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Picture books - Objects of discovery

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This is the first of a series of short articles written for the APPInep bulletin about picture books. I'd like to start by defining what a picture book is and walking you through what I have discovered about this *object*. I hope that after reading this you too will see picture books as objects, not just a series of pages with pretty pictures inside a cover.

What is a picture book?

Illustrated books, decorated books and picture books all contain pictures, so what makes a picture book different? An illustrated book usually includes illustrations that are not necessary for its interpretation and a decorated book includes small pictures or designs, often at the beginning or end of a chapter, for decorative purposes only. A picture book, on the other hand, uses both words and pictures to create meaning. Picture books can be either fiction or non-fiction, so in the case of picture *storybooks*, words and pictures together produce the narrative.

As readers of picture books we read both the pictures and the words - we could think of them both as texts, one is a visual text the other is a verbal text. In some cases, a picture book conveys the meaning entirely through the visual text, a wordless book. In other cases, the two texts accompany each other, sometimes giving us the same information, sometimes giving us different information. It is for this reason that the American illustrator Uri Schulevitz wrote, that a picture book '*could not be read over the radio and be understood fully*' (1985:15). The visual text is essential to the understanding of the message, it clarifies, complements, extends or even takes the place of the verbal text.

Why an object?

Having a visual and a verbal text doesn't make a picture book an object - to be complete we need to add *design*. Bader's very famous quote says it all: '*A picture book is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page.*' (Bader, 1976:1). An item of manufacture, an object!

It is the design of a picture book that we are going to look at in this issue.

Picture book *peritext* - an anatomy

Peritext refers to the physical features of a picture book aside from the verbal and visual texts (Sipe & McGuire 2009:62). These include, front and back covers, dust jackets (if the book is a hard back), the endpapers and the title and dedication pages.

To help you visualise what I am talking about I shall refer to two picture books as an example. *Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?* (Martins Jr & Carle), featured in Ellis & Brewster (2002) and in workshops I've run for years. I'll refer to it as *Brown Bear*. The second is *Down by the Cool of the Pool* (Mitton & Parker-Rees) which many of you will know from the BritLit pack and subsequent workshops. I'll refer to it as *The Pool*. I hope some of you have the real objects to look at as you read the rest of this article.

Before I continue I thought you might like to know that picture books in general have 32 pages, this is for printing purposes. Printing is done on one large sheet which is cut and folded to make a *signature*. Shorter or slightly longer picture books do exist, but as signatures come in multiples of eight, they will only be 16, 24, 40 or 48 pages long.

Picture books are usually made up of a series of double page spreads - that is when a picture book is opened flat, the two facing pages are illustrated as one. Both *Brown Bear* and *The Pool* have 32 pages and twelve double page spreads containing one illustration all the way through.

The front cover

The picture book as object starts with the front cover. The visual text on the front cover introduces us to the main characters and setting. We can use the illustrations to help children predict what the story will be about and help with introducing words they may not be familiar with. *Brown Bear* has the front view of a brown bear, clear and simple. *The Pool* has three of the characters and the setting, as well as three mini-beasts which appear on every page of the book, but are never mentioned.

Then there are the names of the author and illustrator. This is interesting information - someone writes, some one draws; sometimes that person does both things. If you share lots of picture books with your children they will begin to recognise the style of a certain illustrator's work and you could even do some activities which help children imitate these styles. Carle works with pieces of coloured paper, and Parker-Rees uses watercolour, in a splodgy sort of way. Both are lots of fun to imitate.

Many of my students ask me what the black and white bird in a yellow oval is doing on the cover of *Brown bear*. That's a publisher's logo - and you will notice that they are often quite visible and so children notice them. By talking about publishers we are introducing children to how books are made. More on that later!

The back cover

If your children are old enough you could read the blurb which sometimes appears on the back cover - does it help them predict any more? Is there anything else on the back cover to help children predict what is inside? *Brown Bear* has a humorous view of the bear's backside! The bear walks into the book and walks out again! The visual text of *The Pool* introduces two more characters; the verbal text informs us that more farm animals will appear.

The back cover usually has the bar code, a block of vertical black lines with numbers at the top and bottom, which is a legal obligation. Some picture books do funny things with their bar codes, so watch out for them!

The endpapers

The end papers are two leaves at the front and back of a book, with hard cover books they are pasted to the inside of the cover. In paperback books they come before the title page and after the final page of the narrative. They are also called an end leaf or an end sheet.

The endpapers in *Brown Bear* are illustrated with nine strips of ripped paper. They are actually quite important in helping the children remember which colours appear in the book, and their order. By returning to the endpapers after reading the story, can the children remember which animal was which colour? And Eric Carle has signed them with his squiggly writing, that's something interesting to talk about too. Is a picture book like a piece of art with a signature? The endpapers at front and back are the same in *Brown Bear*.

In *The Pool* they are different. The front endpapers are a luscious bluey pink colour, depicting the 'cool' of the water. (Can you find the snail, dragonfly and caterpillar?) As you flick through the book, you will see the pages turning from cool blue, through to yellow and then orange. The back endpapers complete this transformation - they are an orangey yellow, warmed by the reflection of the hot sun at the end of the day.

The dedication page

Dedications are mind blowing, especially when children realise that a book has been written *for* someone - they have lots of fun thinking about *who* that person could be. There's a dedication in *The Pool*, accompanied by a great illustration of a flying cat. A part of it says, '*For George, Harriet, Doris and Guthrie, and the cool of the pool in France - T.M.*' There's lots to wonder about there, a bit of privacy made public.

My copy of *Brown Bear* has no dedication page, but I'm sure a hardback copy would have one. Picture book savvy children are disappointed when they come across books with no dedications, and they often ask, *So who did he make the book for?* Good question!

On dedication pages you usually find the publisher blurb. Children know that publishers are involved in book making as they have seen the logo. What they can find out here is where and when the book was made. My copy of *The Pool* was printed in China in 2002 and my copy of *Brown Bear* was printed in Hong Kong in 1995. That's interesting information, especially if you follow it up with where the publisher has its offices.

The title page

This page includes the title and author/illustrator's names, the publisher and possibly the city where their head office is based.

Brown Bear has a simple title page, neat ripped paper boxing the title. It looks like a window and children often point this out. *The Pool* uses a wobbly font for the verbal text, with splashes coming off it. The visual text depicts a wildly happy duck and frog, I feel like saying '*Wheee! Let's open that book and see what happens!*'

And the head office cities, are they the same as where the books were printed? Goodness gracious, no they aren't! Orchard Books is based in New York, and Puffin Books in London. You can add to this information by musing about where the author and illustrator live. If you *google* Tony Mitton and Guy Parker Rees you'll see they both live in the UK. Eric Carle lives in the States, so did Bill Martin, Jr, but he's dead now. So *The Pool* started in the UK, went to the states then got printed in China. Now that's a fun activity, mapping out the path the book took, before it came into your classroom in Portugal!

Final thoughts

Design brings an aesthetic coherence to a picture book right from the front cover. Those extra bits, the *peritext*, help create the narrative, in so doing make the picture book a whole object. In our ELT classes you can talk about some of these features with your children, maybe not the first time you look at the book together, but perhaps the second and the third. It's a journey of discovery, creating meaning and using English together.

Picture books

Martin Jr, B & Carle, E. 1995 *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?* Puffin Books, London

Mitton, T. & Parker-Rees, G. 2002 *Down by the cool of the pool* Orchard Books, New York.

Activities for Down by the cool of the pool available on the BritLit website:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/britlit/down-cool-pool>

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Bio-data

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