
Janet Evans (Ed.)

Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks: Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts

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Reviewer

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Even before I started to read Part I of *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks*, I was hooked! Janet Evans has very cleverly not only chosen eminent picturebook theorists from around the world to contribute to this exciting and very readable book, she has also designed it in such a way that one is plunged into the world of children's acceptance of complex narratives as a precursor to more theoretical input. These young readers' mature comments are incredibly perceptive and, as one 11-year-old acknowledges, his class can only discuss controversial and challenging picturebooks because they have been working with them for several years. The adults' observations that follow reinforce the importance of knowing how to 'read' these books and suggest that they draw on our knowledge of all that makes us human and invite us to perceive new realities (p. xiv).

It is hard to believe that as recently as 30 years ago, picturebooks weren't really considered an academically acceptable genre. Since then, we have come a long way; picturebook analysis is now highly respected and seems to be going from strength to strength. *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks* is the proof of this, as it examines unconventional, non-conformist picturebooks and considers what they are, their audience and their purpose. It is a publication which moves on and complements much previous research. In bringing together a highly knowledgeable group of international academics, Evans has produced a fascinating, informative and thought-provoking book from which we can all learn. Evelyn Arizpe's forward suggests this when she emphasises, with reference to 'I am Charlie', the important impact of visual texts today. She believes that the meaning of an image will always be contingent on a given context and moment in time and hence has the potential to be regarded as controversial. Her words very aptly introduce the

subsequent essays which, she considers, are 'timely and important' because they 'exemplify the kind of discussion - informed, revealing and enquiring - that can be held around images and their companion words' (p. xvii).

In Part I, through reference to the illustrations and content of carefully selected visual texts, Evans questions what is meant by challenging and controversial picturebooks, what they are and for whom they are created. She considers some of the issues surrounding them such as: how we respond to them; does challenging mean the same for all readers; are they equally available in all countries and, perhaps most importantly, whether it is the words or the pictures, or a combination of both, that create such potentially disturbing narratives. As she does this, she introduces many of the book's contributors to support her argument and focuses on artists who are renowned for their complex, polysemic texts and come from cultures where discussing less cosy aspects of life is more common than others. Perry Nodelman opens the debate by discussing 'the scandal of the commonplace', and puts forward the notion that children's literature is generally defined by 'what it leaves out' and different adults have different ideas about what this should be. As a result, 'any book is likely to seem challenging or unsettling' by somebody and what is 'controversial is in the eye of the beholder' (p. 33). Sandra Beckett then investigates whether we really do need to be fearful of these so-called controversial visual texts and she focuses on those that are directly inspired by traditional fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Her chapter suggests that these book artists 'respect children's ability to deal with controversial subjects that often alarm adult mediators' (p. 49). Totally in agreement, Åse Marie Ommundsen concludes Part I by asking whether challenging and controversial picturebooks are actually created for children or adults. She believes, as does Beckett, that this can be quite different depending on the cultural audience and points out that even within Scandinavia, acceptance of certain themes varies considerably. Focusing on two books from Denmark and Norway, she expertly explains the reason for this; concluding with her belief that it is not actually 'the book's content that decides whether a child reader is addressed or not, but rather the ways of writing' (p. 91).

Evans, always with the young reader in mind, introduces Part II by looking at what she calls 'fusion texts' and includes children's reactions to them. She compares these texts with comics, graphic novels and picturebooks, exemplifying their qualities by focusing on

Dave McKean's work. His narratives, in which the nature of word-image interaction plus switching from one mode of interpretation to another make them a 'challenging, thoughtful and sometimes controversial' read, because they use a variety of 'material in creative, artistic forms' (p. 107). Marnie Campagnaro continues this theme by examining how visual explorations shape the young readers' taste. She looks at children's responses to a selection of picturebooks which use two different types of illustrative styles, and her research investigates how these visual narratives 'create a shared space which affords the possibility of discussion' and develops 'aesthetic literacy' (p. 122). She concludes that children are certainly able to share a variety of challenging and controversial picturebooks, but it is questionable whether teachers and educators are capable of doing the same! (p. 142) Changing focus slightly, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer then look closely at the challenging content of one specific picturebook, *Fox* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, from the perspective of the adult reader. They show how picturebook theory can benefit from this in-depth analysis (p. 144) of artwork and content which challenge common expectations. Their belief is that the rewards of reading this book, for both children and adults, relate to learning about complex emotions which don't necessarily develop at an early age. Elizabeth Marshall also focuses on one picturebook as she concludes this section. Her feminist approach to Roberto Innocenti's *The Girl in Red*, however, is much more concerned with gender, sexuality and violence, but her visual analysis is equally rigorous. Her practical approach, supported by academic theory, allows her to share this book with her students, one of whom comments that she 'saw this book as an incredible counter narrative that allows the reader to critically analyse deeper issues' (p. 174).

How to discuss challenging and controversial picturebooks is at the heart of Part III. Sandie Mourão, well known for her innovative approach to teaching languages through picturebooks, begins by discussing wordless picturebooks and how they play with the mind. She takes one book, *Loup Noir* by Antoine Guilloppé, to exemplify how demanding these books can be because they play with the readers' subconscious and the cultural frames that surround wolves. Following her academic rationale, Mourão presents details of a project she planned in a Portuguese primary school which certainly challenged the reasoning of three small groups of children and produced some thought-provoking

discussions. Wolves seem prevalent in many of the visual narratives mentioned in this volume, and Kerenza Ghosh asks why they appear so much in children's stories. As well as presenting a brief history of the wolf in children's literature and considering how the portrayal of wolves in contemporary picturebooks is often unconventional and thought-provoking (p. 201), she analyses children's responses to the portrayal of wolves in Emily Gravett's *Wolves* and Tincknell and Kelly's *Guess Who's Coming for Dinner?*. Her insightful conclusions suggest that since 'our relationship with the wolf is steeped in history and culture', diverse, unexpected and controversial representations will 'continue to challenge children to read at abstract levels of understanding' (p. 222). Sylvia Pantaleo adds another dimension to Ghosh's thinking when she suggests that in reading Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*, young readers/viewers are positioned as co-authors and need to actively fill in both the verbal and visual gaps. Preceded by theoretical rationale, her Canadian classroom-based research (with children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds) expertly describes her project and, in her opinion, reveals how children's comprehension, analysis and interpretation of picturebooks can be informed when they develop their ability to 'see' (p. 240). Evans draws this child-centred section to a close when she asks 'Could this happen to us?' and explores children's responses to migration when asked to consider what it would be like to be a refugee in a strange land away from those they love. The reader-response results are fascinating and demonstrate the important role that challenging and controversial picturebooks can have in developing empathy and understanding.

What a wonderful idea to conclude with dear Klaus Flugge, Managing Director of Andersen Press, who has helped us all in one way or another over the years. His insights into how picturebooks work, plus his knowledge of the best authors and illustrators to commission, are immeasurable. He has taken chances where others would not and published a large number of challenging and controversial picturebooks, many in translation, for which we thank him wholeheartedly. Evans has captured the essence of his work in her interview with him and it is a very fitting conclusion to a significant book. Although not directly focused on second language learning, it bridges the gap between children's literature and language education and reinforces the idea that enlightening discussions can develop, in whatever language, if the right questions are asked!

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