

Children's Literature

In the world of children's literature there are many books suitable for young children, all of which fall into two main categories – *non-fiction* (often referred to as Fact Books), and *fiction* which are 'made-up' stories. There are also concept books where babies and toddlers can learn about colour, shape, size, texture etc. There are children's cookbooks, and for very young children and babies, waterproof bath books, board books and indestructible cloth books!

Non-Fictional books – these are also called Fact Books in other words information books about cars, animals, anything at all really, often containing photographs as illustrations. There are fact books written for literally every age group.

Fictional stories – these are stories that have been created (or made-up) by the author and are not about actual people (although they can be based on real people) They can be told through many different genres e.g. fantasy, science-fiction, mysteries etc. Even though they are fictional they may still be realistic and could easily be true (something young readers love because it *could, maybe* one day, *might* just happen to them!).

Genres in children's literature are usually limited to the following:

Realism – telling a story about real life where often the story could actually happen to the reader themselves! They are often set in schools, or a neighbourhood, and other familiar places so children can relate to the characters and the story

Fantasy – containing something non-realistic e.g. magic, fairies, talking animals or trees, all sorts. For teenagers and adults this could also include ancient mythology, aliens and the supernatural. *Time-slip fantasies* are also for slightly older readers, *Tom's Midnight Garden* is a good example, where when the clock strikes a door to another time is opened (younger children find it hard to understand the back and forward passage of time)

Poetry – there are hundreds of wonderful poetry books for even the youngest of children *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* by A.A. Milne are two beautiful examples

Fairy Tales – these are all the old classics like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella* etc. while many are simply lovely stories often with great lessons to learn, others are quite terrifying for young children – *Hansel and Gretel* springs to mind!

Fables – these are often very short tales with a moral lesson e.g. *The Hare and the Tortoise*

Historical fiction – not really written for 0-6 years-olds, but there are some books for the 7-10 age group, which are based on historical figures and events. Here children can learn about other places and times, usually told through the eyes of a child. While they may contain many facts they are still telling the fictional story of an often imaginary person living in a particular time e.g. from the point of view of a young chimney sweep in the 1800s

Classics – since children's literature is really only a 20th Century invention, then children's classics are not yet that old, but like all good classics are still loved and adored by generation after generation of readers. Children's Classics include *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and in Australia books such as *Snugglypot and Cuddlepie* by May Gibbs or more recently *Possum Magic* by Mem Fox

Interactive Books – these are definitely a modern invention, where the child is more than just a passive listener, they can actually get physically involved in the story. I think perhaps the very first of these was Eric Carle's wonderful *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, where the book

featured little holes for little fingers to fit through and pretend to be the caterpillar. Other interactive books include the lift-the-flap style books, the touchy-feely books, and more recently the books with buttons to press with sound effects etc.

School Readers – these are a specific genre of books aimed at very beginning readers. These books come in levels from 1 to about 20 (depending on the series) and can be a mix of both fact and fiction. The levels reflect the level of reading each child is at. Level 1 school readers are obviously for the very beginners, they are extremely short with only a few words per page and accompanied by images (whether drawings or photographs), that provide picture cues for what is written. In other words, if the text describes a book or a beetle, then the picture will be of a book or a beetle. Obviously the text and images get more and more complex in each Level as the child's reading improves.

Action and Adventure stories – here the main character/s get up to all sorts of adventures, they are super exciting where the characters are often put in great danger and it's hard to put the book down at the end of every chapter! Action and adventure stories are not a genre as such as they can be written in any genre e.g. sci-fi, fantasy, realism etc.

Anthropomorphism – again this is not a genre, but is an extremely common device used in children's literature. All it means is that animals are given human traits, in other words, they might walk on two legs, wear clothes, live in houses, and of course, talk! Not only is this very appealing to young children, talking animals often provide a great deal of humour in a book. Anthropomorphism also allows complex emotions to be dealt with from a safe 'distance'. Children understand why Little Bear is jealous of Baby Bear and can learn how to deal with their own feelings of jealousy.

Onomatopoeia – onomatopoeia is another weird word but this is actually a fun one! It's pronounced on-oh-mat-oh-pee-'uh' and it simply means that the word itself sounds like the sound it makes. Books about animal sounds are full of such words, the old Batman comics have loads of them, little boys also make lots of these when making car noises!

*Baa, bang, bam, bark, beep, biff, boo-hoo, burp, boom, boing, bump, buzz
Cling, clang, clink, clank, clip, clop, clash, crash, clatter, croak, cock-a-doodle-do,
Drip, drop, ding-dong, dribble, diddle, dollop
Fizz, fizzle, fuzzy, flip, flap, flop, flick, flutter
Gabble, gobble, giggle, gargle, groan, growl, grunt, grumble, gurgle, glug, giddy-up
Hiss, honk, hoot, hiccup, ha-ha, huh, hush, hum, hee-haw
Jingle, jangle, jig, jiggle, jumble
Meow, moo, moan, mumble, mutter
Neigh, niggle, ning-nong, nip
Oink, ouch, oh, oi, ow, ooze
Plip, plop, ping-pong, plink, plunk, peep, peck, pop, pow, prattle, purr, pitter-patter
Rap, rat-a-tat-tat, rattle, ribbit, ring, roar, ruffle, rumble, rustle, rush
Shriek, shush, smash, snort, sniff, splish-splash, splat, squeak, squeal, squirt, swish,
Tap, ting, tang, tick-tock, thud, thump, tinkle, trickle, tingle, toot, twang, tweet
Warble, whack, wham, wheeze, whinny, whisper, whizz, whoosh, woof
Vroom-vroom
Yelp, yip, yowl, yawn, yippee-i-o
Zip, zap, zig-zag, zing, zoom*

Other genres for older readers and adults:

Speculative Fiction – also known as the ‘What if...?’ genre. Not so popular in books for very young children, this is more for the pre-teens and teens, where authors speculate on what might happen if certain events occurred and write a fictional story around it. The *Tomorrow When the War Began* series by John Marsden is the perfect example – What if there was a war? What if Australia was invaded?

Science fiction (Sci-Fi) – not all that common for the 7 to 10 year-olds, Sci-Fi is more for the teen readers. Such books involve all sorts of amazing technology and futuristic worlds

Classics – again these are the books that are often decades, or even centuries old, that have stood the test of time and are still loved and read by every generation. There are thousands of them! For adults these would of course include Shakespeare and Dickens, but also things like *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *1984*; *The Catcher in the Rye* etc. For younger readers there are books such as *Alice in Wonderland*; *The Wind in the Willows*; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* etc. Modern day classics would include the Harry Potter series; and many Roald Dahl books e.g. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* etc.

Comics or Graphic Novels – the older generation will be very familiar with this genre and all the superhero comic books such as *Batman*; *Superman* and *Spiderman* etc. Nowadays they are known as graphic novels and are far more up to date and modern, with outstanding illustrations and complex plots. These books are not generally written for younger children as they’re quite complicated to read since the text itself is often part of the pictures. There are also small ‘boxed’ pictures and panels to follow in a particular order with ‘word-balloons’ containing the spoken dialogue.

Biographies and Autobiographies – a biography is where someone else tells a person’s life story, *autobiographies* are where the person themselves tells their own story. Again not common for the under 10s, but teenagers often become interested usually reading about their favourite pop stars, sports stars and movie stars etc.

Thrillers; Horror; Mysteries; Crime and True Crime; Memoirs; Self-Help; Romance are more for older teens and adult readers.

Chapter books

These books are written for the 7 to 10 year-olds. In chapter books the text is much larger for readers who are still learning to read yet confident enough to no longer need pictures to help them work out what’s going on. Such books have relatively few illustrations usually just in black and white. There is often a larger image at the beginning of a chapter, then smaller ones throughout, which are often used to add another layer of humour to the story. In other words, the words themselves are telling the story without the picture cues that are found in books for beginning readers.

Each chapter in a chapter book, while still being part of the whole book and still moving the story forward, generally have a complete story within itself, with a beginning, middle and end. This is far more satisfying for younger readers who have a much shorter span of attention than older teenagers. They are generally fictional, often humorous stories, to entertain and instil the love of reading.

Chapter books for older teenagers are usually called novels. Like adult novels, these books have much smaller text now their audience are competent readers and they usually contain no illustrations at all. Chapters are no longer self-contained, instead they keep the whole story going and compel their

audience to keep reading, building suspense along the way and all leading to a final climax. Chapters often end on a 'cliff-hanger' where you simply *have* to turn the page to see what happens!

Illustrated texts

There are many examples of Illustrated Texts in children's literature. Here the words themselves tell the story and need no pictures at all to tell it, instead the illustrations are simply there as decoration, enhancing the readers enjoyment, examples include *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and numerous Fairy Tales like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

Poetry books

Poems are often some of the first literature young children experience, I'm referring to Nursery Rhymes, *Humpty Dumpty*; *Old Mother Hubbard*; *Goosey Goosey Gander*, etc., there's dozens and dozens of them. Often set to music, children love the simple rhymes and rhythms of these old fashioned (and now often politically incorrect!) little poems and songs.

In addition there are hundreds of poems as well as poetry books written especially for children. For older children with a good sense of humour Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* is a popular one. *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson is a golden oldie and as I've said above the delightful *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* by A.A Milne. Modern poetry books include *The Llama who had no Pajama*; *It's Raining Pigs and Noodles*, and *Once I laughed my Socks Off*.

There are also thousands of books with rhyming text such as Lynley Dodd's *Hairy Maclary* and *Slinky Malinky* series, but even though they rhyme, they fall under the Picture Book category (see below).

Fact books

Fact books have always been popular, especially for the boys, as they love to know how things are built, how they work, move, change and grow. Don't get me wrong, girls love them too, but boys really *love* them! There are fact books for literally every age group. Fact books have been written about pretty much everything under the sun – birds, animals, insects, plants, transport, people, places, buildings, bridges, you name it, whatever your child is interested in basically!

They often come with photographs or technical drawings instead of illustrations, and tell us how things move, change, grow, how they're built, where they live, what they look like etc. etc. etc. They can tell us about historical figures, sports stars, movies stars, crooks, cowboys, and real-life heroes and how they made their mark in history. They tell us how planes, trains, trucks, cars, bikes and rockets are built, how they work, and the people who invented them. The knowledge contained in fact books is literally endless!

Concept books

Concept books are written for very young children to help them understand the world they live in, what things are called, and their similarities and differences. There are certain basic concepts young children need to know to help them understand the world around them, communicate with others, and lead a fruitful life. These include learning about colours, shapes, size, sounds, textures, people, animals, insects, birds, letters, numbers, time, space, night and day, hot and cold, up and down, inside and outside, nature, the Seasons, farms, zoos, hospitals, etc. etc. etc. So many, many things!

Wordless picture books

Exactly as the title suggests, these are Picture Books without any words at all, so readers get to tell their own version of the story. The pictures themselves suggest some of the story, but readers get to fill in the details. Wordless Picture Books are available for the very young all the way up to the teenagers! Examples include Peter Spier's *Noah's Ark*; Jan Omerod's *Moonlight* and of course *Sunlight*; Jeannie Baker's *Window*; many of Japanese illustrator Mitsumasa Anno's books, including *Anno's Journey*, *Anno's Italy* and *Anno's Britain*; *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs; *Flashlight* by Lizi Boyd; and the visually stunning *The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney.

Picture books

Picture Books are unique in the world of children's literature, in fact in literature in general. Unlike an Illustrated Text where the story makes perfect sense without any pictures at all, in a Picture Book the words need the pictures and the pictures need the words. In a Concept Book the text might simply say, *Big ... Little*, but without the image readers can't possibly learn what big or little mean! They make no sense without one another. For example, *He opened the door and couldn't believe what he saw*; or *She held it gently in her hands*; or the opening line of *Mr. Gumpy* by John Burningham – '*This is Mr. Gumpy*'. None of these sentences make any sense at all without us seeing the pictures that go with them. Even though I've forgotten who actually said it the following quote describes Picture Books perfectly!

*'Where words are wonderfully inadequate without pictures
and pictures are incomplete without words'*

What makes a good quality picture book?

The Picture Book of the Year is chosen by a committee of children's literature experts. Some of the factors they take into account are:

Theme

The theme is the author's purpose for writing the story – the message they wish to convey. The theme should be worthwhile and relevant to children's interests. Main themes in Picture Books include: becoming aware of and accepting yourself as a unique person; growing up; coping with change; accepting responsibility; overcoming fear/loss/anger etc.; and dealing with conflict.

Character

The character should grow throughout the story. Stereotyped characters like the witch in *Sleeping Beauty* do not change. Many Picture Books use anthropomorphism, where an animal has human characteristics, they feel jealous, cry, do naughty things, even have temper tantrums! Effective characterisation shows people as having several facets or sides to their personality, selfishness combined with deciding to be selfless, and taking risks to overcome fear. A strong character in a Picture Book is not just good or bad. We see or read about their thoughts, hear them speak, and understand why they act the way they do.

Setting

The setting is the geographical location and time, either past, present or future and where the story takes place. If the book is historical it should be accurate. If set in a particular country it should be authentic. Sometimes Fairy Tales and Picture Books use setting to create a mood by using symbolism:

- Forest (the unknown, evil or darkness)
- Tunnel (a journey of self-discovery)
- Blossom trees (new life)
- Sunshine (light, goodness)
- Sunset (end of the story)
- Mountains (obstacles to overcome).

Plot

The plot is the action and events of a story. A basic plot contains an introduction to the characters and settings, next a problem occurs, then the character(s) work to overcome it, finally the problem is resolved. The development of events is usually chronological, although sometimes in books for older children and adults, there are flashbacks in time to explain how or why different events occurred, but this is too complicated for younger readers. Excitement and engagement with a book occurs when the main character experiences a struggle and overcomes conflict, for example:

- Person against person (good guys vs bad guys)
- Person against self (learning self control or changing behaviour)
- Person against society (new to the neighbourhood, school, or country)
- Person against nature (being lost in the forest, wilderness, or desert).

Plots may have different patterns of action:

- Predictable repetitive plot:
Where a child can predict what a character will say or do – ‘Quack, quack,’ said the duck, ‘Meow, meow,’ said the cat.
- Common plot:
Introduction > problem > resolution.
- Quest:
Hero begins journey > test one > test two > test three > heroic return.
- Episodic (in books for older children):
Self-contained chapters > rising action, building suspense > final climax.

Episodic Books can also make use of ‘cliff-hangers’ where peaks of action occur throughout the book, usually at the end of chapters. The whole book will still be working towards a final climax, but the suspense along the way is irresistible, each chapter ends at such an exciting point that a reader simply *has to* turn the page and keep reading!

Illustration

Are the illustrations relevant to the story? Is the mood created appropriate to the story? Is the technique one that works well with the story line? Types of illustration techniques include: water colour, coloured pencils, cross hatching, wax/water resist crayons, acrylic, collage, pen and ink, wood cut, lino cut, embroidery/stitchery, cartoon style, and paper sculpture. There are also novelty Picture Books with cut outs, lift-the-flap, touchy/feely materials, and with the advent of technology – sound effects, flashing lights etc.

Format

The format of a Picture Book is also important. Should the book be square or rectangular? How big should the book be? Should the layout be the same on each page? How much text should there be on a page? How big should the illustrations be? For younger readers illustrations are large, simple, and uncluttered. Beatrix Potter, author of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and many other stories always insisted her books remain small so little hands could hold them. Graeme Base on the other hand, chose a large, oversized book for his fabulous *Animalia*, so children could immerse themselves in every page.

Language style

This refers to the way the author uses words and sentences. Combinations of words can create powerful images. Characters should use believable language when they speak. Picture Books work best when read aloud.

Artistic devices in picture books

Most Picture Books come with a standard 32 pages, or 16 double page spreads, limiting both artists and authors in what they can present. Each word and every detail within the illustrations are carefully chosen to evoke the appropriate response. Often it is the illustrations rather than the words that provide the details of character, setting, and in the case of *Rosie's Walk*, the bulk of the story itself!

Line is a vital element to any illustration. Line can refer to the line of perspective, outline, shape, as well as various hatching techniques and is used to represent mood, distance, movement, and emotion. Square, solid forms suggest stability and strength. Rounded figures suggest cosy, comfortable characters. Vertical lines represent height and lack of movement such as a forest scene. Horizontal lines denote calmness and peace like the ocean. Jagged, diagonal lines suggest a loss of control, danger and extreme emotions (e.g. Hiawyn Oram's *Angry Arthur*). Curved lines represent fluidity and unpredictability, such as the wind or swirling snowflakes. Hatching and cross hatching are techniques used by artists such as Ron Brooks in *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, where the subdued tones and cross hatching add to the night-time scenes.

Texture is represented through the artist's choice of medium. Collage is particularly effective, such as Jeannie Baker's actual leaves and bark etc., or in books which use paper and material instead (see Patricia Mullins' *V is for Vanishing*). Blobs and streaks of paint or the transparency of watercolours also add to the texture of the illustration, as does the surface the artist chooses to work on. Eric Carle in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* made great use of colour and texture.

Colour is used to reflect the mood and emotion of the story. Lighting and shadow, the density of colour, the tone, and the choice of colour all add to the overall effect. Colours can be bright and happy or dark and gloomy, with the media chosen adding another dimension, for example, the transparency of watercolours may provide a dreamlike quality as opposed to the density of oil paints. Bob Graham's *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten* is a perfect example of the use of colour (and shape and line) to evoke emotion. Rose and her family are all drawn in soft, rounded shapes in appealing colours, while in sharp contrast the jagged, pointed images of Mr Wintergarten are all in black, white and grey.

Perspective helps give a picture depth and dimension. Perspective can suggest a journey or movement across vast distances, although illustrations are two-dimensional, perspective and positioning helps give the picture a three-dimensional quality.

Point of view positions the reader in relation to the action on the page. When the reader is looking from the ground up the focus of the page is given added height and power. The reader feels very small and insignificant looking at a huge monster from ground level. Alternatively, the reader may be placed in the dominant position, allowing one to see the 'whole picture' from high above, indicating the greater understanding the reader has over those in the story. Cross sections allow another point of view to be explored. The vertical aspect may be shown, for example, the creatures seen above and below the water line. Bringing the reader face to face with a close-up image of the character allows an understanding of the emotions and thoughts of that character. Or a large full-page image of a predator can provoke fear and dread. Thus point of view can be changed both literally and psychologically.

Design and the overall layout and format of the book also add to the story. The size of the book itself; the use of windows or frames around a picture; where the text is placed in relation to the illustrations; and the use of white space, are all features of design. Beatrix Potter insisted her books remain in miniature, for children's little hands to hold, making for a very personal experience. Her soft watercolours in an oval shaped, unframed windows provide just a glimpse into her magical world. Graeme Base's *Animalia* is just the opposite, large enough to invite the reader right inside, he also varies the text and makes the typography itself a part of each illustration. Maurice Sendak in *Where the Wild Things Are* purposefully uses a landscape format, taking the reader along for the journey. In this book, frames around the pictures grow along with Max's imagination and expand until the illustrations fill the whole page. They shrink again as he returns to reality – although never quite to the same extent, representing his now expanded life experience and understanding.

On a deeper level

Picture Books:

- Allow children to make 'connections' with characters in order to understand other people's point of view, people like themselves and those who are completely different
- Allow children to examine complex emotions and question people's motives, moral conflicts, values and principles, at a 'safe distance'
- Extend children's ideas and understandings of relationships
- Show that we can relate to others on lots of different levels – that people are multi-faceted unlike fairy tale characters who never really change
- Encourage children to think creatively about colour, shape, design, and placement of text and illustrations
- Encourage children to let their imaginations 'run wild'
- Enable readers to 'travel' to different places and times
- Develop children's understanding of the power of written language and how it works.