



Two Children Tell: Invertebrate Encounters

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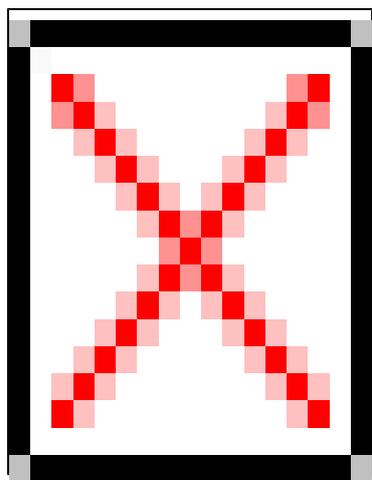
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Invertebrate encounters and a warning to illustrators

*In the latest in her series examining children's relationship with language, **Virginia Lowe** has a warning for illustrators.*



With my two children, problems could arise during readings, when the illustrations disagreed with what children knew to be the case in the real world, most commonly when animals were represented incorrectly. This is not a problem when the creatures were imaginary ones such as Dr Seuss's or Tove Jansson's. But when they purported to be animals from our world, especially in a non-fantasy text, errors were often noticed and commented on. It seems to be the small creatures that illustrators are most unsure of. No one makes a mistake illustrating an elephant or a cat, but the familiar ants, bees, spiders and snails seem particularly challenging.

Snails with four eyes (on the stalks and on the sides of the head) were noticed in **Bananas in Pyjamas** at five (5y0m) by Rebecca and 3y8m by Nicholas who also objected 'Those spiders have got people eyes!'. Rebecca also commented out of the blue [no book present] (5y8m) 'You know that book **Dinosaurs and all that Rubbish**?' [Yes.] 'Well the snail in it - the snail on a leaf - it hasn't got stalks for eyes at all!'

There were bees with stings on their noses instead of on the back, as those in **Hop on Pop** as Nick remarked at 6y7m. 'Anyway, that one would be dead' he said, knowing that bees do not survive their stinging defence.

They were fascinated by pictures of animals generally, as all children seem to be, at least those who live with a pet. They could name them by making their sounds enthusiastically, both going through phases, before they could speak, of carting books around, locating an animal, and begging the nearest adult to make the relevant sound. There is a description of John trying to tell a visitor how to get downtown to the shops. 'Turn left [Meow meow] at the end of [woof woof] the street [tweet tweet] and four streets to your right [moo!] is [meow meow] William Street. Turn into there and you'll see [neigh ? oink oink ? meow] the bakery at the end of the [woof woof] street near the bridge [baa baa].'

Of course this is easy with mammals, but not so much with the mainly silent small invertebrates. Bees of course buzz, and Nick showed he recognised this by 'buzzing' to both bees and butterflies in **Mrs Tittlemouse** and **Barbapapa's Ark** at 1y1m. At 1y4m among his few words was 'bir' for 'bird'. I was reading to Rebecca, and read the word 'bird'.

Nick crossed the room to me, stared at the picture-less page, and then pointed to the writing declaring 'bir'. He seemed to understand already that it was the writing that carried the word. He especially loved Richard Scarry's **Best Word Book Ever** and he could name all the animals on the animal opening except the shark and the beetle at 2y0m ? giving their proper names by now, not just their cries.

At about the same age as Nick seemed to understand about writing, Rebecca showed (1y5m) that she understood and remembered stories. She was on my hip as I discussed books with a children's librarian. We were both enthusing about **Whistle for Willie**. Rebecca was listening closely. 'Ff - ff?' she said ? there was certainly no picture of a dog in sight nor sound of a dog outside the library. She was joining in the conversation about the book, and kept insisting 'ff - ff?' until I agreed with her 'Yes, **Whistle for Willie** is about a dog?' at which she smiled, relaxed and showed by her body language that that was what she had been trying to convey.

True to her scientific bent, Rebecca studied the actual creatures. At 1y8m she was peering very closely at ants, out in the garden. No doubt we discussed the number of legs, and the difference between ants and spiders, at the time, because at 4y4m she spotted that Little Miss Muffet's spider in Briggs' **Mother Goose Treasury** ?has only got six legs? (then discovered a few days later that Wildsmith's in his **Mother Goose** is similar). Conversely at 3y11m in **Summer**, a book showing what children do in hot weather, Rebecca (3y11m) queried on the picnic page: 'Are those ants?' [Yes.] 'But they've got so many legs!' [You're right! They've got eight legs!] 'Like spiders!' [Do you know, I think the lady who drew them didn't know how many legs ants have!] 'Perhaps she'd never seen one?' [Perhaps.] I was clearly dubious, so a minute later she had thought of another explanation. 'Mummy, perhaps she didn't know how to count?'

So conformity to reality matters when illustrating picture books ? children have sharp eyes, and look more closely at things around them than many adults do. If you are an illustrator, don't assume you know what a snail looks like ? go and study one! Some children will certainly spot anatomical errors.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, 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).

Books mentioned

Mother Goose Treasury, Raymond Briggs

Dinosaurs and All that Rubbish, Michael Foreman

Whistle for Willie, Ezra Jack Keats

Summer, Alice Low & Roy McKie

The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse, Beatrix Potter

Best Word Book Ever, Richard Scarry

Hop on Pop, Dr Seuss

Barbapapa's Ark, Annette Tison & alus Taylor

Mother Goose, Brian Wildsmith

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