

Question 2: Analyse the work of illustrators and, particularly, author illustrators who tackle difficult, sensitive and sometimes shocking themes.

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Course: Illustration

Module: Research in context

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Word count: 2263

Humans are subject to evolve with their surrounding environment. We are influenced by what inspires and intrigues us and are naturally drawn to fresh or unorthodox theories or art which then contributes to our intellectual development. Children are no exception to this and are the purest examples of postmodern thinkers as their minds are essentially blank canvases that absorb the information provided to them, forming the foundations of who they will become. This essay will explore the works of authors and illustrators in children's literature, analysing their intricate methods of tackling difficult issues or topics in ways that children are able to digest comfortably. I shall source several articles and studies to better understand the industry and its professionals.

Despite their literal undeveloped brains, children gain complex cognitive skills and can comprehend, compartmentalise and categorise information, but are completely unable to rationalise their emotions, resulting in further complexities if not properly coached through them and given appropriate regulatory skills. (Psych Central. 2022). When children are exposed to the complexities of life and are subject to strong emotion, they can go into states of overwhelm that they require a gentle guide to surpass, thus the need for constructive resources like picture books that provide them access to understanding difficult topics, i.e., mental health disorders, trauma, grief etc. At first glance of a picture book of any genre we instantly notice the art style, typography and use of colour which are the key ingredients of generating atmosphere or mood within the world of the story as well as consideration to semiotics. These elements resonate in the subconscious of children and adults alike and are crucial to consider from an illustrator's standpoint especially when the story contains difficult to digest topics that require dedicate delivery to ensure no further damage is done. As far back as foetal development, humans have the capability to recognise sounds from different sources and later, post birth can understand body language, exaggerated vocals and expressions before learning an actual language (Annis, L.F. 2019. p52). What is denoted from this is that children rely heavily on expression to communicate and learn rather than through spoken language alone (Meadows, S. 2006. P9).

Most children enjoy drawing and painting because of their expressive nature. Psychologists and therapists can decipher any underlying meaning in the form of symbolism that point towards problems that the child may be facing that need

attention, the child unknowingly expressing topics that are causing them potential mental strain because to them it is simply a fun and therapeutic activity. It is normal for children to take no consideration to immense detail, they simply draw what they feel is necessary to portray certain subject matter using basic shapes and scribbles as “convenient symbols” and paying no attention to composition, proportion and general realism (Meadows, S. 2006. P140). It is clear why illustrators tend to produce stylised works so that they can connect with the children instead of overwhelming them with true-to-life accuracy. It’s important to remember that kids thrive on fun and are led by their imaginations so feeding their minds with exciting caricatures of an otherwise serious and gloomy world can inspire their minds and help as forms of escapism, grounding strategies and education.

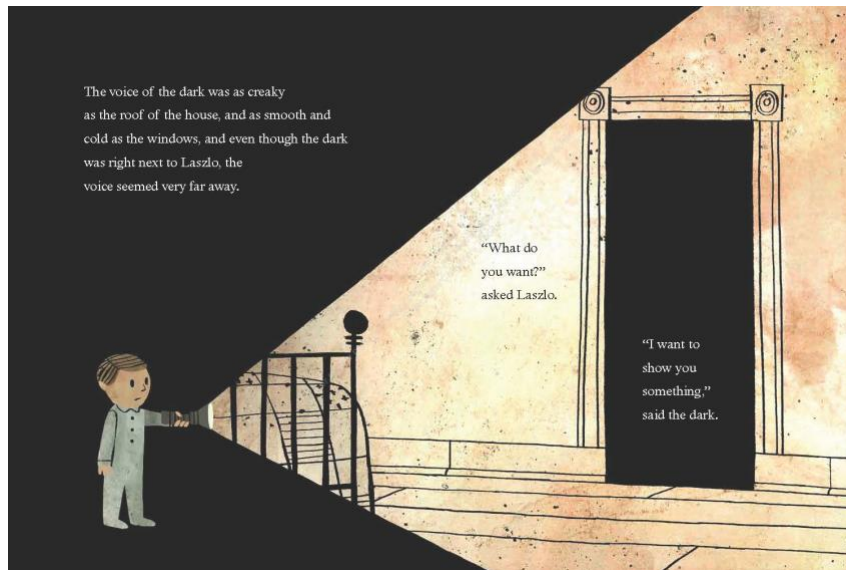
Picture books have proven themselves as helpful tools in the development of children’s learning processes since the first documented example dating back to 1658 titled; ‘John Comenius’ Orbis Sensualium Pictus (or The World of Things Obvious to the Senses drawn in Pictures’ (translated from Latin) which features colourless drawings that depict simple scenes of everyday chores, animal information and often depictions of religious scenes and almost instantly became a key method of relaying relevant information for children and many adults (McNamara, n.d.). Fables could be considered the predecessors of illustrated stories due to their communication of specific ideas or truths through the means of metaphor and fictitious scenarios involving non-human characters. Though they did not feature any illustrations, they certainly left one with a lot to think about (Perry, Babrius and Phaedrus, 1965). It should be noted that children were not the target audiences of fables, but the use of imagination and wisdom could arguably have inspired the creation of picture books.



figure1) Ernst Hiemer and Philipp Rupprecht 1938. *Der Giftpilz*

Picture books have shown to be applied in a multitude of areas of education, however not all recorded instances have been. During Nazi Germany, harmful propaganda was produced targeting Jewish people and portraying them as grotesque villains to manipulate the public and instil fear that would allow the rise of the Aryan race. A children's picture book titled 'the poisonous mushroom' portrays Jewish people as wicked, treacherous and cunning illustrating them with grotesquely exaggerated body parts and shapes that we subconsciously associate with villainous characters in cartoons and other media (fig1). A lot of this sort of media put these exaggerated caricatures of Jewish people in situations where they are an obvious threat to children, which lead to parents developing fears for their children's safety, whether actively or subconsciously. As mentioned prior, children communicate through expression and can notice even the slightest emotional reaction or shift so if their parents are afraid, they should be too. The process heavily relies on the dehumanisation of these people by comparing them to cartoon villains and assigning labels such as 'thieving', 'lying' and 'poisonous'. It is key to analyse instances such as this to truly understand how much of an impact illustrators and authors have, simply by giving context to an existing subject.

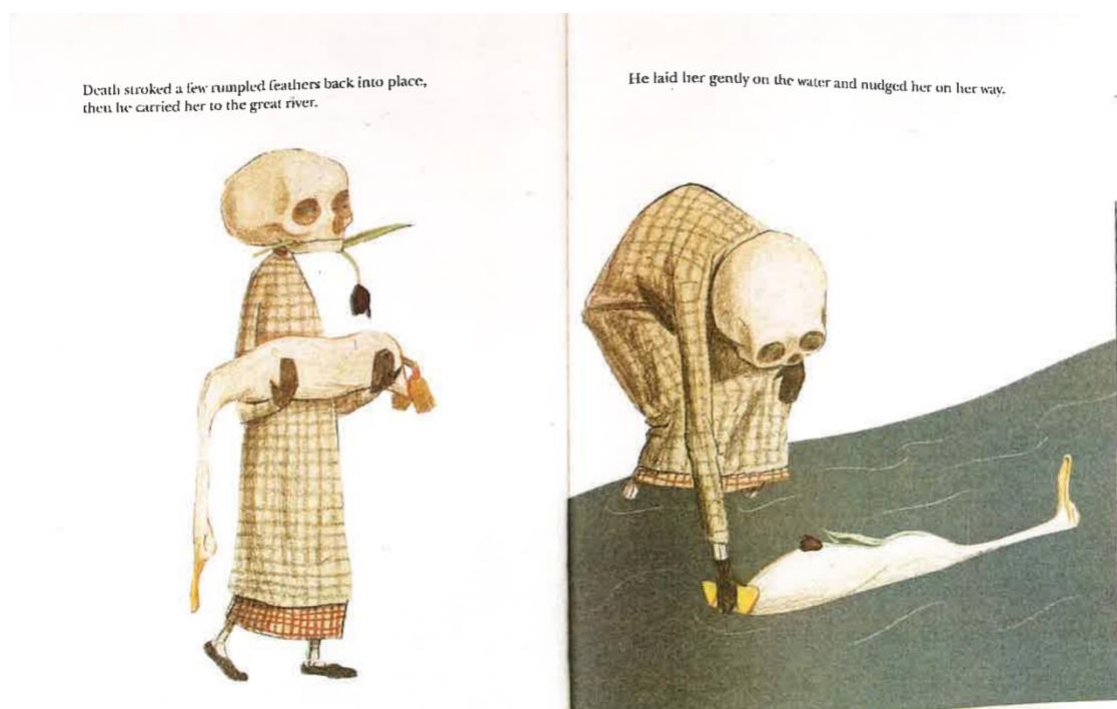
'The true story of the 3 little pigs' written by John Szieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith is a retelling of the classic 'three little pigs' story but with a twist. The story is told from the point of view of the Wolf. The story is a perfect example of a postmodern reboot, making self-aware jokes, occasionally breaking the fourth wall and being brutal but fair. Szieszka, the author wrote "...it's not my fault wolves eat cute little animals like bunnies and sheep and pigs. that's just the way we are. If cheeseburgers were cute, folks would probably think you were big and bad, too", a quote from the wolf near the beginning of the story. This comment is delightfully blunt and calls out the reader for their lack of self-awareness and borderline hypocrisy, provoking an epiphany and letting them empathise with the once considered protagonist of a story they've grown used to. The wolf makes casual comments to how he ate the pigs since they'd otherwise go to waste, as casually as they would eat animal meat. This retelling of a known story teaches a niche but valuable lesson of self-reflection and different perspectives. It challenges the unspoken laws of a common narrative by providing the established villain with more character depth and relatability, helping them develop empathy towards others and themselves.



Lemony Snicket. John Klassen (2019) *The dark*

The dark is a beautiful story of a little boy navigating his fear of the dark. It's a simple enough concept, yet the author and illustrator manage to create so much depth and suspense with simple yet effective methods. For starters, the design for the main character is stylised and loose just like the art style. Lazlo is a small, cute boy wearing a matching pyjama set and simple facial features portrayed by simple lines and dots. Lazlo constantly has an uncertain expression that when combined with his other design elements makes him vulnerable and innocent looking. This design choice was used to instil a feeling of pity or desire to protect him. Klassen uses what appears to be a blend of traditional media and digital denoted from the precise juxtaposed tones and shades. He cleverly uses negative space for the dark areas of the house, with only a small portion of the pages having any visible subject matter the parts of the house that are visible are hand drawn with black ink with a light colour wash of earthy tones that feel comfortable and cosy. The immense deep black that covers the unlit parts of the house are seamless. No gradual shading just pure black darkness which emphasises the extremity of Lazlo's fear. The story follows a linear narrative from Lazlo who talks through his fear and hyper fixation of the dark. We only ever see Lazlo throughout this story which evokes an overwhelming feeling of loneliness and isolation, as if he is completely alone with his fears. As the story progresses, Lazlo journeys through his silent house with the voice of the darkness guiding him. The composition of the typography makes it so that the words spoken

by “the dark” are written in white and always placed on the black parts of the page, as if coming from within. Lazlo’s speech is written on the illuminated parts of the pages but in black colour font and both character’s text remains the same size and font, which suggests that the characters were speaking quietly or gently. The beauty of this story is the way it is suggested that Lazlo is not entirely as alone as he feels, the dark reassuring him that it means no harm to him and acting as the only other character in the story. After Lazlo appears to overcome his fear of the dark, he stops hearing it talking to him which could suggest that the dark was not a sentient entity but rather Lazlo’s bravery manifesting as a comforting presence that helps him to maturely guide himself through his fear. Whether or not the story has hidden messages and meanings, the children reading can find comfort following this brave boy and the example he sets by expressing his fear and gently taking the necessary steps to overcome it or at least reduce the discomfort it was causing. Children respond well to having their feelings recognised or validated, especially when they have a character or role model to follow in the footsteps of (Sharp. 2019). Having a child learn empathy towards their favourite characters or even villainous characters as portrayed in the retelling of the ‘three little pigs’ story can enhance their compassion towards their peers and help with their self-confidence, learning that their feelings are important which will benefit in their emotional regulation and rationalising skills.



(Wolf Erlbruch and Chidgey, 2018)

Children are given different opportunities, strengths and weaknesses, privileges and disadvantages and are still vulnerable to unfortunate circumstance like death.

Approaching the complex and delicate issue of death with a child is not an easy process. One must consider their choice of words and own inner acceptance of death before attempting to help another through the grieving process. Bibliotherapy is an encouraged method of therapy for children that are suffering with grief. The process involves a trained mental health clinician working closely with a child and reading relevant picture books that they can connect with gently instead of overwhelming them further (Susan Elswick, 2018).

Erlbruch's '*duck death and the tulip*' is an example of a picture book that tackles a sensitive issue like death and presenting it as something that very much exists but isn't a threat. The story follows the friendship of a charismatic duck and a personification of death itself. Duck's initial reaction was pure terror but after speaking with death she quickly grew comfortable with him. Duck asks various questions to death and receives no real satisfying answers as it seems death knows as much as she does. The reader of this story would most likely be thinking the same questions as duck and so gain satisfaction when she asks, only to be reminded that it is in fact all just a story and the author does not have the answers to life's biggest questions. The whole story treats death as a completely natural force, as one would treat any common occurrence in life. Seeing death reimagined as a friendly, gentle companion as opposed to typical incarnations of a malevolent spirit, bent on chaos enforces the belief that death is truly nothing to fear as it is as normal as everything else that occurs in life. The final scene is a bittersweet moment where death gently sets duck off down a river with a tulip as a final gesture of affection. There is no grand finale for duck, just a peaceful end to her story. The semiotics help to portray a delicate and gentle feel in the subject matter and character design. The diluted use of dull colours helps to establish the bittersweet reality of the story and emphasise the reality of the topic. Children and adults that read this book would face initial shock at the juxtaposed art style and seemingly morbid theme but will eventually grasp that the story has no intention of causing harm or distress, it aims to veraciously portray death in a straightforward and considerably blunt fashion.

Both authors and illustrators have helped pave the way for numerous breakthroughs in the cognitive development of children and adults alike. The influence that a powerful narrative has when coupled up with suitable visualisation has shown to potentially aid mankind or drive to achieve the sinister goals of the corrupt. Knowing that I can improve the quality of lives through illustrating fills me with excitement to continue my studies into my own children's picture book and hopefully eventually inspiring others. To conclude the rising movement of post-modern picture books shall hopefully be applied to the education and development of young minds, as well as tackling complex societal issues to prevent the children of the future from repeating the same mistakes of the past.

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