How Can Picture Books Help Children?

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by Lillian Heil

What kinds of picture books would encourage children to be happy with the way they look, develop confidence in their own ability to solve problems and accept differences in other people?

First, let’s consider being happy with one’s physical characteristics. Picture books could help children see that there is not just one model for appearance—if books are chosen that present heroes and heroines who are interesting, strong and unique. Some might be plump and lazy like Zemach’s Duffy in the amusing folktale about Duffy and the Devil; some could be scruffy but smart little towheads like Wally in Richard Kennedy’s hilarious account of The Contests at Cowlick (illustrations by Marc Simont); some would be wiry, dark-haired tomboys like the successful rebel, Phoebe, in Babbit’s Phoebe’s Revolt; some might be old with a white walrus moustache like Stevenson’s Grandpa in Could Be Worse; or have straight, stick-out-everywhere-hair like Peter and Judy in Van Allsburg’s Jamanji; or have the wild, red mop and dumpy figure of Glen Rounds’s fearless stagecoach driver in Kimmel’s story of Charlie Drives the Stage. Some fairy tale princesses could look like Galdone’s long-brown-haired Cinderella, and some could be the white-skinned, stylized ladies depicted by Errol LeCain in Thorn Rose or Cinderella. Still others could have the tousled look of Hyman’s Snow White. All of these picture books have heroes and heroines with unique personalities and unique physical characteristics. You feel that you would recognize them if they suddenly made an appearance in your neighborhood.

The picture books you would want to avoid are those that do not create memorable characters—where the children and adults have the same eyes, mouths and face shapes (hair color does seem to vary—maybe that’s the easiest way to differentiate who’s who in the story). The two popular styles for instant illustrators are the comic style and the cute. The comic style uses round eyes, the turned up or down line for the mouth (or round circle for surprise) and round face. The cute style features well dressed, chubby, big-eyed, long-eyelashed, turned-up nose, rosebud-mouthed children who seem to
encourage the response of "cute" or "how adorable" from readers. Predictably, women and girls like them better than boys and men.

There are two questionable messages presented by these stereotyped cute and comic illustrations. One is that all children (or adults) should look alike. I hear adults complain when their offspring want to look like everyone else in terms of clothes and hairstyles, so we are giving children mixed messages if we show approval of stereotyped physical appearances in books, but complain about it in real life.

The other questionable message is that "attractive people have big, long-lashed eyes, a turned-up nose, a rosebud-mouth and thick hair that always stays in place. Children with short, thin eyelashes, broad or large noses, thin lips, or unmanageable hair would always find themselves left out when they hear adults exclaiming over what is nice-looking in pictures or in real life. Children who don’t fit this model are more likely to be unhappy with their looks, and possibly with themselves because they aren’t "cute."

The second thing to consider in helping children through the use of picture books is to ask, what kind of picture books might help children develop confidence so they can overcome difficulties? Kherdian and Hogrogrian’s Right Now shows the heroine having good and bad days as one does in real living. Or help children get to know lazy, chubby, buck-toothed Arthur (in Wooding’s Arthur’s Christmas Wish) who finds out that life requires effort. Enjoy the end of Geraldine’s frustration (Geraldine’s Big Snow by Keller) when snow finally comes and she can use her new sled. Let children see the visual anger and frustration of the greedy baker, Van Amsterdam, in The Baker’s Dozen: A Colonial American Tale by Heather Forest, compared to his floating elation when he discovers that giving a generous "baker’s dozen" is good business. See the set of Hanna’s stubborn back as she rescues her pig and figures out how to keep her neighbor from stealing him again in Aylesworth and Rounds’s Hanna’s Hog. Capture the incredible visual moment when almost all hope has gone and an owl finally returns the call and lands in the tree above a father and daughter who have braved the winter night to go owling. (Owl Moon by Yolen and Schoenherr.) Feel the visual isolation of Chibi, the shy country child who is isolated from everyone, compared to his happy response to people when a teacher allows him to share a talent all can appreciate in Crow Boy by Yashima.

Such books visually capture genuine feelings because the story and illustrations build up to the strong frustration before any solution takes place. The effort involved in solving the problem provides a logical reason for the feelings of elation and success. The body language and facial expressions are convincing. The reader almost feels that he or she has solved the problem for Duffy or learned to play the piano with Arthur or sighted the huge silent owl for one magic moment as he or she stares at one another on a frigid
winter night. Because the reader lives through the effort it takes to solve problems, as well as the elation of the solutions, he learns that problems can be solved; he knows it is frustrating and requires vigorous effort.

The poorly done picture books don't present convincing problems because neither the illustrator nor the author take the time to develop the feeling of genuine frustration or anger; therefore, the problem never becomes real. Even biographies of real people don't sound real when achievements are focused on so heavily that their lives seem to have required no effort. (Comic illustrations don't help because they make the life of the person laughable and trivial instead of real.) Without the reality of the struggle, the reader cannot feel the reality of success.

The third thing to consider is what kinds of picture books encourage children to accept differences in others—looks, language and lifestyle? They succeed if they show the differences in the context of life so that they are logical and understandable. Steptoe's folktale *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* does this with its universal theme of how kindness pays off. Visually, this book shows some of the most regal black people I've ever seen, but the king and the two girls have black kinky hair, broad noses and thick, full lips. They do not look like or wear the same clothes we do. They wear flowing robes and bands of jewelry on their heads and arms. They live in homes that are different from our homes and the plants and animals don't look like the kinds we are used to. But they show strong people who look and act like kings and queens and they show that black and kindness are beautiful.

A comic view of human beings is presented by Tony Ross's illustrations for Jeanne Willis's *Earthlets*. Babies and their habits are described from the viewpoint of an alien professor who is a five-eyed green creature with two long whip-like tentacles. Babies are diaper-clad fatties with rosy cheeks and very little hair doing all kinds of things like mauling cats, eating, leaking, and bawling—like babies do so well. This funny book allows the child to look at himself as an alien creature.

Illustrations in poetry books can help us appreciate others. Consider Beddows's marvelous pen-and-ink drawings (Fleischman's *Joyful Noise*). Don't miss the spinning whirligig beetles (enough to make you dizzy) or the lovesick moths (you'll never view moths flitting in the light in the same way again) or the supremely adored queen bee on her conch as she seems to say, "Truly a bee's is the best of all lives."

Poorly done picture books about other cultures don't take the time to show the totality of their common physical characteristics, nor the uniqueness of particular characters. (All orientals do not all look alike any more than all caucasians do.) Poor illustrations usually take a single part of appearance like facial color and hair, or sometimes a stereotype like slanted eyes. The latter seems particularly dumb because anyone who has looked knows
that oriental races don’t have eyes that slant—the depth of their eye sockets is what is different. The people in poorly written stories do not have convincing visual or textual descriptions so they don’t become real and the reader can’t develop feelings of appreciation for them.

Marvelous visual messages about what it’s like to be human—the uniqueness, the ability to surmount problems, and the beauty of variety await you and the children you care about in good picture books. If you’re still muttering to yourself that children are too young to know the difference between great and poor language, and they certainly aren’t old enough to make generalizations from illustrations, you will first have to explain to me why children just starting to talk call every man they see ”Daddy” or every four legged creature a ”doggy” (if that’s the pet they have in the home or in their picture books). Children start making generalizations very young; we find out about them when they start to talk. The stereotypes and sameness of cute and comic children in picture books certainly have a share in causing the sometimes serious problems our teenagers have in being able to accept and be happy with their own combination of physical characteristics. The older I get, the more I know that my visual memories, and the way they made me feel, go back a long way and I didn’t even realize at the time that I was being affected by them. Don’t run the risk of contributing to the negative visual messages so plentiful in our culture that certainly aren’t helping our young women, for example, to avoid anorexia, or our young boys to realize that physical violence is not the answer to every problem. You are the adults who can provide a strong foundation of love, and with it, powerful picture books that children can return to again and again as they discover new details and new meanings that help them to accept their own uniqueness and the differences of others, and develop confidence in their ability to surmount the difficulties that will confront them.

Bibliography


