

Picture Books



We can define them as books in which pictures are much more important than the written text, or which have no written text (wordless), or which interact with the written text in an essential way. In contrast, in illustrated stories, such as the original editions of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) or A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), the pictures are important, but the words convey the most important meanings. In our course we are going to read two picture books, Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* and Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Picture books are the form of literature than more than any other is designed specifically for children. The assumption is that understanding pictures comes before understanding words, and so children can understand picture books much better than normal books. Comenius, the author of the earliest picture book in the Western tradition (the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, 1658) wrote that "pictures are the most intelligible books than children can look upon".

English **Randolph Caldecott** (1846-1886) is considered the creator of the modern picture book. He has contributed not only to the Anglo-American world, but to children's book illustration in general. His pictures were full of joy, movement, character, beauty and humour. Artists admire the austerity of his line, for he believed that "the fewer the lines, the less error committed". Before Caldecott illustrations in children's books depicted the events literally or added adornments. Caldecott *interpreted* and *enhanced* the text, adding new elements to the story. Young Caldecott had a passion for drawing, but his father prompted him to take a position as a bank clerk, which he held for eleven years, eventually moving to London to devote the remaining years of his life to art. Caldecott illustrated traditional nursery rhymes such as "Hey Diddle Diddle" and many picture books like *The House that Jack Built*, *The Diverting Story of John Gilpin*, *The Queen of Hearts*, or *Sing a Song for Sixpence*. Nowadays we take well-designed picture books for granted, but when Caldecott's began to appear there were few quality picture books available.

Caldecott's influence is such that the most coveted award for book illustrators today is named after him. The **Caldecott Medal** or **Award** is awarded yearly to the artist of the best American picture book for children published in the United States during the preceding year. The committee's definition of the genre and the criteria for assessing the quality of a picture book are worth quoting:

1. A picture book for children as distinguished from other books with illustrations is one that essentially provides the child with a visual experience. It has a collective unity of story-line, theme or concept, developed through a series of pictures of which the book is comprised.
2. A picture book for children is one for which children are a potential audience. The book displays respect for children's understanding, abilities and appreciations. Children are defined as persons of ages up to and including fourteen and picture books for this entire age range are to be considered.
3. In identifying a distinguished picture book for children the committee members need to consider:
 - Execution in the artistic technique employed.
 - Pictorial interpretation of story, theme or concept.
 - Appropriateness of style of illustration to the story, theme or concept.
 - Delineation of plot, theme, characters, setting, mood or information through the pictures.
 - Recognition of a child audience.
4. The award is for distinguished illustration, not for didactic intent or popularity.

Some Caldecott medallists include: Ludwig Bemelmans for *Madeline's Rescue* (1954), Maurice Sendak for *Where the Wild Things Are* (1964), William Steig for *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (1970), or David Wiesner for *Flotsam* (2007). The following website lists the Caldecott award winners. It is an excellent resource for locating quality picture books in English:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/caldecottmedal/caldecottwinners/caldecottmedal.htm>

Many people therefore assume that picture books must be simple, but in fact they are highly complex. The picture has to have a style, a viewpoint, and reflect decisions about details, and all of these inevitably have social, cultural and political implications. For the picture-book artist, one traditional way of avoiding irrelevant complexity has been to use anthropomorphized animals. But even displacing human behaviour into animal form can be dangerous, as when the marriage of a white rabbit to a white rabbit in Garth Williams's *The Rabbit's Wedding* (1958) caused the book to be banned in some southern states of the USA. Modern picture books feature non-white children (Toni Morrison's *The Big Box*, Sandra Cisneros's *Hairs/Pelitos*) and may deal openly with controversial subjects such as wars (Toshi Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika*).

In talking about pictures in picture books we need to address the following questions: What is the purpose of each picture? Is it primarily narrative, referential, symbolic, or atmospheric? Are there any contradictions in terms of point of view between the pictures and narrative voice speaking in the text? Do the pictures add details to the text that are not in it? Do the pictures leave room for the child's imagination, do they have gaps, or is everything in the text depicted in the pictures? Some critics believe that the gaps between what we read and what we see make good picture books.

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