
Martin Salisbury & Morag Styles

Children's Picturebooks. The Art of Visual Storytelling (2nd edition)

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Reviewer: Sandie Mourão

The First Edition

I begin by sharing a little information about the first edition of *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling*, as it is relevant to my review of the second edition. I was just finishing my doctorate when the first edition was published in 2012. I had immersed myself in the world of children's literature and in particular the quirkiness of picturebook scholarship. *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling* brought something rather special to picturebook scholarship at that time, as it was the result of a professional partnership between two colleagues at the University of Cambridge – Martin Salisbury, Professor of Illustration at the Anglia Ruskin University and director of the first Masters programme in children's book illustration, and Morag Styles, Professor of Children's Literature at Cambridge University. Together they embody picture and word collaboration – they represent the worlds of 'the practitioners in the art and design sector and the theorists in the education sector' (2012, p. 7).

The content was also rather unusual – not only did it bring the history and evolution of the picturebook to the reader (see also Alderson, 1986), but it combined the art of picturebook-making (see Salisbury 2014; Schulevitz, 1985) together with its reception (see Arizpe & Styles, 2003 / 2016; Baddeley & Eddershaw, 1996; Evans 1998). As such Salisbury and Styles presented professional and student case studies with artists, students and publishers alongside discussion around the role of the picturebook as an introduction to the visual arts and language in the classroom (see Bader, 1976; Doonan, 1993). All this was done in a publication which resembled a coffee-table volume, with lush illustrations and reader-friendly, short but informative texts. This combination made it both useful, interesting, and relevant for the expert

and the student, for the artist, designer, publisher and even the teacher and librarian. The cherry on the cake (for me at least) was the range of examples coming from picturebook creators, designers and publishers that were from across the globe, extending the readers' knowledge of key concepts and practices in picturebook creation beyond the anglophone perimeter. In fact, I still remember my squirm of delight at seeing one of my favourite Portuguese illustrators, Bernardo Carvalho, being featured in the section on 'Wordless books and graphic novels'. This a magical book, and one I cherish in my home library.

The Second Edition

Since the original edition was published in 2012, followed by four re-printings, much has happened in the field of picturebook-making and publishing. Professor Morag Styles and I have reconvened to produce new content reflecting the many new trends, all clothed in another fabulous cover design by Beatrice Alemagna.

(Martin Salisbury, email communication, 12 December 2019 – with permission)

The above is an excerpt from Martin Salisbury's announcement on the 'New Directions in Picturebook Research' Jiscmail list (a useful discussion list for anyone interested in researching picturebooks). As far as I am aware, a similar announcement did not appear on any language learning discussion lists. Picturebook research and more specifically, one with a focus on the process of picturebook creation is more than peripheral in English language education. So, when I was asked to review the second edition of *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling* for *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, I was reticent. Despite returning to the first edition of *Children's Picturebooks* many a time since 2012, I associated it with my geeky relish in picturebook illustration – it is not on my reading list for ELT teacher education, neither is it a book I usually recommend to ELT colleagues. Undertaking this review has meant I have had to challenge my presumptions.

The second edition of *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling* is as magnificent as the first. It is the same book in essence, with lush illustrations and reader-friendly,

short but informative texts, brought together by the individual experiences of a practitioner in the art and design sector and the theorist in the education sector. However, the case studies are all new, ‘designed to reflect recent and current developments in the field’ (p. 7), and there is an additional chapter which reflects a rising phenomenon in the picturebook publishing industry, ‘non-fiction’.

The opening chapter, ‘A brief history of the picturebook’, provides a succinct contextualization of the concept of pictorial storytelling, showing and telling information about the development of printing, the birth of the modern picturebook. We are sped through the decades of the twentieth century (re)discovering known and lesser known illustrators and the seminal picturebooks which contribute in one way or another to a thoroughly colourful picturebook history. This chapter culminates in ‘Picturebooks in the twenty-first century’ which announces that not only have ‘new, innovative, small independent publishing houses [...] shaken up the world of picturebook publishing’, but ‘China is rapidly discovering the picturebook’ (p. 42).

Chapter 2, ‘The picturebook maker’s art’, begins by pointing out the resemblance to art these books have: ‘The very best picturebooks become timeless mini art galleries for the home – a coming together of concept, artwork design and production that gives pleasure to, and stimulates the imagination of both children and adults’ (p. 44). It attempts to answer the question ‘How have [these] artists emerged?’ and ‘Can their skills be taught?’ (p. 45). Using subtitles such as ‘Learning to see’, ‘Thinking through drawing’ and ‘Visual communication’ it is made clear to the reader that it is about communicating visually – either learning how to or by refining an innate ability. The eye-opening case studies begin with John Klassen, creator of the multi-award winning *I Want My Hat Back* (2012), contributing to a better understanding of each picturebook maker’s art.

Chapter 3, ‘The picturebook and the child’, starts with a section on ‘The challenges offered by picturebooks’ which introduces the reader to the idea of ‘risk-taking’ picturebooks – those that cover ‘demanding themes, [include] sophisticated artistic styles, complex ideas and [with] the implied notion of a reader as someone who will relish the challenges and take them

in their stride' (p. 69). There is a section on 'Defining visual literacy' and 'Visual texts and educational development', which provides an important bridge to child development in preparation for the fascinating and informative excerpts in 'How children respond to picturebooks'. Many of these examples are taken from published work (e.g. Arizpe and Styles, 2003 / 2016), but this makes them no less interesting and certainly demonstrates how 'picturebooks can encourage children to both think and feel deeply' (p. 80).

Chapter 4 'Word and image, word as image' furnishes a brief survey of the most influential approaches taken in picturebook scholarship. This supports the move into 'Word and image interplay' where the reader is introduced to the different categories of picture-word inter-animation, with fascinating examples. A subsection on 'Wordless books and graphic novels', suggesting that these are just as complex and sophisticated as picturebooks with words, is followed by one on 'Pictorial text', implying the merging of verbal and pictorial text is ever more commonplace. A case study here focuses on Sam Winston and Oliver Jeffers' picturebook, *The Child of Books* (2016), where Oliver Jeffers' 'hand-rendered characters and narrative text sit alongside and within Sam Winston's [...] "typographic landscapes"' – a fascinating read.

Chapter 5, 'Suitable for children', looks at the issue of suitability with regard to 'subject matter and visual language' (p. 105). This chapter brings beguiling examples from Norwegian picturebook creators on challenging topics such as aging and death, domestic violence, depression and even love and sex. There is reference to the predominance of over-sentimental picturebooks in English-language publishing, countered by controversial examples like *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* (*Death, Duck and the Tulip*) by Wolf Erlbruch (2007), and Rebecca Cobb's *Missing Mummy* (2011), which sensitively relates death from a child's perspective. The subsection, 'Man's inhumanity to man' brings war and xenophobia to the fore and leads well into the case study of Francesca Sanna and *The Journey*, which touches on 'displacement through war without being overtly political' (p. 121).

Chapter 6, 'Print and process: the shock of the old', offers a multimodal description of 'the mechanics and aesthetic characteristics of the main printmaking processes' (p. 129). The objective is to demonstrate how many picturebook artists are replicating pre-digital effects, i.e.

‘relatively crude printmaking processes’ (p. 129), and using these alongside digital technology. The chapter shows and tells the reader about the ‘Print room’, ‘Relief printing’, ‘Screen printing’, ‘Etching/intaglio’, ‘Lithography’, ‘Monotype and monoprint’ and ‘Digital printmaking’. It is as enthralling as it is varied and each of the case studies complements these sections with glimpses of the artists’ workshops, their sketches and tools and the final product.

Chapter 7 is the new and additional chapter on ‘Non-fiction’, considered ‘the fastest-growing sector’ in children’s book publishing and ‘an exciting new area of opportunity’ (p. 156) for the illustrator. Smaller independent publishers are considered at the forefront of this phenomenon, encouraging partnerships between illustrators and scientists, historians, zoologists or geographers, as well as encouraging the emergence of more narrative, character-based approaches. Non-fiction picturebooks are getting larger, lush, and more diverse in relation to their design and production - we are in ‘the golden age of illustrated non-fiction’ (p. 156). Sub-sections include ‘Strong women’, ‘Big books and Wimmelbücher’ and ‘Novelty and interaction’, with case studies that include Japanese-born illustrator Nariso Tago’s *Magnificent Birds* (Walker Studio, 2012).

The final chapter is all about ‘The children’s publishing industry’, which is described as ‘a massive global industry’ (p. 167). It looks at the how the picturebook actually comes into being, with detailed sub-sections under the ‘The publishing process’. There is an interesting section on the ‘The reviewer’, which highlights the difficulties reviewers from a ‘non-visual, literary background’ (p. 172) might encounter when reviewing the ever-evolving, rapidly changing picturebook. Despite the major players in this process being caught up in a globally interdependent chain, there is also mention of the cultural role a picturebook plays, especially in countries (e.g. Norway, Belgium and South Korea), which ‘value the indigenous book as part of their particular cultural and artistic heritage’ (p. 167). The case studies look at an array of publishing houses (large and small!) in the UK, the States, Portugal and Norway which show how different their individual publishing philosophies are.

This last chapter finishes with a section on ‘The future’. It suggests that the physical book has proved more resilient than many would have foreseen, and the picturebook has played

a key role in this ‘revival of fortunes’ (p. 182). The significance of the design and production of these beautiful artefacts – their ‘physicality and desirability’ (p. 182) – has been hugely relevant, and innovation and experimentation will continue. Salisbury and Styles suggest that ‘the increasing global nature of the picturebook’ (p. 182) will also have a huge impact on the future and the Chinese picturebook artists will be key players. Exciting!

How have I challenged my presumptions? This remains, in my view, a book for those interested in picturebooks and the art of picturebook illustration. I would recommend it for any course that targets the picturebook as a form of children’s literature. It brings a valuable understanding of the artistic process of creating and producing a picturebook and successfully bridges this with children’s reception of picturebooks and consequences for mediation, as well as providing some fascinating examples to drool over. From my experience as a teacher educator in the world of ELT, it is a rarity that teacher education includes the ‘comprehensive training in *using children’s literature*’ (Bland, 2019, p. 93 – my italics) – this would include training in understanding what a picturebook is and the affordances it brings to the English classroom. *Children’s Picturebooks* would therefore be extremely useful for any teacher educator who has realized that they needed to re-evaluate their assumptions around picturebooks and the coffee-table format would make this experience a pleasurable one. Of course, it can also be on the student teachers’ reading list, but its presence there needs to be integrated into course materials in such a way that the valuable information therein is seen as relevant to the *use* of picturebooks as ‘a unique, magical medium’ (Salisbury & Styles, 2020, p. 192) in an English classroom.

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Sandie Mourão is a research fellow at Nova University Lisbon, and researches picturebooks in early language education, with a particular focus on intercultural citizenship education. Recent publications include *Teaching English to Pre-Primary Children* (Mourão with Ellis, 2020, Ernst Klett,) and the co-edited volumes *Fractures and Disruptions in Children's Literature* (Ramos, Mourão & Cortez, 2017, Cambridge Scholars) and *Early Years Second Language Education: International Perspectives on Theories and Practice* (Mourão & Lourenço, 2015, Routledge). Her research interests also include assessment in language education, classroom-based research and teacher education for early language learning.