with the concept, rather than genuinely puzzled.

One of his favourite illustrators was Richard Scarry. His **Best Word Book Ever** has little animal characters which Nicholas loved poring over by himself. He would ask for 'Dat big Scarry book?' at 2y5m. The Scarry books were not uniform in size and shape, so he was undoubtedly recognising the style of illustration at 2y11m when he told an adult friend 'We've got a new Scarry, Ron!?' At 3y4m Rebecca brought home a sheet of busywork from school, and along the top were a line of Scarry's animals in black and white. 'That's Scarry! Lucy has got those in a book?' he volunteered, recognising the characters quite out of context.

When the illustration was to a story or rhyme for which they already knew at least one other set of pictures, this foregrounded the individual styles of artists. Mother Goose was the best example of this, as we had four nursery rhyme books illustrated by different artists. He could thus recognise four different versions of 'Humpty Dumpty?'. However when we brought the Tasha Tudor **Nursery Rhymes** home from the library, he took the new library books into his room. Suddenly he came running through the house in great excitement and grabbed my hand: 'Mummy, Mummy, come and look. Something's gone wrong!?' collecting his sister and father on the way as well. 'It's Humpty Dumpty!?' he announced, showing us the cover (3y10m). Tudor has a most unusual Humpty in old-fashioned military garb, contrasting with her very realistic children. He was clearly delighted to recognise this unusual portrayal.

Comparisons of artistic style were a highlight in picture books for Nicholas. He often named the artist on seeing a new volume by a well-loved illustrator. David McKee and Maurice Sendak were two he recognised at once.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids' Book](#) [3], 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. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

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