

Learning & Picture Books

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Lately I've noticed that we expect children to grow out of picture books very early, and start reading 'real' books, full of words and no pictures. But we should think carefully about this. Illustrations are not just decorative; in picture books, meaning is derived from the combination of words and pictures. Pictures are a complex and beautiful language in themselves, and the intellectual challenge I enjoy most as a picture book creator is deciding what percentage of words, and what percentage of pictures I will use to tell a story.

Pictures *are* the story in wordless books, such as *Uh-Oh!*

With wordless books, children closely observe, articulate their observations, put them in the proper sequence, use appropriate vocabulary, add personality and verve to the story, and have fun doing it. This is perfect for English language learners, who are often able to narrate the story in two different languages.

Sometimes the text does not tell a coherent narrative. *Bow-Wow-Wiggle-Waggle* is a nonsense rhyme:

*Bow-wow wiggle-waggle yip yap yowl
paw paw pitter-patter meow growl.*

The plot is in the pictures. Various typefaces emphasize the character of the words. Young readers giggle and wiggle with this book; they name the animals, mimic the movements, memorize the rhythmic rhyme, brainstorm animal sounds, and narrate the story in their own words. Older children learn about action verbs, alliteration, and onomatopoeia--and have fun doing it.

I use very few words in *Two Little Birds*. The simple story provides a basic structure; the illustrations contain a wealth of additional information. Children examine the pictures, wonder, predict, support their ideas with evidence from pictures and text, question what they observe, and then figure out where and how to find answers to their questions. Perhaps they'll observe birds in the yard or the park, read a library book about birds, map the birds' migration, or listen to birdsong on the web. This is qualitatively different than being told facts about bird migration.

It is always important to look at the pictures, even when the story is clearly told by the text. In Eileen Spinelli's *Now It Is Winter*, a young child repeatedly longs for spring, and his mother replies by pointing out the joys of winter. Is he convinced? The answer is in the illustration.

Sometimes the words and pictures tell complimentary stories. Children describe their chairs in the text of *My Chair*: *'My chair rocks. Mine rolls...'* We see their real and imagined descriptions in the pictures; the reason they all gather together is revealed only via illustration. Picture books like *My Chair* are ideal for multiple readings--read once for the story, another for the pictures, vocabulary, grammar, theme, implied meaning, visual language, etc. This is an enjoyable way to establish a practice of close reading, a goal of the Common Core curriculum.

Picture books often imply more than they say, and some of the best children's picture books also function as allegories. *Two Little Birds* has a literal meaning for children, the migration of birds, and another for grownups: children grow, become capable, and leave the nest. The variety and depth of communication possible with picture books are what make them a joy and a challenge to create.

Picture books are beautiful, fun, and, it pains me to say, Good For You.

Read pictures! and have fun doing it.