

# **Let The Duck Float**

## **Illustration, Mindfulness and Engagement**

How Illustration Is Used Within Picture Books As  
A Mindfulness Tool.

### **Research In Context**

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Bringing too much of the past with you can make it  
very difficult to move forwards.

“Whilst anxiety is a natural part of development for children it is important to teach them strategies to help deal with worry and understand when further support is needed.” - (carus, 2026)

In an increasingly modern and fast paced world, experiences of anxiety and mental health are becoming widely recognised across all ages. A method of coping with experiences of mental health and anxiety is mindfulness, which is often communicated through language based practices, something that isn't always accessible or engaging for everyone as one size does not fit all when it comes to mental health. “Mindfulness and the arts can play an important role in psychospiritual growth and the evolution of human consciousness. - (Zuzana Jančík Petrová, Vašíková and Žáková, 2025, Lawrence Peltz, MD) And, illustration provides an immediate, sensory and emotionally resonant approach which is “normalising feelings and offering comfort.” - (carus, 2026) This essay explores how illustration can function as a visual language for mindfulness, communicating emotional grounding techniques inviting feelings of calmness and safety. Through the visual communication of colour, form, composition, pacing, illustration used in this way acts as a gentle and powerful aid to not only represent emotions but actively influence how they are experienced as ‘a book can be a lifeline for a child to process and understand what they’re going through.’ - (BookTrust, 2025). This essay considers how these visual tools and elements can create a sense of stillness, reassurance and calm, inviting the audience to engage with emotional content in an intuitive and reflective way. The three key words this essay is centered around are; illustration,

mindfulness and engagement, this essay will discuss how mindfulness and illustration is engaged with.

By analysing a selection of illustrated works, including both children's picture books such as *My Heart* by Corinna Luyken and *Mr Huff* by Anna Walker and more universally targeted texts such as *A Beautiful World* by James Norbury, This essay will also examine how different illustration approaches visual storytelling to communicate mindfulness across varied audiences. In doing so, it will argue that illustration has the capacity and influence to not just act as a story telling device but as a form of emotional support that encourages reflection and a gentle comfort.

Experiences of anxiety and mental health have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society, affecting children and adults in different but interconnected ways. The modern day social pressure and the constant exposure to information can make it difficult for individuals to regulate and process their emotions effectively. As a result, there has been a growing emphasis on mindfulness as a mental health tool which aids with self awareness, emotional resilience and a vital sense of calm, *‘through techniques such as focused breathing and exploring sensations in the body, has been clinically shown to reduce anxiety’* (Catherine-Nasskau, 2019)

Mindfulness practices encourages individuals to slow down, teaches grounding techniques and promotes individuals to observe their thoughts without judgement and remain present within their immediate environment. However, these mindfulness practices are often communicated through verbal or written guidance which can be an obstacle particularly for younger audiences. This highlights a gap in how

mindfulness is provided, suggesting a need for more accessible, intuitive and engaging media and forms of mindfulness communication.

This is where illustration offers a unique response to this gap, unlike text based approaches, visual imagery can communicate emotion and express comfort instantly in a more universal way to a wide range of audiences - regardless of age or reading ability.

### Illustration

Illustration functions as a form of visual language, communicating emotion in an immediate and intuitive way, unlike text which requires interpretation through reading, 'it is a versatile discipline' (Meuwissen, 2025) Imagery can be understood almost instantly, allowing readers to respond on an instinctive and sensory level.

This is what makes illustration effective when communicating mindfulness as there is an emphasis and engagement centered around not only understanding and learning but feeling.

Key visual devices such as colour, composition and form play a significant role in shaping this emotional response. Desaturated and soft colour palettes are often associated with calmness and stability as it reduces visual intensity and creates a soothing atmosphere. 'application of colors are not only aesthetically important but also essential for achieving emotional and psychological impact.' (Galantusz Grafika, 2025) similarly, the use of rounded natural shapes can create a sense of safety and approachability whilst harsher, angular forms may introduce tension or trigger

anxiety. Through these purposeful style choices, illustration can be a significant aid to guide the viewer's emotional state without the need for explicit instruction.

Composition further contributes to the reader's experience through the use of negative space. Minimal layouts allow the viewer's eye to rest, creating a breathing space without too much visual stimulation. 'By arranging elements strategically, an artist can lead the viewer through the artwork in a deliberate sequence.' (House, 2025) this intentional sense of space mirrors the principles of mindfulness, encouraging a slower pace of engagement and reduces cognitive overwhelm.

Additionally, pacing within illustrated works plays a crucial role in emotional communication. Simple visual progression and repetitive imagery contribute to a slower, more meditative reading experience, 'also how the reader feels while journeying through the pages.' (Greene, 2023)

This pacing invites the reader to remain present within each moment and page, reinforcing a sense of calm and stillness. As a result, illustration does not simply aid to mindfulness text but actively participates in creating a mindfulness experience.

Each of these principles can be observed in the book *A Beautiful World* by James Norbury, where minimal composition and gentle colour palettes are used to create a calm, quiet reflective atmosphere. The restrained use of detail allows each image to feel open rather than over stimulating, encouraging the viewer to slow down, remain in the present and engage thoughtfully. Norbury doesn't direct the reader through a fast paced narrative, the illustrations create moments of stillness - aligning closely

with the fundamental teachings of mindfulness. Norbury often utilises soft watercolour washes, limited natural colour palettes and delicate line work. This is a deliberate reduction, allowing space for reflection and emotional interpretation.

Throughout the book *a Beautiful World*, Norbury alternates between highly detailed environmental scenes and minimal scenes that have less colour and solely focuses on the characters to mirror the character's emotions with the message accompanying it, creating a sense of pause and interpretation. The absence of visual stimulation allows the message to resonate deeply, demonstrating how illustration can amplify emotional meaning through restraint and deliberate consideration to mindfulness.

Furthermore, Norbury introduces detailed backgrounds but they do not overwhelm the narrative but support and expand it. Natural environments such as trees, water and animals act as visual metaphors for growth, change and rebirth. These settings ground the philosophical text and together, they aid and provide a visual mindfulness teaching with gentle and thoughtful guidance. In this way. Illustration becomes a bridge between internal emotional states and the external world, reinforcing mindfulness through both imagery and atmosphere.



So much ruin, so much loss,  
yet still...so much beauty.



From the ancient ruins a tree took root.  
Even in loss, life finds a way.

Figure 1

(Norbury 2025 p.26 p.27 A Beautiful World)

This interplay is particularly evident in this spread, (Figure 1). On the left page, a predominantly monochromatic composition depicts the Panda strolling through a river, surrounded by dark ink tones and a distant, misty and abandoned structure. The use of black and grey reflects themes of loss, heaviness, depression reinforced by the text “so much ruin, so much loss, yet still so much beauty” (Norbury 2025) the limited palette and soft blended tones evokes a sense of stillness, allowing the viewer time to reflect and sit within the emotional space of the image. This is also a

gentle way of providing comfort to the reader as the characters are traversing through the same journey as the reader.

In contrast, the right page introduces colour and warmth through the presence of a tree growing around architectural ruins. The gentle greens and Earthy tones suggest renewal and life, visually echoing the idea that 'even in loss, life finds a way' the transition from monochrome to colour across the spread can be interpreted as a journey from heaviness towards acceptance and growth. This colour shift demonstrates how colour can be used narratively to guide emotional progression without explanation or visual clutter.

### Mindfulness

At its core, mindfulness explores awareness, presence and the acceptance of emotional experience without judgement or resistance, encouraging a person to sit with their emotions without attempting to control or suppress internal experiences. Mindfulness also emphasises not achieving constant calm, but developing a gentle attentiveness to one's inner state, creating a space between experience and reaction - 'reduce stress or anxiety, sleep better and might help us cope better with difficult situations.' (NHS, 2023)

Within illustrated works such as *my Heart* by corinna luyken, these mindfulness principles are communicated not through instruction but through visual and narrative suggestion. The book creates an environment in which the reader can experience

moments of reflection, stillness and emotional recognition through the interplay of illustration and text.



(Figure 2)

(Luyken 2019 p.11 My Heart)

Luykens illustrative style plays a significant role in demonstrating these mindfulness practices. The image above, demonstrates a delicate balance between detail and space - large areas of soft textured space surround an interaction between two small figures. This use of negative space encourages the viewer to slow down and engage with the mindfulness practices presented through emphasising space and being present in a single moment. The figures are rendered simply, without overwhelming detail, allowing the emotional exchange between them to remain clear and accessible.

Moreover, colour is used sparingly yet meaningfully. The colour palette is controlled, containing muted greys and soft greens which create a sense of calm while the gentle bursts of yellow act as points of warmth and connection - and can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for growth and hope. This reinforces the accompanying text “and grow.” This restrained use of colour prevents over stimulation and guides the viewer towards quiet awareness of change and development.

The presence of the tree further strengthened the mindful qualities of the image as a recurring natural symbol, it reflects ideals of hope, stability and continuity. This grounds the emotional narrative in a familiar and organic form. Also, the way the tree forms a canopy of yellow stretching across the composition creates a sense of shelter and calm, while also directing the viewers gaze across the page gently. This encourages a slower, more contemplative form of consuming mindfulness.

Lastly, the simplicity of both text and image allows space for personal interpretation. The book does not dictate how the reader should feel but offers a visual and emotional framework through colour and composition within which those feelings can be explored. This is a central ideology of mindfulness, where the aim is not to control or suppress emotion, but to acknowledge and observe it. Through its understated approach, *My Heart* demonstrates how illustration can become an active participant in creating a mindful and emotionally supportive experience.

In contrast to more reflective works such as *A Beautiful World* by James Norbury, Luyken's approach is communicated more stylised and more directly, particularly to younger audiences. But both encourage a similar emphasis on emotional awareness and gentle reflection.

### Engagement

Engagement plays a crucial role in how effectively mindfulness is communicated through illustration, particularly within children's books where visual interaction often proceeds textual understanding. In works such as *My Heart* and *Mr Huff*, illustration actively invites the reader into the emotional experience, not just positioning them as passive observers.

In *My Heart*, engagement is achieved through relatability and visual metaphors. The sequence of small everyday events paired with the presence of dark cloud like forms above the character is externalising internal emotion. This allows the reader, particularly children, to recognise and connect with feelings they may not be able to

articulate. Another visual aid that encourages engagement are the minimal backgrounds and soft colour palettes which prevent distraction and directs focus toward the emotional narrative and communicates a reflective and gentle participation in the reading process.

The character design of Mr Huff is significant in shaping how children engage with the book. Despite representing difficult emotions such as anxiety or frustration, his illustration remains soft, rounded and visually gentle rather than threatening and foreboding. The muted grey tones, simple facial features and textured edges give the character a sense of sadness rather than danger, making him approachable and almost friendly to younger readers. This softened design allows children to confront challenging feelings in a safe and comforting way, reduces fear while encouraging recognition and empathy. By personifying emotion as a gentle character rather than an abstract shape, the book creates stronger engagement, helping children to understand that uncomfortable feelings can be acknowledged and managed rather than feared, aligning closely with the teachings of mindfulness.

Moreover, Mr Huff utilises illustration to create a more direct and character driven form of engagement. In the bath scene the large looming grey figure of Mr Huff occupies the majority of the composition, physically embodying the child's emotional state, see (Figure 3). The exaggerated scale and proximity of this figure make the emotion feel immediate and unavoidable, while the smallness of the child enhances a sense of vulnerability. However, the soft colours and gentle forms prevent the image from being hostile or intimidating, it maintains a balance between tension and reassurance.



(Figure 3)

(Walker 2015 Mr Huff)

Both *My Heart* and *Mr. Huff* demonstrate how illustration can translate complex emotional experiences into accessible visual language that allows readers to engage through recognition, empathy and imagination. By externalising emotion and simplifying visual environments, these works create a space for the reader to project their own experiences onto the narrative. In doing so, emotional participation

reinforces the role of illustration as a powerful tool in supporting mindfulness and emotional understanding.

## Conclusion

In conclusion this essay has explored the relationship between illustration, engagement and mindfulness through the analysis of illustrated mental health texts such as *a Beautiful World* By James Norbury, *My Heart* by Corinna Luyken and *Mr Huff* by Anna Walker. These works demonstrate that illustration is shown to be far more than a decorative feature but a visual tool which communicates mindfulness and does so in a gentle compliment to the text through colour, composition, character design and pacing.

Each book demonstrates how engagement can be created through different illustrative approaches. Norburys reflective minimalism encourages quiet contemplation, invites readers and interpret meaning for themselves. Luykens symbolic and emotionally expressive use of colour encourages empathy and reflection, while Walker's character led storytelling offers younger audiences an accessible and relatable way to detangle emotions. In each case, engagement is achieved through narrative and the readers connection to the imagery itself whilst mindfulness teachings are woven through the text, pacing and illustrative choices.

These revelations directly inform the proposed practical project, which aims to create an illustrated picture book centered on positivity, comfort and the challenges of anxiety eased through mindfulness.

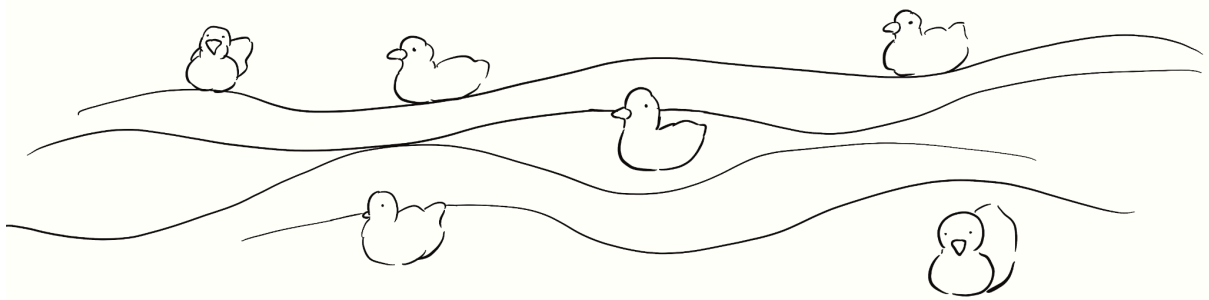
The title references the concept of allowing a rubber duck to float rather than forcing it underwater, symbolising the importance of allowing emotions to be acknowledged rather than suppressed - to leave the duck float is to be calm. This essay researched how mindfulness and illustration can work together to provide calm, the intended practice aims to do this.

Ultimately, this essay argues that when illustration successfully creates engagement, it makes visual storytelling a valuable tool for emotional support across different audiences. The images below are concepts for the intended practice based on leaving the duck float, a journey through mindfulness.

Let the Duck  
float



eventually, all waves settle



Total word count is 2572.

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