

Recipe for shaping a lesson on how picture books work.

I think this lesson could be adapted to work for any year at Primary school, I've taught it both to Year 2 and Year 6. It's one that I keep under my hat, like a Paddington Bear emergency marmalade sandwich, for those occasions where I might be giving a session at a library or story festival and so 7 year olds turn up bringing with them their 3 year old and 11 year old siblings, an uncle and a grandma. I like to think of it as a catch-all session!

It's a delight to teach because it appeals to all, and the real perk, is that you can see the lightbulb moments and not just with the children! It also, like many of my favourite lessons, doesn't depend on having children who are fluent readers of text – it's about reading pictures... and in our image focused world the children can't practice this skill often enough!

When we start to study poetry we are taught about different forms – sonnets, ballads, free verse etc and then to consider the poetical techniques to look for within those poems iambic pentameters, similes, assonance and so on. Well this lesson offers an introduction to the equivalent in picture books! Before we really get to grips with looking at the ins and outs of the pictures we can enjoy learning how this traditional picture book works in terms of its form here we focus on:

How the picture book is set out on the page

Where the words are

How big the images are

It's also lots and lots of FUN. Critical literacy as I'll never tire of saying should be fun. For me, it's part of Reading for Pleasure, we just need to sell it...

What you will need:

John Burningham's, *Time to get out of the Bath Shirley*

Maurice Sendak's, *Where the Wild things Are*

Kes Grey's, *Eat Your Peas*

Method

I always begin by saying that I'm going to read a story. That they should all be sitting comfortably, because it's going to be very exciting. You will know your audience better than me though, if I'm teaching year 6 I normally begin by saying we are going to look at picture books as adults, because they are now, as far as I'm concerned pretty much adults. **I point out that in children's picture books we have 3 different stories.**

- 1: The story that just looking at the pictures tell us.
- 2: The story that just looking at the words tells us.
- 3: The story that the two combined tells us.

(This is old school children's lit criticism but is largely new to school pupils – more evidence that we need to get out university lectures into classrooms!)

Time to get out of the Bath, Shirley

Read *Time to get out of the Bath, Shirley* but don't show them the pictures. This book without pictures, doesn't really make sense. It is a wonderful list of nags. For example, the first few pages read:

'You haven't left the soap in the bath again have you?'

'You really ought to have a bath more often Shirley'

'Some people don't even have baths'

With the final page concluding

'There's water all over the floor.'

If there happen to be any adults in the room, they tend to laugh at this (I tell my undergraduate students that really this book is a lesson in contraception as the mother is clearly going through her normal bath time motions, and when they see the image of her on the bathroom scales they tend to agree!) The children are normally scrunched nose or beginning to say that that's not a nice mum, or what a boring book, or 'sounds like my house'. **There's a rich opportunity for discussion here about why this may or may not be a good children's book.**

Now show them the pictures alongside the words.

Here there are more questions to be asked. It's great if you can give the children time to look at them closely.

While mum is talking, what is Shirley doing?

(Shirley, as you'll see, is off down the plug hole, escaping the bland adult world, going into a fantasy land to joust with a medieval King and Queen, but always, as children's lit decorum dictates dressed in a towel!)

How is the book arranged? Do Shirley and her mum ever share a page?

Now, we are asking them to consider the form. The mum is always pictured on one side, the left as we look at it. The writing is also always on that 'adult' side. Shirley is always, wordless, on the right hand page.

How does the book use colour?

The mum is pictured in pastels. It creates a dreary look (I think). When Shirley is in the bath she also is drawn in such shades. It is only when she goes to another world that the colours become vivid – when the adventure takes place.

Do you think this is a happy ending?

The beauty of this is that there isn't one real answer. But already, what seemed a simple book on first reading has become much more complex.

What do you think this book tells us about adults and children?

Ditto the last answer, but there is the feeling, I think, that adults and children aren't on the same page, physically or metaphorically. Of course, the last page does see them on the same page – but are they together? Where are the words? Shirley hasn't heard her mother's words. The mother hasn't

experienced Shirley's adventure. Is this a problem between adults and children? Do adults say things and not really notice if children are listening or not? The dialogue is entirely the mother's voice (interesting point of discussion might, at another point, be why Shirley is silenced).

For our purpose it should be clear that this picture book is using a traditional trope of adults on one page and children on the other to say something about the relationships between adults and children.

Where the Wild Things Are

The children will now have the idea firmly in their heads that picture books are sometimes organised with an 'adult' side, that we read first in our culture (again an interesting potential discussion – why do we see adult's side first? Is it because adults write and publish children's books and therefore put themselves first?) and a child's side. That the adult side often has the text on it.

Read the book through and ask the children to keep an eye on the way the book is organised – its form.

Go back, or, linger on the first 3 pages.

The night Max wore his wolf suit (on the adult side) with a small image of Max (being wild) on the child's side.

As you turn to the next page 'and made mischief..' the children may well note that the image, while on the child's side, and still relatively small, has in fact grown!

Once you've got to this step, the book almost teaches itself. The image grows and grows. When Max is sent to his room, the image takes up the whole 'child's' side, but as the trees grow they break the (imaginary border), and then – wohooo- the image encroaches on to the ADULT side!

***Why do you think the picture has moved on to the side with the writing?**

***What is happening in the story when it does this?**

Max is going into his fantasy world, and leaving the adult world behind.

***What happens to the pictures and words as Max sails away?**

The pictures take over the adult page. For some time the words are squished at the bottom of both pages while the pictures are really big. Here Max is in a new world.

***What happens to the words and pictures when Max says 'let the wild rumpus start'?**

There are no words anymore. Max and the wild things party away. This is the carnival season, where we can let lose all inhibitions. The sensible adults are not allowed in. Only thing about carnivals is that they must come to an end, and we must then return to our worlds.

***Tell me what happens to the words and pictures when Max gets tired of the Wild partying.**

The words return to the bottom of both pages. And then when Max sails home, the picture also sails back to its own 'child' side.

***Tell me about the ending. What has happened to the words and pictures?**

In the end we are left Max in the final image taking down his hood, is it time to grow-up, and be good? He is still loved maybe – they have left food. But the turn to the very last page – why do you think there’s no picture? Have the adults had the last word?

Again, by the end of this book the children should be getting really skilled in looking at how the book is set out, and why where the pictures and words are placed on the page is important.

Eat your Peas

Now that the children have had experience in noticing where pictures are placed, and are able to discuss how this might be important to the story, **it’s time to read *Eat Your Peas***. Read the book as normal, with both words and pictures and ask the children to think about what they have already learnt about the ‘adult’ side and ‘child’ side. This is the story of a battle between Daisy and her mum. Daisy’s mum is desperate that Daisy eats her peas and Daisy doesn’t like peas and won’t eat them. It’s a familiar teatime scenario.

Page 1: Tell me what you see?

This seems traditional. Daisy’s mum is on the ‘adult side’, Daisy is on the ‘child’s’ side. There’s writing on both sides, but Daisy’s mum is bigger than Daisy. Readers will probably also note the mum’s pea necklace and earrings!

Tell me what you changes you notice in the pictures as we read through.

Daisy’s mum gradually gets smaller as she offers more useless bribes. Daisy however, maintains her power with her one word reply ‘I don’t like peas’. The picture of Daisy, who keeps to her side, grows and grows as she becomes more and more powerful. There is a page late on where mum is exasperated, hands on head, and almost squashed out of the bottom of the page, while Daisy’s face takes up the whole of the right hand side.

Look at the page where mum offers a ‘new fluffy pencil case’. Tell me about it.

So here we have a bit of a surprise. Mum, has got bigger again on the adult side, she is bigger than Daisy here. Why? Well this is the first time Daisy has replied with anything more than ‘I don’t like peas’. There is a moment of compromise and it all hangs in the balance, is this the moment where mum wins? (After all, in most children’s literature the child see the error of his or her ways and has that bath, uses that potty, doesn’t bite his/her sibling anymore)

Turn the page: What has happened here?

Mum is on the child’s side! She’s smaller than Daisy. Daisy is on the ‘adult’ side. Note that Daisy is now the chief negotiator with, “I’ll eat my peas if you eat your Brussels” and mum’s response “But I don’t like Brussels.”. The power has shifted and this is neatly reflected in the positioning of mum and Daisy in the image.

Tell me how it ends.

Both mum and Daisy like pudding. Here they are both (physically and metaphorically) on the same page!

***Where now? Is children's literature more about compromise than it used to be?**

***Children should now be excited about looking at how picture books are structured. They should know that some picture books have 'adult' and 'child' sides.**

***They can design their own picture books (Children in Year 6 did this – see testimonials).**

***They can look at if this trend in children's books goes on in 'real' life - look at magazines and newspapers. How are men and women placed? Are men above women or bigger in newspapers for example?**

***How does Anthony Browne use show how the father takes up space in *Piggybook*?**

***Take a look at a postmodern picture book like, Lauren Child's *Who's afraid of the Big Bad Book*. How does this jumble up power relationships? Sides of the page etc...**