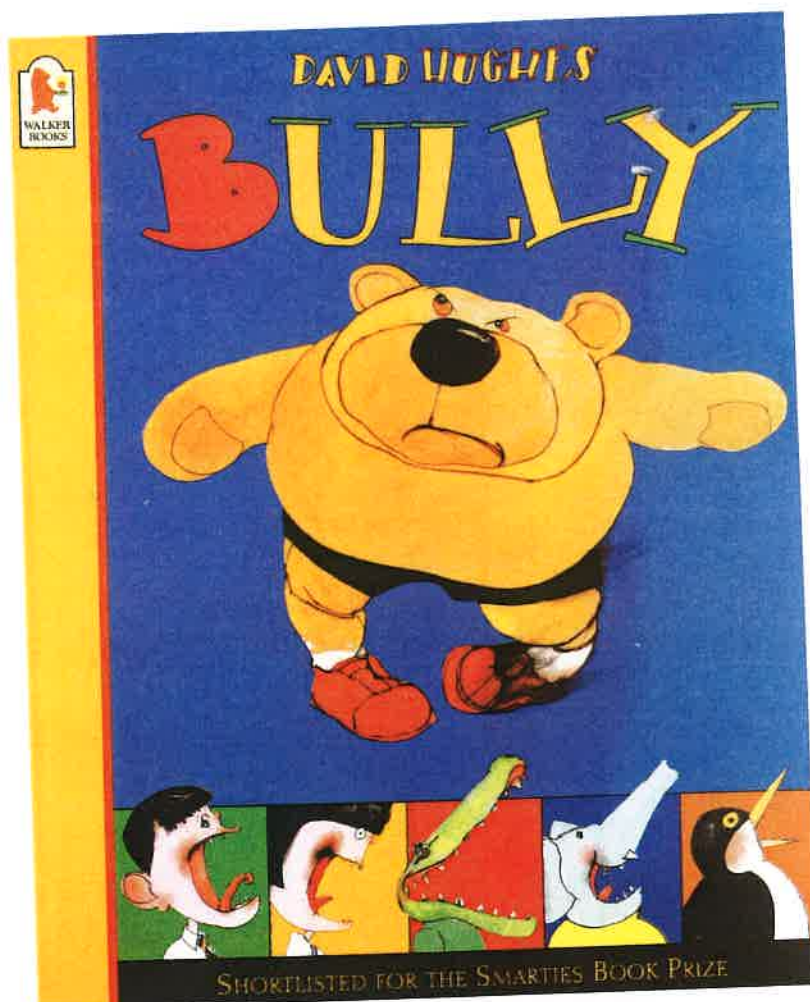




Left and below: David Hughes' stark, uncompromising cover for *Bully* (Walker Books, 1993) gives a clear indication of the picturebook's theme, which is addressed through Hughes' typically forthright graphic language.

Pig kicked Teddy.



Dog smiled a horrible smile.

Teddy ran to Elephant.



Teddy held Elephant's hand.



Girl smiled a nice smile.



Perceptions of suitable or appropriate content¹ for children's picturebooks have changed greatly over the years. They also vary considerably across cultures today. It is something of a paradox that, while the marketing departments of many publishing houses in the West insist that picturebooks come with clearly labelled, target audience ages, many artists and authors are creating crossover books (even these need to be named and labelled) that can appeal to different age groups on different levels. The picturebook as a medium of communication for all ages is an increasingly evident and welcome phenomenon, albeit one that can cause problems for booksellers in terms of where to place the books on their shelves. The CJ Picture Book Festival in South Korea celebrates this emerging trend and states in its publicity material:

Picture books, in the present era, enjoy a status as a culture form to be enjoyed by people of all ages. It is a precious and versatile art that has already left the confines of paper behind, shattering the boundaries of its own genre and fusing with various other forms of art and imagery.²

How do we as adults decide what is 'suitable' for children? Early children's stories, including many fairy tales, were often extremely savage and dark in their cautionary nature. While difficult subjects, such as death, illness, abuse and racism have been tackled in children's literature over the last 50 years, many commentators – particularly in the West – have increasingly come to believe that young children must be protected from all things unpleasant and dangerous, in both life and literature. It could be argued that this perception extends to all walks of life in our contemporary risk-averse culture. And although domestic violence, dying, sex and relationships, sadness and war have all been explored in the pages of the picturebook, some feel that childhood has become more and more sentimentalized in certain areas of visual and verbal literature. Nevertheless, there are many cultures where discussing the less cosy aspects of life (and death) in picturebooks is more commonplace than it is elsewhere, along with a reluctance to specify a target audience age – notably in Scandinavia, other parts of mainland Europe such as France, Belgium and Germany, and in the Far East, especially South Korea. In the United Kingdom, however, publishers have tended to allow difficult subjects only in works by more well-known authors such as John Burningham, David McKee and Quentin Blake – those with a long track record of sales who are seen as having earned the right to make what are regarded as more risky books. It is less easy to generalize about the United States, Canada and Australia, where there are many forces at

play across a wide range of publishing houses. On the one hand, edgy, highly experimental books are being published in all these countries, but on the other – particularly in the United States – the conservative force of the Christian right is a countervailing influence.

The reasons for these differences are too numerous to consider here, but attitudes to, and perceptions of, childhood are highly significant. We know that the notion of childhood is socially constructed and varies over time and across cultures. No book is ever socially or politically neutral, and books for the young are especially sensitive to the way a particular culture, at a specific time, views childhood. The United States is an interesting case in point, as the ideologies of, for example, downtown New York and rural West Virginia, are poles apart – but the former has more influential publishing houses. And, of course, social mores vary greatly between societies. In the context of picturebooks, this affects the extent to which it is acceptable to discuss uncomfortable subjects openly. Aesthetic sensibilities also come into play, and are influenced by each country's unique historical traditions in the graphic, decorative and fine arts.

The stylistic suitability of visual texts for children is an equally subjective and contentious matter. Many publishers and commentators express views about the suitability or otherwise of artworks for children, yet there is no definitive research that can tell us what kind of imagery is most appealing or communicative to the young eye.³ The perceived wisdom is that bright, primary colours are most effective for the very young. The difficulty is that children of traditional picturebook age tend not to have the language skills to express in words what they are receiving from an image. They can also be suggestible and prone to saying what they imagine adults want to hear. So, even with the best designed research projects, the world that children are experiencing will inevitably remain something of a mystery to us. As adults we make decisions on their behalf, even though we may struggle to retain the magical ability to read pictures that appears to come so naturally to the young.

This chapter looks at the varying ways some taboo subjects have been approached in children's picturebooks, with examples from a number of different countries.

¹ 'Content' refers here to both subject matter and the stylistic nature of the pictorial texts that convey it.

² www.cjbook.org/english/about/introduce.php

³ There has been some research into children's preferred art styles, such as *Children's Preferences in Picture Story Book Variables* (Ruth Helen Amsden, 1960) and *Effect of Art Style on Children's Picture Preferences* (Inez L. Ramsey, 1982).

TAKEN FROM: CHILDREN'S PICTUREBOOKS:
THE ART OF VISUAL STORY TELLING

MARTIN SALISBURY and MORAG STYLES



Er moest van alles geregeld worden. Moeder belde, schreef,
rende en snoot haar neus in duizend zakdoekjes.
Mare ging naar grootmoe. Grootmoe's ogen werden nat, en
daarna ook haar wangen en haar jurk. Mare had geen handen
genoeg om al dat water tegen te houden.

Straks staat de hele kamer onder water!

De vloer werd nat. Zo meteen zou het bed naar buiten drijven.
Dan varen we naar Engeland.



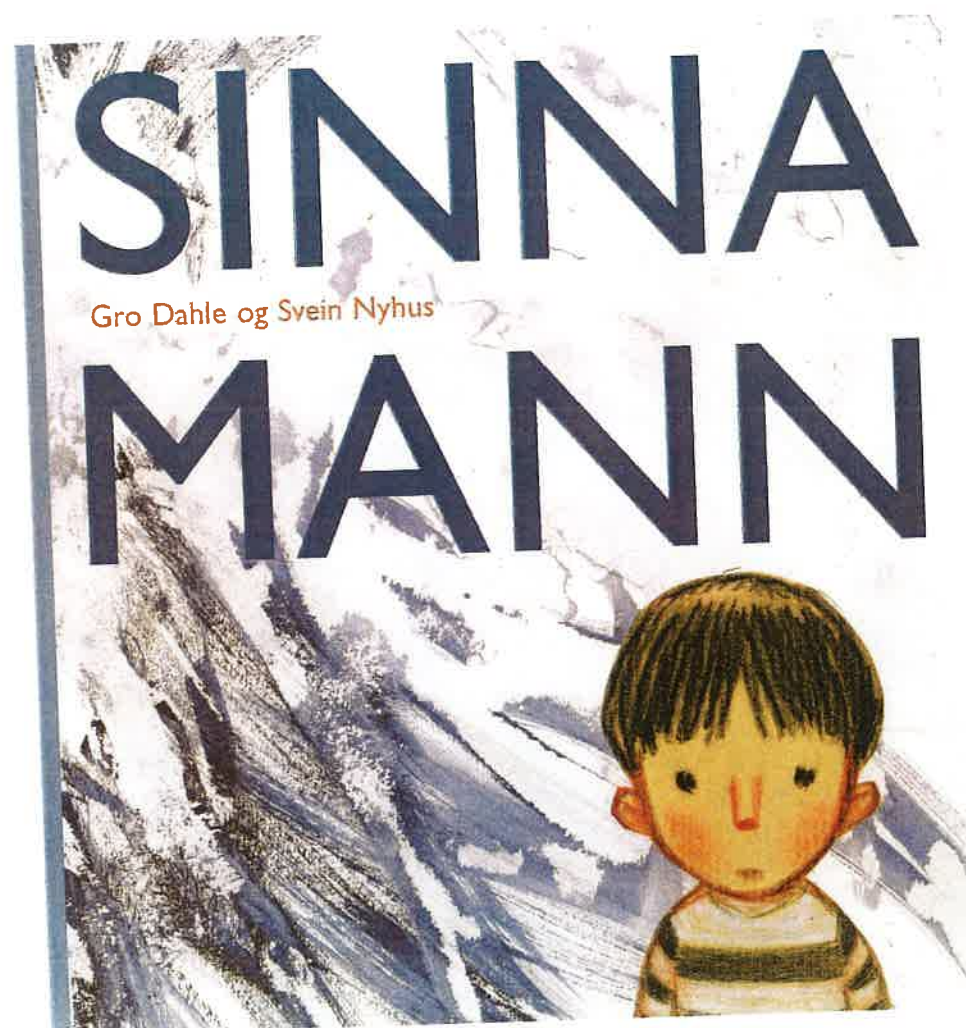
Left: Katje Vermeire's artwork for *Mare en de Dingen* (text: Tine Mortier; De Eenhoorn, 2009) sensitively explores the subject of ageing and death.

Violence

The Norwegian husband and wife team, artist Svein Nyhus and writer Gro Dahle, are well known for creating picturebooks that deal with uncomfortable themes. *Sinna Mann* (Angry Man, Cappelen, 2003) deals with domestic violence. A close working relationship between author and artist allows words and pictures to synthesize in a harrowing portrayal of the build-up of tension in the domestic environment. The growing anger of the father is described visually by the use of scale. Through the pages, the father gets bigger and bigger in relation to the mother and child. His explosive anger is reflected in burning colours. Nyhus uses visual devices such as sharp objects perched precariously on the edge of surfaces to give a heightened sense of impending violence. He says of the audience for this book:

The audience is mainly children, especially those who have experienced domestic violence and parents with mental illness. These children's books may be classified as allagerlitteratur in Norwegian, i.e. 'literature for all ages', a crossover genre, as it also has a psychological and symbolic side, which is best understood by adults. So the books have at least two levels; the concrete what-you-see aimed at children, and a deeper or higher meaning aimed at adults. The text is poetic and symbolic with a lot of verbal metaphors but also contains quotations from people with similar problems.

Right and opposite: Svein Nyhus and Gro Dahle's *Sinna Mann* uses exaggerated extremes of scale and colour to emphasize the simmering anger of the father and the vulnerability of the wife and child in this exploration of domestic violence.



Asked why he feels a picturebook was the appropriate medium for addressing such a topic, Nyhus says:

Sinna Mann was made in response to a request from a family therapist needing a simple book about children witnessing domestic violence to use as a 'conversation piece' in his talks with his clients, both children, women and men. I think he initially wanted an information book that ideally should have the potential of 'saving the world from all evil'. We could only 'offer' an artistically free fiction book as we thought the educational twist may subdue or weaken the content and impact. So this is our (i.e. my wife Gro Dahle's and my) way of trying to solve his challenge. The book has by no means become a sales hit, of course, but it has generated a lot of reaction and even been adapted into some theatrical plays and an animated film. I also think there is a slightly provocative or sensational effect when combining disturbing subjects with traditionally nice and cute children's literature. This may have helped making such serious matters more visible in the media and the public debate.

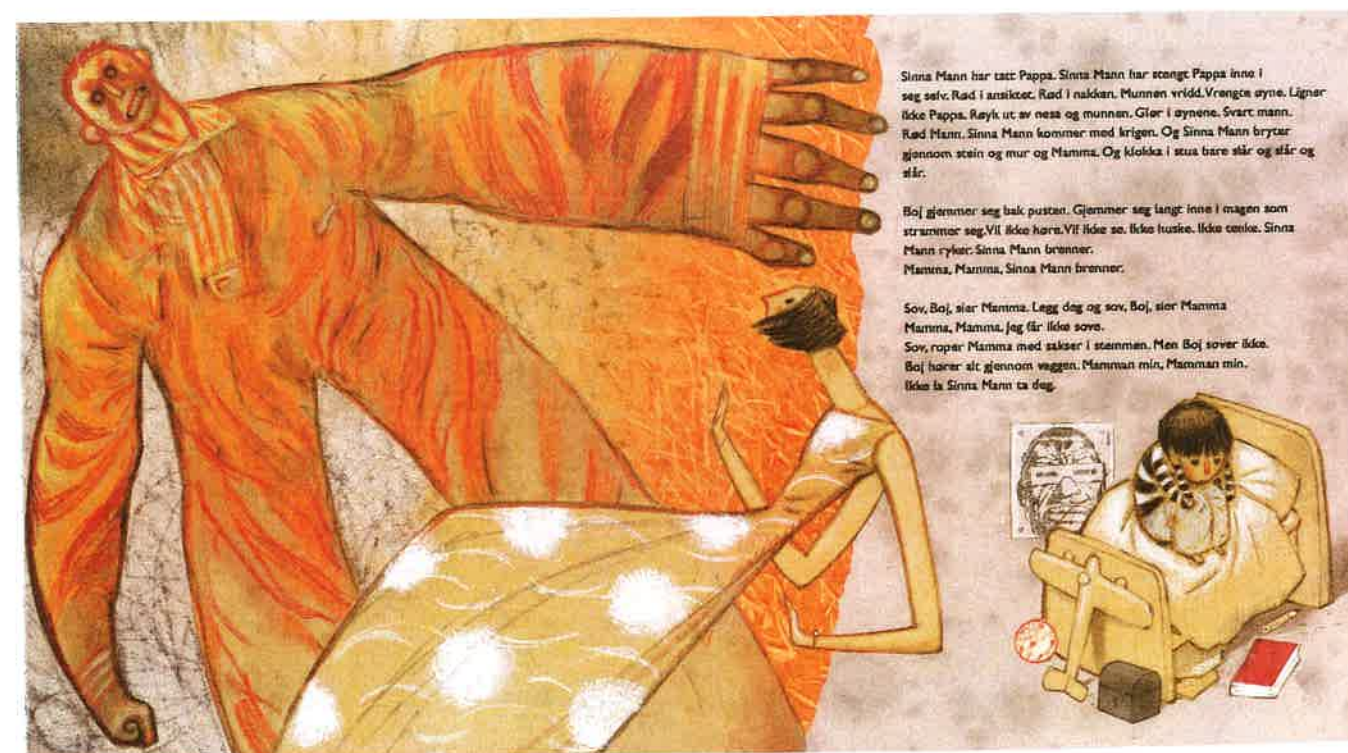
In *Håret til Mamma* (Mum's Hair, Cappelen, 2007) they explore the issue of a parent's depression from the perspective of the child. The mother's hair is used as a visual metaphor; it becomes increasingly entangled as the situation deteriorates, and the child movingly tries to 'comb out' the depression.

Håret til Mamma was also a job initiated by a therapist. As with Sinna Mann we had free hands to write and illustrate it like an ordinary and 'normal' children's book. The Norwegian government's generous financial support for new quality literature in Norwegian makes it possible to publish narrow titles without taking commercial success etc. into consideration. This way Norwegian illustrators, writers and publishers can experiment a little bit more than foreign colleagues may do.

Nyhus tends to work mainly in children's books nowadays, but previously worked for newspapers as a caricaturist and cartoonist. Clearly, he has found a natural canvas in the picturebook:

A picturebook is in many ways like a gallery wall to me, with lots of space and room to fill with my illustrations. It also has the qualities of a stage with scenography making it a small universe of its own, so to speak. I have a lot of ideas and great optimism and energy when beginning a book project, but always end up totally exhausted and frustrated with my own insufficient talent and ineffective ways of doing things.

As for the difficult issue of whether the picturebook can reach a broader audience than the traditional three- to seven-year-old readership, Nyhus is optimistic:



It is, of course, a matter of definitions. If you mean 'books with pictures' there already are a lot of them. I think the new generations mix visual culture, both popular and more serious, for children and adults alike, much more freely than before. Then there also becomes a commercial potential for books aimed at 'all ages'. Picturebooks for children are usually read aloud by adults for small children, and it is a good trick to make something for the adults as well – and not bore them with exclusively children's material. Both target groups need something to make them interested, I think. But this broad appeal and richness is, of course, a quality found in all great literature.

We have been a couple for almost 30 years, making books together since 1993. Gro's intuitive and poetic creativity has stimulated my more analytic approach and traditional style and helped me develop it in a more experimental direction. A good combination of different natures, I think.

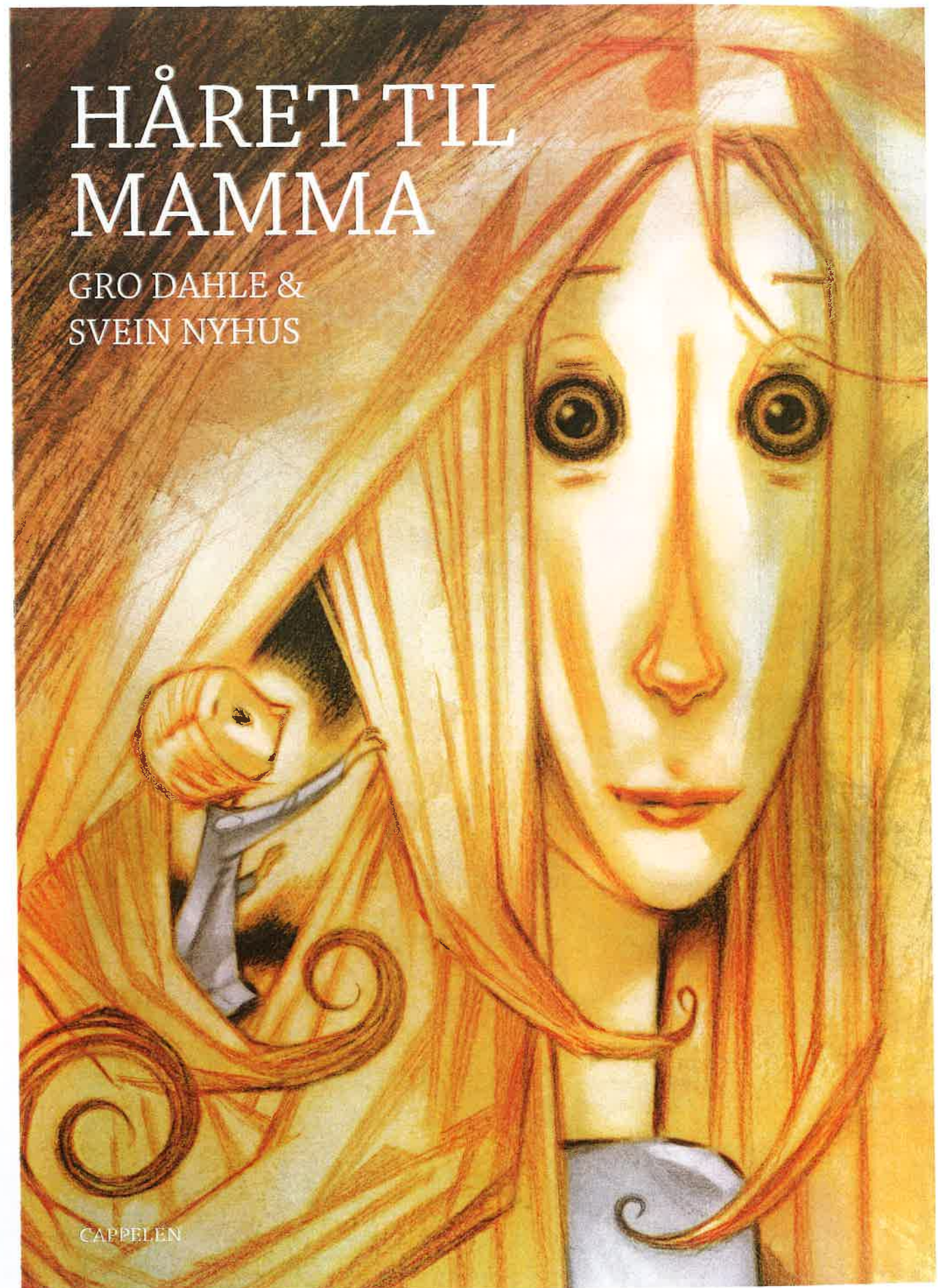
Reactions in English-speaking countries to books such as those of Dahle and Nyhus can be extreme. Some people are outraged at the idea of exposing children to their subject matter; other people (often artists and educators) despair that such books are not more widely available.

Below and opposite: In *Håret til Mamma* Nyhus and Dahle approach another sensitive issue – depression – through the visual metaphor of tangled hair.



HÅRET TIL MAMMA

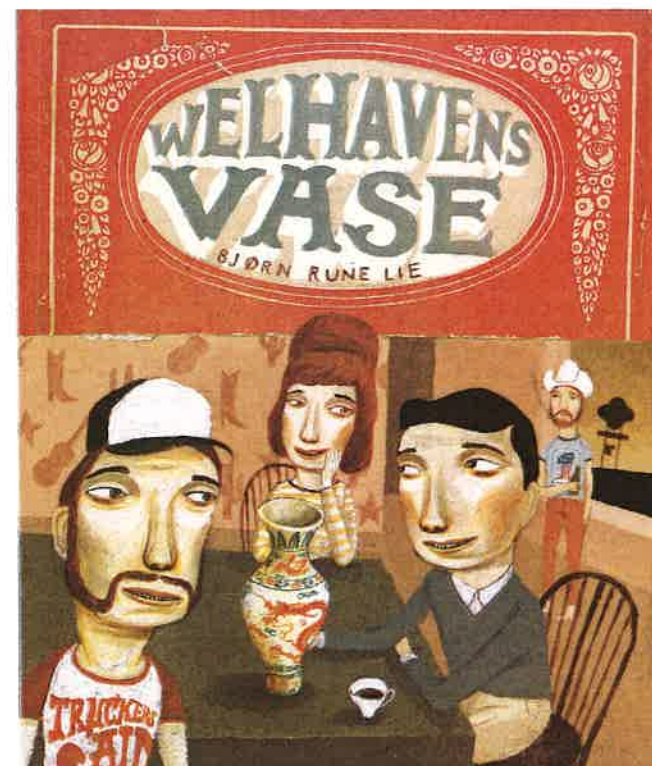
GRO DAHLE &
SVEIN NYHUS



Below and opposite: *Welhavens Vase* could be considered a picturebook for adults; there are no children in its cast and the storyline deals with the triumph of love over material possession. But the intricate visual detail appeals on many levels.



Love and sex



Bjørn Rune Lie's *Welhavens Vase* (Magicon, Norway, 2010) is a touching tale of a love that blossoms in unlikely circumstances. Welhaven, a wealthy, haughty man finds himself forced to travel in the company of a lowly truck driver when he moves his valuable possessions from one mansion to an even larger one he has acquired. He clings to his priceless Ming dynasty vase as the kindly driver chats to him. Along the way, they encounter a circus troupe, stuck at the side of the road because their truck has terminally broken down. To Welhaven's horror, the driver offers to take the troupe to its destination so that the show can go on. Welhaven falls for the contortionist and, to cut a long story short, eventually has to free her from the interior of the priceless vase by smashing it – the perfect metaphor for Welhaven's release from his own entrapment by material possessions.

As a picturebook, *Welhavens Vase* could be said to break many of the suitability rules that tend to apply to the more commercial end of the market. There are no children in evidence, and the visual and verbal texts do not make any overt concessions to an audience in the usual three- to seven-year-old age bracket. Many of the feelings and emotions expressed could be said to be primarily adult – yet the underlying message that it is important to put people ahead of possessions is a universal one. Some publishers may argue that the busy, painterly visual text is too complex for the young reader. The artist's keen interest in letterforms and graphic motifs certainly makes each page a complex fusion of word and image that is challenging for the younger child. But this is a picturebook that can be enjoyed by all ages, one that succeeds on many different levels. The story can be read out loud to the youngest children but is also filled with subtle visual references that will only register with the adult reader. Asked whether he considered the book suitable for children, Bjørn Rune Lie says:

An illustrated book tends to become a 'children's book' by default, but I normally refer to my books as 'picturebooks', because I want adults to appreciate them too. Children and 'childish adults' was the age range!

I guess the book does deal with adult concepts to an extent; love, loneliness, consumerism, class, etc. All the characters are adults. I wanted to do a book about a trucker, and when I started working on ideas, it just became set in an adult world. I got cold feet about the story at one point and did a whole new version with a boy as the protagonist, but my publishers ditched it. In the end I just tried to remember what fascinated me when I was young. My favourite books when I was little were the Serafin books by Philippe Fix. They had a lot of adult references in them which went over my head, but I absolutely loved them. The drawings are amazing!

'Style' wise I just did my own thing with this book, just trying to experiment and have fun. I was more interested in doing something I liked than trying to appeal to the sensibilities of a specific target audience. A bit self-indulgent perhaps, but it was for a small independent publisher who wanted to push things a bit.

Death and sadness

Over the years many artists and authors have attempted to tackle the subject of mortality in picturebooks. Of course, death in its generalized sense often crops up in books for the young, but using the subject as the central theme of a picturebook is a very different matter. The natural, insatiable curiosity of the young mind will always want to know more, especially about subjects parents may be inclined to avoid. In the developed world, for better or worse, many people are choosing to have children later in life. This means that instances of children of picturebook age experiencing the loss of a grandparent are becoming increasingly common.

Approaches to the subject of death have been many and varied. Most commonly perhaps, it is dealt with through a much-loved pet dying and a reassuring representation of heaven, where everyone is having a lovely time and looking down benignly and comfortingly on our worldly travails. A rather different approach can be found in Wolf Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, which was first published in Germany in 2007 as *Ente, Tod und Tulpe*. The book follows Duck as he nears the end of his life and becomes aware of Death – depicted in uncompromising form as a clothed skeleton – following him. 'Who are you? What are you up to, creeping along behind me?' asks Duck at the beginning of the book. 'Good,' comes

the reply, 'You finally noticed me. I am Death.' The pages of the book are sparsely populated, on a white background, and consists largely of the ensuing philosophical dialogue between Duck and her follower. When Duck eventually feels cold and lies lifeless, Death carries her to the water, gently places a tulip (which has hitherto provided a rare splash of warm colour on the pages) on Duck and nudges her on her way.

Many people, particularly in the English-language publishing world, may see books such as *Duck, Death and Tulip* as a form of vanity publishing, indicative of the different, northern European attitude to death, and published to win awards for artistic brilliance and sensitivity. It certainly provides an extreme contrast to some of the over-sentimental picturebooks published in the English-speaking world. Opinions differ over whether such a book has a place in a children's bookshop. Erlbruch himself has strong views. He bemoans what he describes as 'the pinky aesthetics in English picturebooks', and speculates that this may be both a cultural and a marketing phenomenon. 'Where have all the Tenniels and Shepards gone?' he asks in despair. Asked whether he thinks English-speaking children are being deprived of quality visual literature by marketing perceptions, he says: 'Absolutely so. Their childhood is being stolen by the rubbish given to them by their marketing-and-

telly-conditioned parents!' Erlbruch never consciously considers his audience when he creates books, though he hopes to initiate a dialogue between parents and children: '... a thing which has become rare nowadays in a more or less speechless society.'

Sunkyung Cho's *Blue Bird* (Yellow Stone, 2009) deals with the complex emotional issues of parent-child relationships, growing up and independence. Word and image come together to create a somewhat harrowing exploration of the ultimate love of a parent: 'letting go' and releasing her offspring only through her own death. Printed in two colours – black plus the blue of the bird – the book speaks in a poetic tone with no trace of sentimentality. Although it was inspired by a deep personal experience, the artist explains that he hopes it has wide appeal:

Individuality exists based on age, gender, and background but as human beings like any other, there also exists some form of emotional homogeneity. In addition, despite this work taking on a personal theme, it has universal appeal because it includes all the basic emotional elements that all humans share. I don't believe that explaining emotionally complex issues to children is easy, but children are well capable of experiencing an array

Below and opposite: The bleak, uncompromising visual and verbal text of Wolf Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip*.

They could see the pond far below.
There it lay, so still – and so lonely.
That's what it will be like when I'm dead, Duck thought.
The pond alone, without me.



Death stroked a few rumpled feathers back into place,
then he carried her to the great river.



He laid her gently on the water and nudged her on her way.

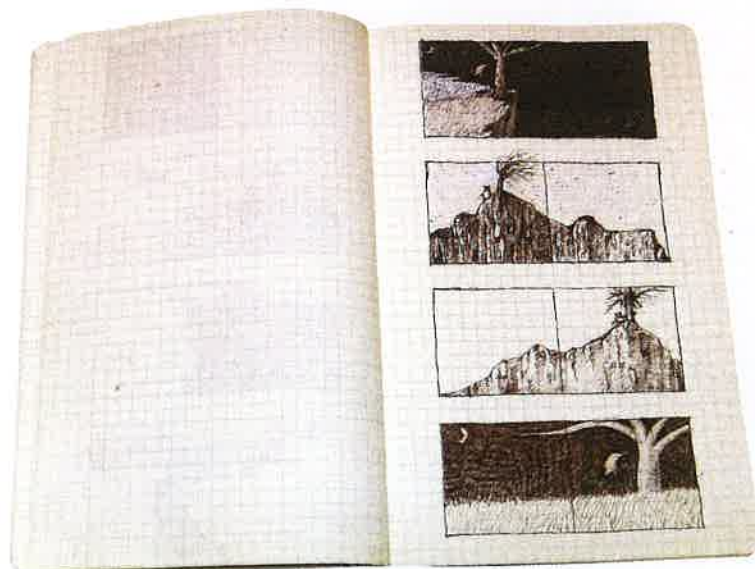
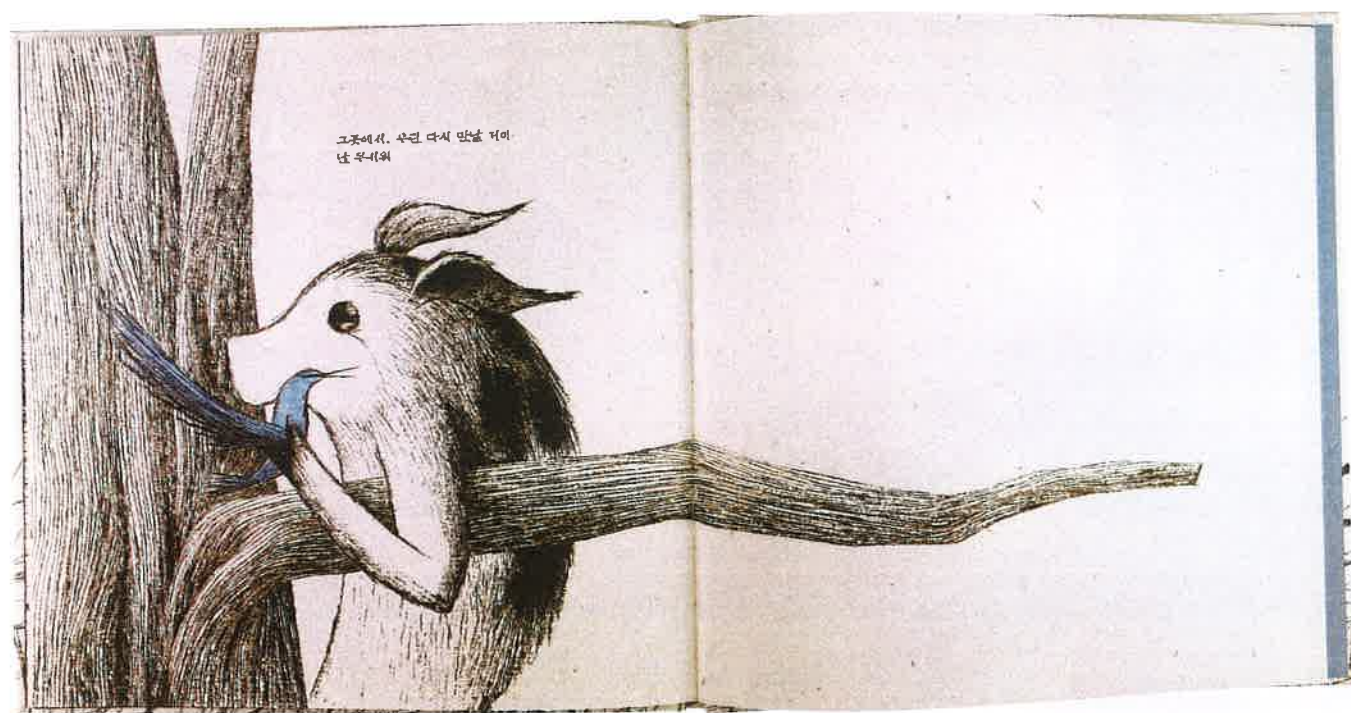


of universal human emotions. They may lack in life experiences, but they too can take part in sharing these complexities of emotions if we respect them as fellow beings that can think and reason.

Sunkyung Cho hopes picturebooks will increasingly appeal to adults: 'If picturebooks exist with contents and level that are appropriate for adults, I believe them to be another important means of communication.'

The Sad Book (Walker Books, 2004), written by the popular poet Michael Rosen (Children's Laureate 2007–09), and illustrated by Quentin Blake, takes a painful and honest look at depression, death and grieving. The book is based on his son's sudden death as a late teenager, and Rosen writes in the first person about everything from feeling that people will avoid him if he shows his sadness to moments of utter despair, mixed with happy memories of his son, accounts of trying to cope, the kindness of friends and, at the end, a little bit of hope. The

low-key but devastating darkness of parts of the written text is brilliantly mirrored in Blake's illustrations; overwhelmingly grey with a few telling, scratchy pen-and-ink lines, they depict utter misery. Blake is also good at lifting the mood with a touch of yellow, an exuberant child character, a toy raising an eyebrow to the reader, a flickering candle flame. From its murky cover with bits of rubbish strewn around a city street, to its unrelentingly grey endpapers, the book's treatment of some of the toughest emotions human beings ever suffer is frank, straightforward and true to life. It was critically acclaimed in the West and may have gone some way to breaking down the barriers outlined above.



Opposite: Sunkyung Cho's *Blue Bird* was developed from a deeply personal perspective on relationships between parents and children. The first notebook compositions shown here already demonstrate the intensity of vision that is retained in the final version.

Below: Michael Rosen's and Quentin Blake's *The Sad Book* was one of the most high-profile books to deal with the subject of death.



Man's inhumanity to man

Very different approaches to the broad subject of wars and racial tension can be seen in Armin Greder's award-winning *The Island* (first published in Germany by Saurlander Verlag in 2002 as *Die Insel*) and David McKee's *The Conquerors* (Andersen Press, 2004) and *Tusk Tusk* (Andersen Press, 1978).

The Island offers a bleak view of mankind's propensity to be influenced by a lynch mob mentality. Here is a picturebook that provides a stark contrast to the 'pinky aesthetics' bemoaned by Wolf Erlbruch. Once again, we have to look to Australasia for an English-language edition (Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2007).

With limited use of colour and dark Honoré Daumier-like drawings, Greder creates an island world that is turned upside

Below and opposite: Armin Greder offers little in the way of hope in *The Island*. A dark, classical visual tone combines with a bleak view of mankind's ability to see 'aliens' as being to blame for society's ills.



down by the arrival of a naked, wretched-looking man, washed up on the shore. What possible harm can this sorry figure cause? But gradually he becomes a focus of blame, a convenient scapegoat for all the islanders' ills, all their fears. Mothers use him as the bogeyman with which to threaten their children if they don't eat their food. *The Island* plots the gradual spread of suspicion and fear of someone different. It is a bleak book that doesn't offer any hope in the form of a traditional happy ending, but its universal message is powerfully conveyed.

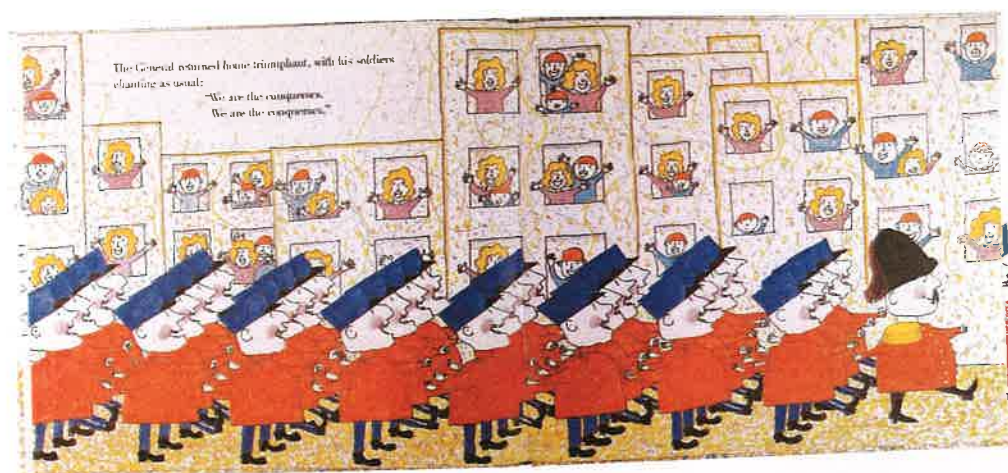
In *The Conquerors* and *Tusk Tusk* David McKee takes a much gentler look at man's apparent perennial need to invade and conquer his neighbours' territories. McKee's approach is a more typical, less direct Anglo-Saxon one than Greder's, and

uses humour and irony to tackle equally serious material. *The Conquerors* is a beautifully understated book that tells the tale of a small nation which, rather than engaging in war, prefers to devote its time to culture in the form of storytelling, singing songs and quietly celebrating its heritage. Its larger and aggressively expansionist neighbour, led by the stereotypical medal-strewn general, continually invades the nation but somehow never conquers it. The invading soldiers are greeted quietly, told stories and sung to; eventually they have such a good time that before they know it they themselves are being conquered with culture and charm. The book sends a profound message with effortless elegance.

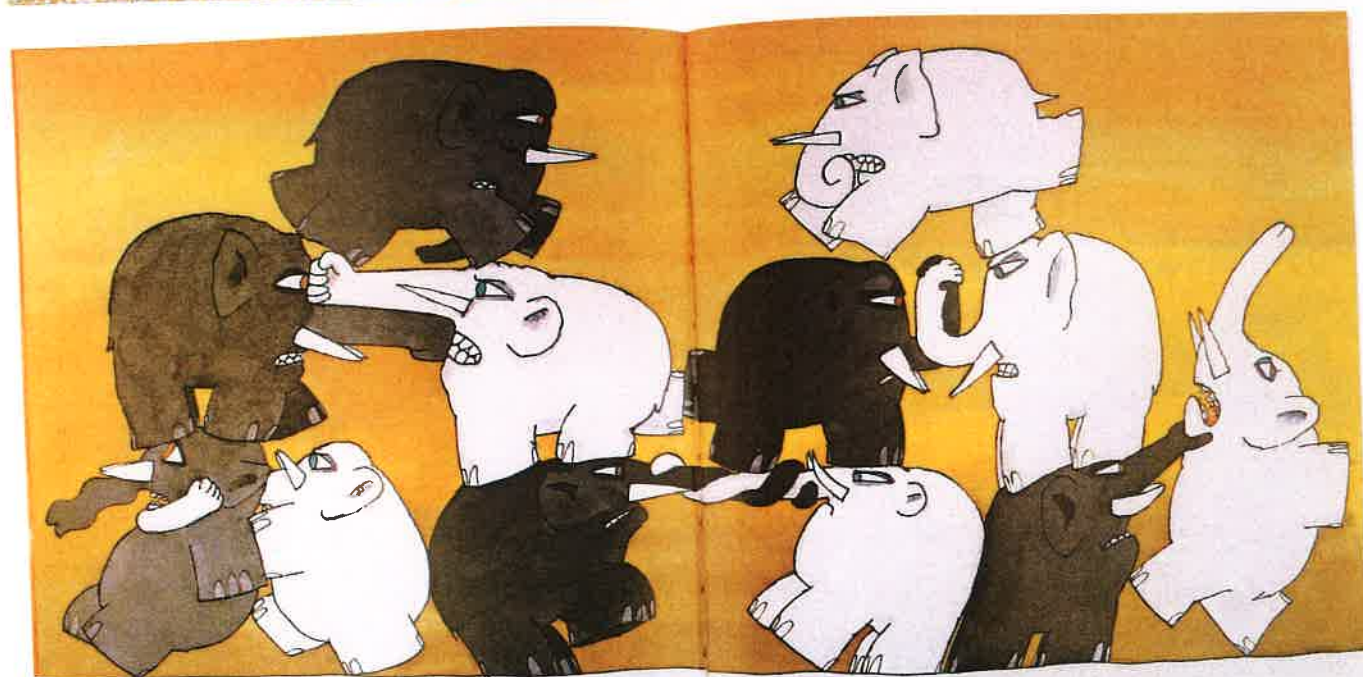


Although McKee's *Tusk Tusk* is a small picturebook that features apparently simple, sweet, stylized elephants set against a colourful jungle background, its themes are hatred, racism, war, violence, difference, outsiders. It is designed and marketed for a young audience, but McKee offers a no-holds-barred view of some of the worst aspects of humanity. The Eden-like existence of the elephants in a land bursting with gorgeous vegetation soon ends as the black elephants hate the white elephants and vice versa. Trunks turn into guns, and war and killing ensue until the environment is laid waste, and the peace-loving elephants are left no choice but to hide in the depths of the forest. Decades later, as the land once more bursts into beautiful life, grey elephants appear, the progeny of their peace-

loving forebears. The reader believes McKee will provide a happy ending after all, but the final sentence in the book is: 'But recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks.' McKee is not afraid to challenge children. He is better known for the gentler elephant series, *Elmer*, but it is worth pointing out that even here the hero is multicoloured and multicultural.



Left and below: In books such as *The Conquerors* and *Tusk Tusk*, David McKee's use of rich colour and a relatively traditional picturebook language belie the underlying seriousness of the messages that are conveyed.



and on, and on...

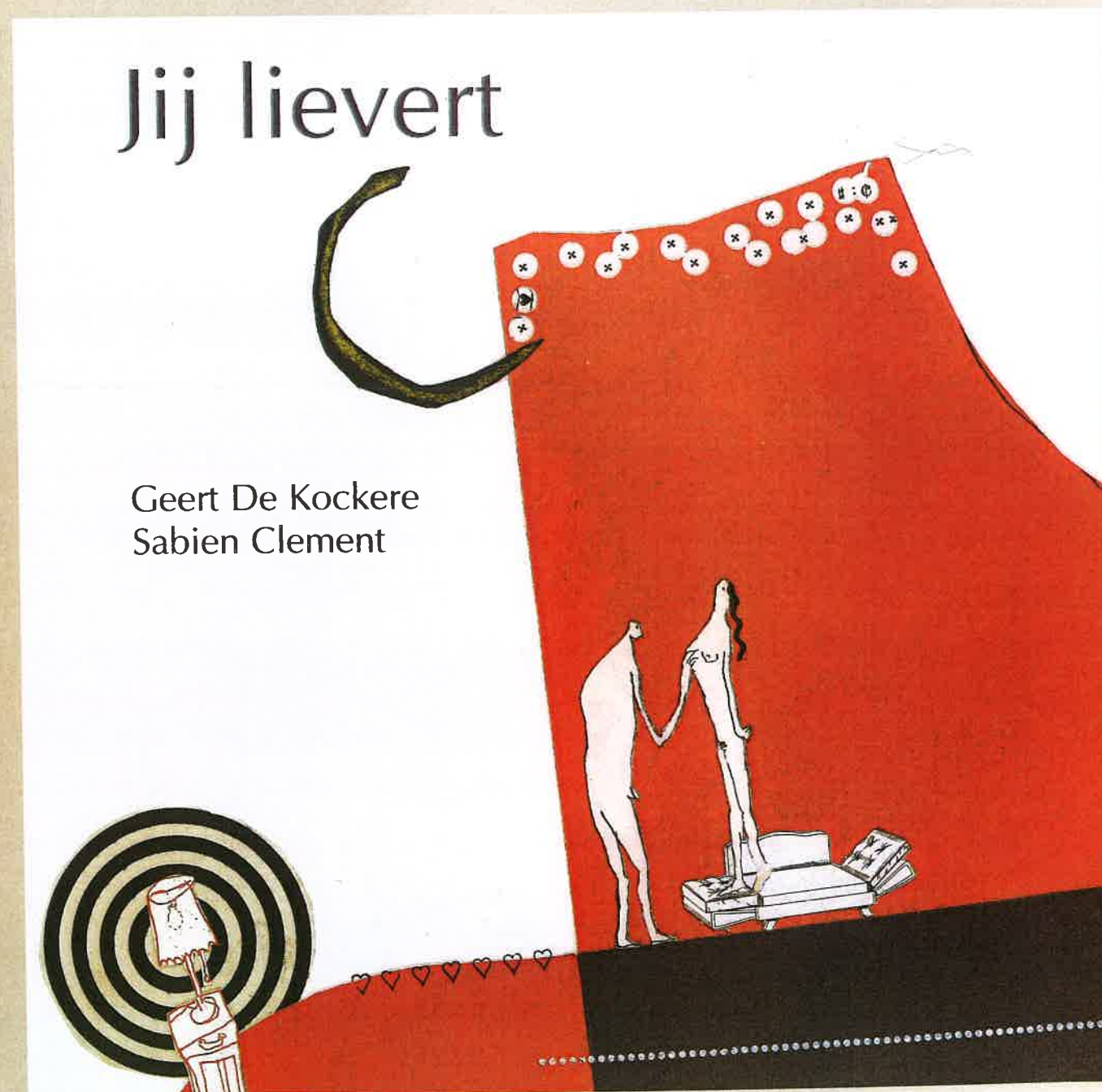
Professional case study: Portraying physical love

Sabien Clement *Jij lievert*

The issue of sex education for the young has long been a battleground, and will always provoke a wide range of views and standpoints. But the visual portrayal of physical love in a picturebook is a difficult and challenging task for any artist. In *Jij lievert* (De Eenhoorn, 2002, subsequently published as *Amourons-nous*), Sabien Clement demonstrates that it is possible to tackle the subject with sensitivity, humour and charm.

The book is a collaboration between Clement and writer Geert De Kockere, whose poems about love and being in love the artist interprets. In *Colouring Outside the Lines* (Flemish Literature Fund, 2006) Marita Vermeulen writes eloquently about Clement's illustrations:

The pen drawings and coloured shapes in Jij lievert represent human beings in all their vulnerability. The fragile lines can scarcely rein in the sensual bodies. Within the pictures there is



a constant friction between the physical and the emotional. It appears as though Clement's characters hardly have enough body and limbs to express their love and their anxiety. Arms and legs that are much too long or just too short touchingly symbolize the awkwardness of human beings trying to demonstrate their love.

It is Clement's nervous, searching line that gives the book a rare innocence and warmth. The pictures dance playfully in, out and around the text, sometimes expanding the words, sometimes offsetting them. As Vermeulen observes: 'When the text is explicit, her pictures are ambiguous; when the text is harsh, she adds gentleness.' Clement is always respectful to the spirit of the text.

Speaking about her approach to such a project, Clement makes clear the importance of understanding the author's intentions:

When a writer asks me to make illustrations for his book, first I read the text, but also I like to meet with the writer, to know his thinking, his opinions, his vision. I always ask about the age of the intended audience but when I start the work, I try not to let it rein me in too much. I just try to build an atmosphere that fits.

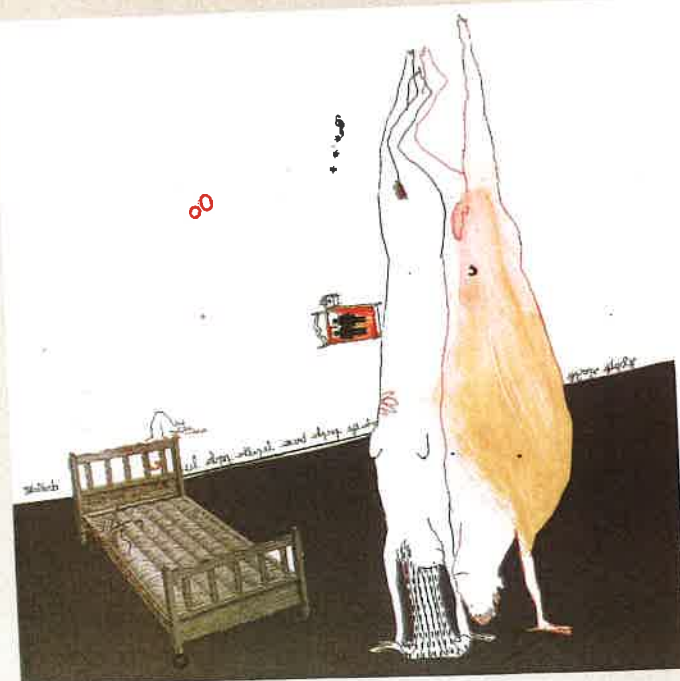
Asked about the tricky issue of defining suitability for children, she says:

Hmmm... that's very fragile. It even depends on the education of parents. A child of eight can sometimes be more grown-up than one of fourteen. I remember a girl of about eight looking at Amourons-nous. She wasn't shocked or embarrassed at all to see naked people. She acted very normally and liked it in a nice, gentle way. In my opinion, Amourons-nous isn't shocking at all. It's love described in a gentle, universal way. So in answer to the question, I would say that you cannot put in boxes what is or isn't suitable. Except when the subject is genuinely shocking.

On the broader subject of her sense of self as an artist/illustrator, Clement says:

I see myself as a 'drawer from the heart'. If this becomes a picturebook, that's fine. If it becomes a painting, that's fine too. In my free time, I draw – just for myself – on a big canvas or in a small diary book. I do life drawing just because I adore it. I like to balance on the edge of being an illustrator and a painter/creative artist. If a picturebook transcends the normal, if the pictures move you emotionally, then for me it's fine art. But I am not really concerned about the words.

Previous page and below: In *Jij lievert* (subsequently published as *Amourons-nous*), Sabien Clement's delicate drawings perfectly complement Geert De Kockere's text on the subject of love. Clement hits just the right tone of gentle humour without diminishing the seriousness of the subject.



Draai lief om,
zoek de betekenis op
en neem daarvan
het omgekeerde.

Zo is het
jou te hebben.



Ik was jou
aan het schrijven
en jij was mij
aan het lezen.

Maar lang duurde het niet.

Want ik was onleesbaar
en jij onbeschrijfelijk.