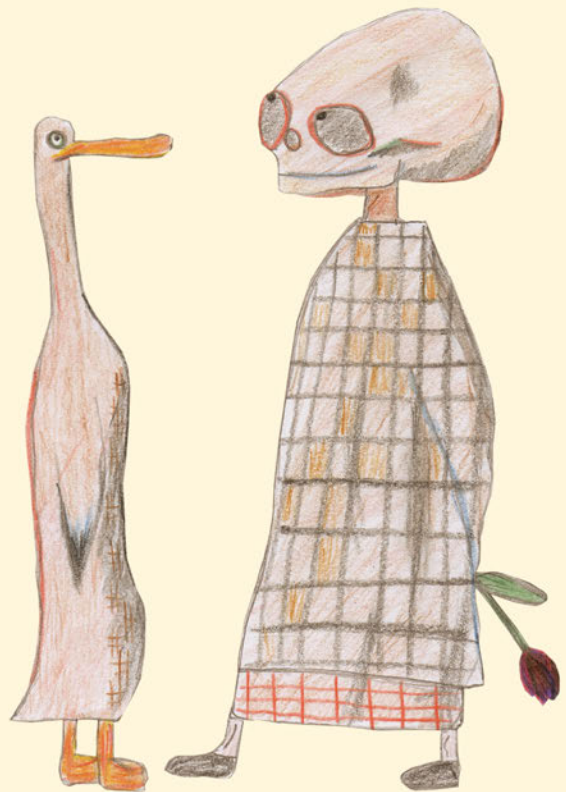


CHALLENGING AND CONTROVERSIAL PICTUREBOOKS

CREATIVE
AND CRITICAL
RESPONSES TO
VISUAL TEXTS

EDITED BY
JANET EVANS



CHALLENGING AND CONTROVERSIAL PICTUREBOOKS

It is often assumed that picturebooks are for very young readers because of their emphasis on the illustrations and their scarcity of text; however, there are increasing numbers of picturebooks where the age of the implied reader is questionable. These are picturebooks whose controversial subject matter and unconventional, often unsettling style of illustration challenge the reader, pushing them to question and probe deeper to understand what the book is about. In addition to the book challenging the reader, the reader often challenges the book in an attempt to understand what is being said.

These increasingly popular picturebooks work on many different levels; they are truly polysemic and worthy of in-depth analysis. They push the reader to ask questions and in many instances are intrinsically philosophical, often dealing with fundamental life issues.

Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks examines these unconventional, non-conformist picturebooks, considering what they are, their audience and their purpose. It also considers:

- Children's and adults' thoughts on these kinds of picturebooks.
- How challenging and unsettling wordless picturebooks can play with the mind and promote philosophical thought.
- What creates non-conformity and strangeness ... is it the illustrations and their style, the subject matter or a combination of both?
- Why certain countries create, promote and accept these picturebooks more than others.
- Why certain picturebooks are censored and what factors are in play when these decisions are made.
- The role of publishers in translating and publishing these picturebooks.
- Children's creative and critical responses to strange, unsettling and often disturbing visual texts.

This inspiring and thought-provoking volume explores the work of a number of highly respected, international picturebook experts and includes an exclusive interview with the legendary Klaus Flugge, Managing Director of Andersen Press, one of the few remaining independent children's book publishers in England.

It is an indispensable reference for all interested in or working with picturebooks, including researchers, students in higher and teacher education, English advisors/inspectors, literacy consultants and classroom teachers.

Janet Evans is an Independent Scholar, freelance Literacy and Educational Consultant and former Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University, UK.

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Creative and critical responses
to visual texts

Edited by Janet Evans

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Challenging and controversial picturebooks: creative and critical responses to visual texts / edited by Janet Evans.

pages cm

1. Picture books for children—Educational aspects. 2. Visual learning. I. Evans, Janet, 1952—

LB1044.9.P49C43 2015

372.133—dc23

2014044961

ISBN: 978-1-138-79774-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-79777-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-75691-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Book Now Ltd, London

To Les, my husband

This academic book would not have been written if it had not been for Les. He has given unconditional support both emotionally and literally at all times. Whenever I felt downhearted he cheered me up, whenever I needed advice he offered suitable, soothing words; then, more time consuming than anything else, whenever the computer decided 'not to play', or when I needed help with images, charts and 'difficult things', Les was there for me, always willing to give help and sort me out.

My heartfelt thanks Les. Your patience and forbearing is legend; I couldn't have done this book without you.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book has been hard, indeed quite challenging at times, but it has always been totally absorbing and personally satisfying. I have been fortunate to have expert writers, each of them specialists in their field, who have contributed to this volume. Their time, effort and professional expertise are truly appreciated and I thank them wholeheartedly.

Since I began researching the subject of challenging and controversial picturebooks many individual picturebooks and picturebook creators have influenced me. Two books in particular stand out as having planting the seed of this book idea in my mind. The first was Wolf Erlbruch's exquisite picturebook, *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. I was immediately intrigued and instantly obsessed by this book. How could a 'mere picturebook for children' focus on such a dark and potentially foreboding subject in such a passionate and aesthetic way? At the same time I was introduced to the work of Danish picturebook creators, Oscar K and Dorte Karrebæk, in particular, Karrebæk's audaciously disturbing and uncompromising picturebook, *The Black Book: On the Seven Deadly Sins*. My fascination with unconventional, non-conformist picturebooks had begun and I was hooked!

There are many other people to whom I am grateful.

I must initially mention the crucial role that my research scholarship at the International Youth Library in Munich had to play. There, with help from experts such as Jochen Weber, and the whole team of knowledgeable specialists, I was exposed to strange, ambiguous and unconventional picturebooks from around the world.

A particular mention goes to Evelyn Arizpe who very kindly agreed to write the foreword for this book. She has done so in an informed manner that clearly links some of the thought-provoking themes in the book with the disturbing and distinctly unsettling events currently happening in the world around us.

xii Acknowledgements

Finally I would like to thank the children at Gilded Hollins County Primary School, Leigh, Lancashire, who have willingly shared their thoughts and ideas and who have had no problems discussing and responding to certain picturebooks that many adults would consider unsuitable for children. A special thank you goes to 11-year-old Molly Hatton whose accomplished illustration from Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip* graces the front cover of the book. Then, of course, Wolf Erlbruch must once again be thanked, as without him there would be no duck, death or tulip.

Janet Evans
January 2015

PERMISSIONS

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Permission given by Wolf Elbruch

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- Cover from *Nu (Nude)* (2009) by Sara. Permission given by Editions du Seuil
- One single page from *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch (2008). Gecko Press, New Zealand. Permission given by Wolf Erlbruch
- Cover from *Ratten (Rats)* by Wolf Erlbruch (2009). Jacoby and Stuart, Germany. Permission given by Wolf Erlbruch
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- One image from *Lejren (Camp)* by Oscar K and Dorte Karrebæk (2011). Høst og Søn, Copenhagen, Denmark. Permission given by Oscar K and Dorte Karrebæk
- Cover from *Knokkelmanden's Cirkus (Death's Circus)* by Oscar K and Dorte Karrebæk (2014). Høst og Søn, Copenhagen, Denmark. Permission given by Oscar K and Dorte Karrebæk

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- One image from *Rødhatten og Ulven* by Fam Ekman (1985). Cappelen Damm, Norway. Permission given by Fam Ekman
- Rood Rood Roodkapje* by Edward van de Vendel and Isabelle Vandenabeele (2003). Uitg. De Eenhoorn, Belgium. Permission given by De Eenhoorn Publishers, Belgium
- One image from *Mon Chaperon Rouge* (1998) by Anne Ikhlef and Alain Gauthier. Editions du Seuil, France. Permission given by Alain Gauthier
- One double-page spread from *Les Cubes* by Béatrice Poncelet (2003). Editions du Seuil, France. Permission given by Béatrice Poncelet
- One image from *L'Ogresse en pleurs* by Valérie Dayre and Wolf Erlbruch (2004). Editions Milan, France. Permission given by Wolf Erlbruch

One image from *Vous oubliez votre cheval* by Christian Bruel and Pierre Wachs (1986). Le Sourire qui mord, France. Permission given by Christian Bruel

Chapter 4

Cover, three images and two double-page spreads from *De skæve smil* by Oscar K and Lilian Brøgger (2008). Klematis, Denmark. Permission given by Oscar K

Cover and five double-page spreads from *Krigen* by Gro Dahle and Kaia Dahle Nyhus (2013). Cappelen Damm, Norway. Permission given by Gro Dahle

Chapter 5

Cover, one double-page spread and one image from *The Wolves in the Wall* by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean (2003). Bloomsbury Publishing, London. Permission given by Dave McKean

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One double-page spread from *Pictures That Tick* by Dave McKean (2009). Darkhorse, London. Permission given by Dave McKean

One image from *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean (2005). Bloomsbury Publishing, London. Permission given by Dave McKean

One double-page spread from *Crazy Hair* by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean (2015). Bloomsbury Publishing, London. Permission given by Dave McKean

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Lothian Books, Melbourne. Permission given by Shaun Tan

Chapter 12

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Cover from *Tadpole's Promise* by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross (2005). Permission given by Andersen Press, London

One double-page spread from *Frog and the Birdsong* by Max Velthuijs (1991).

Permission given by Andersen Press, London

One double-page spread from *Lovely Old Lion* by Julia Jarman and Susan Varley (2014). Permission given by Andersen Press, London

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Permission given by Andersen Press, London

One double-page spread from *I Hate My Teddy Bear* by David McKee (1982).

Permission given by Andersen Press, London

Cover and one double-page spread from *Tusk Tusk* by David McKee (1978).

Permission given by Andersen Press, London

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FOREWORD

At the time of writing this foreword the world is reeling from, and trying to make sense of, the massacre in Paris of the cartoonists, writers and editors from the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. While the 'Je suis Charlie' signs dominate, there are also many who disagree with the satirical magazine's interpretation of freedom of speech. Heated discussions about respect, tolerance, culture and the right to express oneself will no doubt continue for some time in the media, as we reflect on where we place ourselves within the range of opinions. This is as it should be because the debate prevents the issues from becoming 'black or white' and reveals the many shades of grey in-between. Whatever interpretation of freedom of speech one agrees with, one thing comes across clearly from these tragic events: despite the ubiquity of images of every imaginable (and unimaginable) sort in the media, the impact of the visual text has not lessened. It reminds us that for every person who laughs at a picture, there will be another who will be saddened, offended or find it distasteful in some way. Regarding the massacre in Paris, Gary Younge, one of *The Guardian* columnists, argued that 'freedom of speech is always contingent'.¹ This implies 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.

This collection of essays on controversial and challenging picturebooks is therefore timely and important as it exemplifies the kind of discussion – informed, revealing and enquiring – that can be held around images and their companion words. Works of art or literature have never been distanced from controversy but there is something about the way both word and image are brought together in these highly crafted picturebooks that doubles the impact – on our minds, our emotions and even our bodies. In addition, by their very nature picturebooks are controversial because they challenge expectations about intermediality, format, directionality and textual boundaries, among others. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, because they are ostensibly for a particular yet undefined audience, picturebooks challenge notions of childhood.

As in her previous collections of essays on picturebooks, Janet Evans has done an excellent job of pulling together voices from different perspectives and different parts of the world and introducing the reader to a rich and exciting list of picturebooks unknown in the English-speaking world. Not having translations in English is a loss highlighted by many of the authors of these essays. What is it that publishers are afraid of? Why not treat these picturebooks as one would any other form of literature or art book? A bookshop I recently visited in Spain simply had a section called 'picturebooks for adults' on a high shelf, not only an acknowledgement that picturebooks can be for adults but also that not all picturebooks are for children.

Janet starts the discussion by asking questions which will occur to people who look at the books mentioned in the chapters that follow. However, it is in the first essay that Perry Nodelman, with his customary incisive tone, shoots down any assumptions we may hold about what is 'acceptable' and what is 'controversial'. He does this by making us look again at what we take for granted, which is what the best literary criticism does no matter if it is for adult or children's books. The rest of the essays continue in this vein, questioning widely held notions of childhood and suitability through a discussion of a variety of international picturebooks, also providing a variety of lenses through which we can see that challenge, controversy and censorship are indeed contingent and contextual.

The power of image perhaps also has to do with the feeling that the impact of words can be immediately soothed over by other, comforting words but that the impact of images, as educators such as John Locke and François Fenelon maintained more than three centuries ago, could be even deeper and therefore less easily mitigated or erased. Yet the evidence from children's responses to difficult and haunting images suggests that even very young children find ways of coping with them. The accounts of readers discussing some of the 'challenging and controversial' picturebooks mentioned in the book support the main finding from a study from 2003 involving response to picturebooks, which is that children can be sophisticated readers of complex texts (Arizpe & Styles, 2003).² Since then, more than ten years later, children have been exposed to increasingly multimodal texts and can employ strategies from these experiences in their reading. Furthermore, the empirical work that appears in the chapters in this book shows that the children involved not only enjoyed these encounters but were motivated to search for their own answers and reflect on their interpretations, acting with sensitivity and independence. It seems that the problems about suitability arise when adults condemn a book before taking the time to read it carefully, to think about it or to discuss it with children. After all, it is adults, not children who have come up with the labels 'controversial' and 'challenging'.

The argument about protecting children from particular realities is a hard one to resolve, given that definitions of 'child' and 'reality' are continually modified as the historical boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood are constantly being redrawn. Often this urge to protect seems to be an unconscious way of dealing with the guilt we adults feel about having made the world such a dangerous and endangered place for children. Therefore, before we share picturebooks that are in some way problematic or disturbing, whether it be with younger children or older

students, we have to start by first being honest with ourselves about our own reactions to the picturebooks and our motives for wanting others to read them. This involves rethinking our conceptions about childhood and the idea of innocence, questioning any nostalgic or sentimental notions we may have but also reflecting on our own participation in the political, social, moral or environmental issues that created controversy or the need for ‘protection’ in the first place. Reading is a social practice, so once we have acknowledged our position, we then need to listen to points of view that differ from our own and consider these as we look closely at text and image so that we become aware of as many multiple layers of meaning as we can. Reading essays such as the ones in this book should help us in this self-reflexive and critical endeavour.

Finally, we need to consider why we want readers to engage with challenging picturebooks, whether it be as parents, educationalists or researchers (and, I would suggest, also as booksellers and publishers). Picturebooks about certain topics such as violence, depression or death can act as a trigger or support for broaching and reflecting on the way they touch the lives of young readers. However, there is a danger of encouraging a merely ‘functional’ reading that ignores both the aesthetic and pleasurable experience of reading and the status of the picturebook as an aesthetic object. There is also a danger, unless we are trained in some form of therapy, of causing upset by inviting discussion of sensitive issues. Depending on the readers, we need to create strategies to make sure that they are supported in approaching challenging themes and, if they so require it, provide a safety net to restore a sense of balance after plunging into some of these dark areas. More so than with other books, some of the picturebooks mentioned in this collection require many re-readings and a space for readers to talk, when they are ready and willing to do so, about what they found disturbing (or not). Providing readers with some analytical tools, a critical vocabulary and an invitation to respond creatively can enable them to view the text more objectively and perhaps deconstruct some of their anxieties and fears.

In a recent project in Mexico on adolescent reading, one of the books we looked at and discussed was *The Girl in Red* by Roberto Innocenti and Aaron Frisch³ with two groups of 14-year-old students (one of the contributors to this edited collection, Elizabeth Marshall, presents an insightful analysis of how girls and women appear as objects of violation in this picturebook and also how student teachers respond to the idea of reading it in the classroom). While all eighteen participants in my project (Adolescents, Young Adult Literature and Literacy Practices in Mexico, <http://readingchanges.blogspot.mx/>) were familiar with the original tale of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, only a few of them were familiar with picturebooks and they were amazed and fascinated by the design, colour, style, peritext and storyline in this particular picturebook. They were also intrigued by the choice of endings – happy or sad – that the authors of *The Girl in Red* offer the reader. Given that the climate of violence in Mexico became more extreme around the time of the project with the unexplained, forced disappearance of 43 student teachers, it is not surprising that the adolescent readers referred to the implicit and explicit threat of violence running through the picturebook and that most of them considered the unhappy ending to be

the most 'realistic'. They linked the threat to their own lives, to the fears they faced either because of their gender, because of the area where they lived, because of the people they could come across or because of all of three. Armed with a disposable camera, they set out to create their own 'picturebook' version of the fairy tale which would be set in their communities. While many of the photographs reflected a sinister atmosphere and the beginning of the narratives tended to be alarming or bleak, most of the endings had either a twist which allowed the characters to arrive safely at their destination or a brief reflection on how we must not let our fears overcome us. It was my turn to be surprised: given our conversations, I had expected darker endings. I cannot prove it but it seemed that through the group discussions and the creative responses they came to the realization that they had the power to change their stories and so this challenging and controversial book contributed to some extent to their resilience.

As it becomes evident throughout the essays in this volume, serious artists, from Erlbruch and Sendak to Innocenti and Oscar K not only deeply respect the intelligence and independence of their readers but are also clearly aware of their responsibility to their young audiences. The images and words stir up fantasies deep inside our unconscious and push at the boundaries of what is difficult and demanding, yet at the same time they help us tolerate the anxieties they awaken. The different layers of meaning suggest that the creators are happy for their readers to decide what they can cope with. Wise publishers like Klaus Flugge, with deep knowledge of their craft, are also very much aware of the issues involved and Flugge's views are a breath of fresh air within a market where profit determines production on the one hand and arrogant and blinkered politicians come up with misguided government policies that result in library closures and narrow education on the other.

Making sense of how others think and feel is a complex cognitive activity, so awareness, self-reflection and discussion are essential if an understanding of what is challenging and controversial in a picturebook both for ourselves and for others, is to be reached. The authors of the essays in *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks* show how much we have to learn from the insights of those closest to the creative process – authors, illustrators and readers – all involved in making meaning from image and text.

Evelyn Arizpe
25 January 2015

Notes

- 1 Younge, Gary (2015) Charlie Hebdo: The Danger of Polarised Debate, *The Guardian*, 11 January. Last accessed 18 January 2015 at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/11/charlie-hebdo-danger-polarised-debate-paris-attacks
- 2 Arizpe, E. & Styles, M. (2003) *Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts*. London: Routledge.
- 3 Innocenti, R. (2012) Story and illus Innocenti, R., text Frisch, A. *The Girl in Red*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.

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Sandra L. Beckett is Professor Emeritus of French at Brock University (Canada). She is a former president of the International Research Society for Children's Literature. She has authored numerous books, including *Revisioning Red Riding Hood Around the World: An Anthology of International Retellings* (2014), *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages* (2011), *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives* (2009), *Red Riding Hood for All Ages: A Fairy-Tale Icon in Cross-Cultural Contexts* (2008), *Recycling Red Riding Hood* (2002), and *De grands romanciers écrivent pour les enfants* (1997). She serves on the boards of several international journals.

Marnie Campagnaro has a PhD in Pedagogical and Educational Sciences and teaches Theory and History of Children's Literature in Educational and Training Sciences at the University of Padua. Her research interests include children's literature, reading promotion, visual literacy, and narrative and imaginative thinking in children. In 2013 she successfully hosted the *Ninth Annual International Conference 'The Child and the Book 2013'* at the University of Padua. Two of her most recent publications are in collaboration with Marco Dallari, *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure. Albi illustrati e relazione educative (Enchantment and Stories in the Maze of Pictures. Picturebooks and Education)* (2013), and *Le terre della fantasia. Leggere la letteratura per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza (Fantasy Lands. Reading Children's Literature)* (2014).

Janet Evans is an Independent Scholar, freelance Literacy and Educational Consultant, and former Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University. She has written numerous articles and book chapters and nine books on language, literacy and maths education. Her last academic book, *Talking Beyond the Page: Reading and Responding to Picturebooks*, focused on a reader response approach to responding orally to picturebooks and was published in March 2009 by Routledge. Her current research interests include an exploration of children's responses to

strange, ambiguous and unconventional picturebooks. Janet has taught in India, Nigeria, Australia, America, Canada, Chile and Spain. She has given professional development courses at international schools and has presented keynote speeches and papers at many international conferences. In 2010 she was awarded a research scholarship to study at the International Youth Library in Munich.

Klaus Flugge launched his own publishing company, Andersen Press (named after Hans Christian Andersen) in 1976. Since the early days there have been more than 2,000 titles for children by the likes of Michael Foreman, Satoshi Kitamura, David McKee and Tony Ross. The fiction list includes prize-winning work by Melvin Burgess and Sharon Creech. Andersen Press is responsible for modern classics such as *I Want My Potty!* by Tony Ross and *Badger's Parting Gifts* by Susan Varley. Probably the best-known character of all is Elmer the Patchwork Elephant created by David McKee. Klaus has received many prestigious awards and in 2013 was awarded the honorary citizenship of Bologna for his commitment in the field of children's books and to the Bologna Book Fair.

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Jörg Meibauer holds the chair of German language and linguistics at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, and is Affiliated Professor at the University of Stockholm, Sweden. His research focuses on the semantics–pragmatics interface, the grammar of German, word formation, lexical acquisition, and the linguistics of children's literature, especially picturebook theory (in cooperation with Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer). His monographs include *Rhetorische Fragen* (1986), *Modaler Kontrast und konzeptuelle Verschiebung* (1994), *Pragmatik* (1999) and *Lying at the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface* (2014). Among his many co-edited books is the handbook *Satztypen des Deutschen* (2013). Currently, he is editing *The Oxford Handbook of Lying*.

Sandie Mourao is an independent scholar based in Portugal where she works as a teacher educator, author and consultant in the field of English language education, specialising in early years. She has an MA in TESOL from the University of Manchester and a PhD in Didactics and Teacher Education from the University of Aveiro in Portugal. Sandie's interest in picturebooks involves her in a number of activities that include preparing materials for and with teachers to use picturebooks in English language classrooms, as well as classroom-based, reader response research with children from pre-primary through to upper secondary education. Sandie writes an award-winning blog, *Picturebooks in ELT*: <http://picturebooksinelt.blogspot.com/>

Perry Nodelman, Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, is the author of *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (third edition in collaboration with Mavis Reimer), and *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, as well as publishing over 150 articles on various aspects of children's literature in academic journals and essay collections. He has also written a number of books for young readers, both on his own and in collaboration with Carol Matas.

Åse Marie Ommundsen is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Norway. She has her PhD from the University of Oslo on Children's Literature, with a thesis on *Literary Boundary Crossings. Erasing the Borders between Literature for Children and Adults* (2010). Her earlier publications include a book on religious magazines for children from 1875 to 1910 (1998), and *Looking Out and Looking In: National Identity in Picturebooks of the New Millennium* (ed., 2013). Her current interest is in contemporary Scandinavian children's literature, crossover picturebooks and picturebooks for adults, on which she has published several articles in Norwegian, English, French and Dutch and lectured as a guest lecturer and keynote speaker. Her ongoing

research project is ‘Norwegian children’s literature in the aftermath of 22/7’. Most recent publication: ‘Picturebooks for Adults’, in: Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.) *Picturebooks: Representation and Narration* (2014). In 2013 Ommundsen was awarded *The Kari Skjønberg award* for her research on children’s literature.

Sylvia Pantaleo is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, Canada. She teaches courses in language and literacy, and children’s and young adult literature at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Grants from the International Reading Association, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the University of Victoria have assisted in funding her programme of research. Her multiple classroom-based studies have explored how 6 to 13-year-old school children respond to, understand, interpret and analyse literary elements and elements of visual art and design in picturebooks and graphic novels, and other multimodal texts.

CHILDREN'S THOUGHTS ON CHALLENGING AND CONTROVERSIAL PICTUREBOOKS

Over the years ... we have built up expectations of how hard and challenging picturebooks can be and our expectations have risen so that we now expect the picturebooks we read to be very challenging and demanding in terms of their content.

Edward, 11 years old

Over a period of seven years I worked with a class of 30 children, from their start at school at the age of 4/5 years to their final year at primary school at the age of 11 years. The class was made up of 14 boys and 16 girls. Over this period of time the children read, shared, thought about and responded to a variety of different books, mostly picturebooks. We considered the picturebook as something to read for pleasure; to think about, talk about and discuss (Evans, 2009; Styles & Noble, 2009); to respond to in the form of writing (Horner & Wing Jan, 2001), drawing (Anning & Ring, 2004; Styles & Noble, 2009), role play and drama (Heathcote, 1991); and as a catalyst for artistic expression (Craft, 2001; Brice Heath & Wolf, 2004). We also considered the picturebook as an art form and as a vehicle for discussing controversial and philosophical issues such as death and dying, war and conflict, drugs, immigration, loneliness and old age.

Many of the picturebooks were challenging, visual texts that prompted much thought and discussion. On occasion there were texts that made the children feel uneasy in relation to the subject matter; invariably, however, they invited the children to respond to texts by asking more questions and by sharing their personal thoughts and points of view.

The children were in their last year at primary school and I worked with the whole class prior to focusing on a small group of 6 children. We revisited some of

the books we had previously read and worked with and examined what we thought challenging and controversial picturebooks actually were.

The children addressed a series of questions including:

What does challenging mean?

What does controversial mean?

What is a challenging picturebook?

Who are challenging picturebooks for?

What makes a picturebook challenging?

Would you choose to read a challenging picturebook and which one would you choose to read?

Initially the children were asked to write their individual ideas prior to discussion with the other group members. Then they shared them with their peers. Their responses were thoughtful and often quite profound.

What does challenging mean?

I think challenging means something that is a bit out of your comfort zone and something you are not used to doing. For example the first time you go to work it may be challenging but once you get used to it, it is not a challenge any more. There is more than one kind of challenge ... there are mental challenges where you find something hard because you are in troubling times, and physical challenges that might make your body ache.

Molly

Challenging means something that isn't easy; something that takes you a while to work out.

Edward

I think challenging means hard and difficult. I also think it means a task, like something you have been asked to do. Challenging is something that one person may find difficult or confusing that other people may find easy. I also think to challenge somebody is to ask them to do something they may not like.

Charlotte

Other words that mean challenging

The children thought of other words that could be used to describe challenging. They used the dictionary then the thesaurus to find synonyms for challenging (Figure 0.1).



FIGURE 0.1 'Other words that mean challenging'.

What does controversial mean?

Charlotte and Megan both considered what the word controversial might mean although not all the children found this easy to define.

I am not sure what controversial means but after our discussion I think it means causing a problem by saying something that someone disagrees with. So, if someone says something completely different to everyone else to cause an argument they are being controversial.

Charlotte

If something is controversial it means you can disagree with someone else and have an argument.

Megan

I've just looked it up in the dictionary and a controversial book is a book dealing with shocking issues such as the death penalty that not everyone has the same opinion of.

Edward

What is a challenging picturebook?

A challenging picturebook is a book that you have to think about 'out-of-the-box' as well as 'in-the-box'.

Molly

A challenging picturebook is a book that invites discussion and scrutiny so you can understand it.

Emily

A challenging picturebook may be challenging for one person but not for someone else. I mean it might be really hard for one person but not hard for another person.

Patrick

Who are challenging picturebooks for?

I think that challenging picturebooks are for children aged 9–14. Too young and they wouldn't understand but too old and they wouldn't be challenging enough.

Edward

I would aim a challenging picturebook for an 11 year old or for people at high school or over because they are something that younger children won't understand because they're beyond their knowledge and experiences.

Molly

Sorting and classifying challenging picturebooks

After the 11 year olds had shared their thoughts and suggestions they looked at a selection of 35 picturebooks. From looking at just the title and book cover image they were asked to classify them according to if they thought they would be 'challenging', 'not challenging' or 'not sure'. Some of the books were classed as challenging by all of the children, and they began to talk about what makes a picturebook challenging.

What makes a picturebook challenging?

They were then asked to consider what might make a reader think a picturebook will be challenging. Emily's thoughts were quite comprehensive and she noted that book titles and subtitles, style of illustrations, text type and font and use of colour were all factors that can make a book look challenging or not:

I think illustrations can make a picturebook challenging. If they are child-ish pictures, it ticks in my brain saying easy, but if they are formal drawings and it looks more grown-up, I say challenging. For example, *Duck! Rabbit!* [Rosenthal & Lichtenheld, 2009] has cartoon type pictures, whereas *The Sweetest Fig* [Van Allsburg, 1993] has painted pictures, which are fully fledged.

The title can make a book challenging. If the title is long and in very formal writing it makes you feel like it's an adult book.

The font also makes a difference because if it looks posh, you automatically think it is more challenging.

Colour can affect my decision because lighter and warmer colours can make me think a picturebook is not as challenging but picturebooks with darker colours can make me think they are more challenging. For example with *Lola and*

the Rent a Cat [Josephus Jitta, 2007] and *Woolvs in the Sitee* [Wild & Spudvilas, 2007]. *Woolvs in the Sitee* has dark and more complex colours but *Lola and the Rent a Cat's* colours are brighter and simpler so it is less challenging.

Cartoon images and computer-generated images make a book look simpler but painted images can make it look more mature.

The subtitle of the book affects your opinion of the book, because even though *Underground* [Evans, 2011] is hand drawn and cartoon like, the subtitle writing at the bottom saying *Finding The Light To Freedom* make it sound much more mature and interesting.

Emily

Would you choose to read a challenging picturebook ... which one would you choose?

After looking at, classifying and discussing the reasons for their choice the children were extremely motivated to read the books and they each chose one to focus on. They predicted what they thought the challenge in their book would be before reading it. They then illustrated the book cover, wrote a caption for their illustration and concluded by summarising the book.

After reading the book they revisited their original challenge to see if their prediction had been 'correct'.

Once again the children showed great maturity of thought. They remarked that the reason they felt so at ease in responding was because they had been used to reading and talking about picturebooks like this for many years and they knew there was no right or wrong answer (Evans, 2009).

Children's choices and responses to six challenging books

The Island by Armin Greder

The Enemy by David Cali, illus. Sergei Bloch

Norton's Hut by John Marsden, illus. Peter Gouldthorpe

The Sweetest Fig by Chris Van Allsburg

The Wolves in the Wall by Neil Gaiman, illus. Dave McKean

Smoke by Anton Fortes, illus. Joanna Concejo

Emily's choice

The Island by Armin Greder

Before the read:

I think the challenge will be understanding and empathising with the person in the book.

xxx Children's thoughts

After the read:

I now know *The Island* is very challenging and the challenge is understanding why the other islanders didn't accept the man because he was apparently different when he wasn't. Just because the man seems different doesn't mean the islanders should treat him cruelly.

The illustrations are sad, disturbing and horrifying. The look on the islanders' faces is angry and worrying and the book is very upsetting with a storyline that is related to things that are going on in the world now.

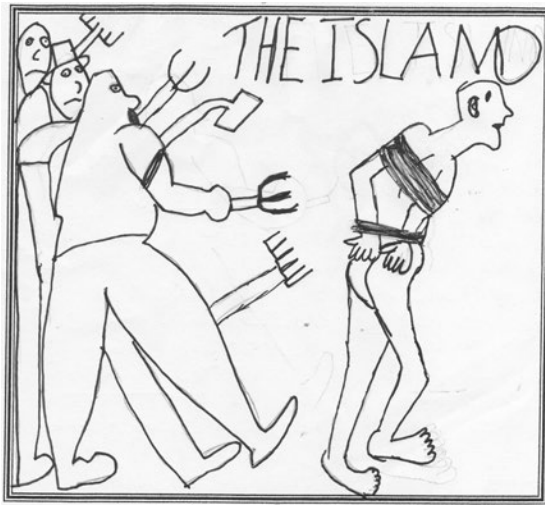


FIGURE 0.2 Emily's cover drawing and caption for *The Island*.

The illustration shows a man being attacked by the islanders simply because they perceive him as being different to them.

Megan's choice

The Enemy by David Cali, illus. Sergei Bloch

Before the read:

I think the challenge will be for the soldier who is at war but wants to make peace.

After the read:

I like this book a lot now I have read it. At first it didn't make much sense and I wondered what would happen if it continued but then you start to understand what the man is trying to do and it made a lot of sense.



FIGURE 0.3 Megan's cover drawing and caption for *The Enemy*.

The soldier is going to war to kill the enemy. However, he doesn't look like a fighting soldier, he looks like someone who wants to make peace because he has a flower in his mouth and a smile on his face.

Patrick's choice

Norton's Hut by John Marsden, illus. Peter Gouldthorpe

Before the read:

I think the challenge for this book will be understanding it because the title doesn't give much away.

After the read:

Norton's Hut is challenging because it was difficult to understand and to figure out what happened at the end.



FIGURE 0.4 Patrick's cover drawing and caption for *Norton's Hut*.

This image represents the ghostly part of the story with the man trembling next to the fire in fear that the hut will burn down and he will become a ghost.

Charlotte's choice

The Sweetest Fig by Chris Van Allsburg

Before the read:

I think the challenge will be trying to understand why they called it *The Sweetest Fig*.

After the read:

I don't think it is challenging because I understood what was going on and now I know why it is called *The Sweetest Fig*. It is called *The Sweetest Fig* because the fig tasted sweet and it is sweet to have a fig that could make your wishes come true.

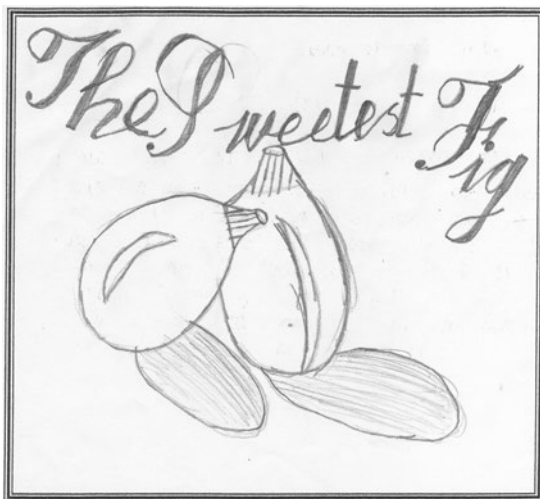


FIGURE 0.5 Charlotte's cover drawing and caption for *The Sweetest Fig*.

The figs in this image represent the greed of the man who thought he could have everything in the world, however, in the end he ended up worse off than at the beginning.

Edward's choice

The Wolves in the Wall by Neil Gaiman, illus. Dave McKean

Before the read:

I think the challenge will be finding out why there is a wolf in the wall.

After the read:

I found my book was challenging because it was random and although I understood the book, it took me a while to accept what was happening.



FIGURE 0.6 Edward's cover drawing and caption for *The Wolves in the Wall*.

This picture of a wolf sliding down the banister represents the mischief, chaos, mayhem and destruction that the wolves were causing in the walls of the house.

Molly's choice

Smoke by Anton Fortes, illus. Joanna Concejo

Before the read:

I think the challenge is going to be trying to understand the characters and why it is called *Smoke* and why it has got that particular illustration on the front.

After the read:

Now I have read the book I think *Smoke* is a **very** challenging book. It is challenging because it doesn't tell you anything, it just gives you clues. The children don't know what's happening, but their families suffer a great deal of loss.



FIGURE 0.7 Molly's cover drawing and caption for *Smoke*.

The suit in the image represents the people who have lost their lives because they got gassed in the concentration camps and the tree represents new life and new hope because it is growing new shoots and leaves.

The children focused on *Smoke* by Anton Fortes and Joanna Concejo

Some books evidently looked much more challenging than others and although it was Molly who initially chose *Smoke* by Anton Fortes and illustrated by Joanna Concejo to focus on in detail, the other group members were also intrigued by the title and cover of this White Raven selected picturebook (2009) and they all chose it as their second book to read and discuss (Figure 0.8).

A harrowing yet poignant picturebook, *Smoke* describes the holocaust using a powerful blend of words and pictures. The reader sees how the little boy protagonist survives in the concentration camp, initially with his mother (his father having gone in a different line) and other prisoners, then alone with his only friend, Pali. Fortes' descriptive and haunting words are partnered by Concejo's equally graphic and emotive images drawn in pale, muted colours to evoke the transience of a previously short but sweet life. The reader is never sure if the boy knows where he is or what will happen to him but his innocence is never in question and, although many readers know what will finally happen, the end is still shocking.

The children's discussion about *Smoke* showed just how willing they were to predict, speculate and tolerate uncertainty in relation to challenging picturebooks; they even commented on how their own willingness and ability to do this had improved over the years. They knew there were no right and wrong answers and even though the book was very challenging and controversial, they took risks and shared their personal, sometimes audacious viewpoints as they knew these would be accepted by the other group members.

In thinking about this kind of qualitative reader response research in relation to picturebooks, Perry Nodelman questioned if it could be classed as 'real' research

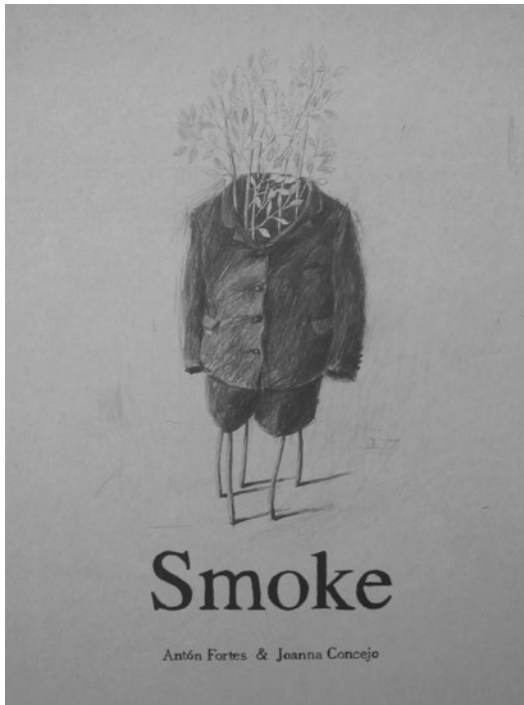


FIGURE 0.8 *Smoke* by Anton Fortes, illus. Joanna Concejo (2009).

and asked, 'what might legitimately be learned ... from work with a specific child or group of children?' (2010: 10). Nodelman felt that this kind of research could be classed as too subjective and idiosyncratic and he alluded to David Lewis's articulation of two routes to picturebook research, one involving, 'careful and patient listening to what children say as they read' and the other, 'an equally patient, careful description of individual books' (1996: 113). After consideration of both routes Nodelman admitted that there was great value in the former, whereby researchers work with children as they read and respond to picturebooks. He then proceeded to comment on the effectiveness of the researchers in this kind of response work and noted that in their attempt to praise the children for being so capable of precocious responses, 'researchers are often so determined to make their point about how clever children can be that they seriously underplay how clever they are themselves' (Nodelman, 2010: 11).

Children's thoughts and responses

The children with whom I worked were certainly capable of precocious responses and in relation to challenging and controversial picturebooks they showed: a willingness to be open minded; an awareness of deep, profound issues; and a level of maturity beyond their years, which at times was quite disconcerting. They were enthusiastic and willing to offer points of view and to learn from each other in this 'community of learners' environment.