

Research in Context

IMAGE, BOOK, TEXT

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“If we insist on telling children that everything in the garden is lovely, we’re doing them a disservice” (Browne quoted in Crown, 2009, p. 12). Analyse the work of illustrators and, particularly, author illustrators who tackle difficult, sensitive, and sometimes shocking themes.

This essay aims to critically explore the work of illustrators and author illustrators that cover topics such as anxiety, depression and sadness. Illustrators often tackle these topics in children’s books with subtlety using metaphors in images to suggest emotions, making it more digestible for the young reader. Three books I will be analysing are *Where Happiness Begins* by author, illustrator Eva Eland, *My Monster and Me* written by Nadiya Hussain and illustrated by Ella Bailey and *The Red Tree* illustrated and written by Shaun Tan. Research suggests that books such as these are needed more than ever, one in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year (Mental health facts and statistics, 2017) and one in six school-aged children has a mental health problem (CYP Mental Health Fact sheet, 2021).

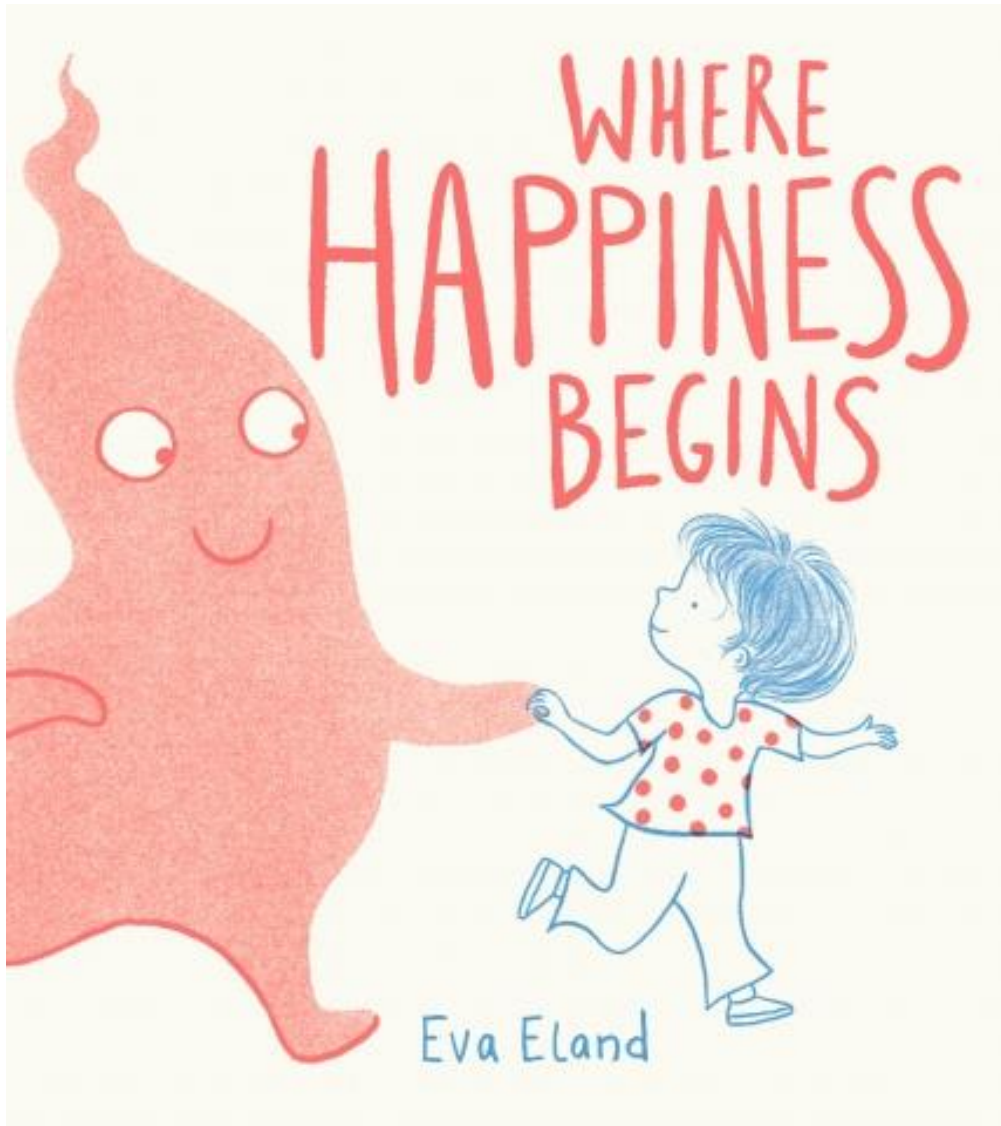


Figure 1. *Where Happiness Begins* (front cover) by Author, Illustrator Eva Eland (2021)

Eland, illustrator and author of the book *Where Happiness Begins* (Where Happiness Begins, 2021) is a picture book aimed at children ages five to seven years, it sensitively deals with feelings of sadness that a young girl is experiencing. Eland's beautiful imagery and narrative, aids children in navigating their way through emotions, teaching valuable lessons along the way, understanding sympathy and empathy for the character.



Figure 2. *Where Happiness Begins* (pages 28-29) by Author, Illustrator Eva Eland (2021)

The illustrations are richly textured, with a risograph print quality as the differing opacities of colour are overlaid. Eland further experiments with patterns and line work, especially when illustrating clothing and material. The blue colour of the text can be seen in the illustrations, which is a prominent colour as well as yellow and red. The tone of colour in parts of the illustrations are muted and soft, opting for a muted palette creates a calming effect for the viewer. However, Eland maintains the drawings with lively pops of limited saturated colour. Moreover, she utilises negative space in the book to make the illustrations the focal point, similarly to spot illustrations, each scene sits within its own parameters thus creating a dynamic visual. Using such a technique gives each of the illustrations more gravitas and importance. Bang describes the process thus, “In addition to giving elements breathing room, judicious use of whitespace can dramatically improve the visual appeal and effectiveness of figures, posters and slides” (Wong, 2010). Eland has illustrated happiness in a stylised quality in comparison with the other characters for example, happiness is a shape that is defined minimally with linework, the colour defining its shape thus blends in with the white of the background. This could distinguish it as an intangible feeling and is merely there

in the young girl's mind. Using a non-human form and the decreased opacity of the red hue, differentiates it from other characters. The red boots and spots on the top of the young girl alongside happiness which is also red could infer that happiness was with her all along. This notion can be further solidified from the continued use of the colour red throughout the books, red is also depicted in scenes where happiness is present. The text uniquely addresses the reader in second person, with the use of "you", this narrative voice invites the reader to become the character in the book. Dr Jarmila Mildorf highlights the lack of second-person point of view narratives in literary contexts and there is little academic socio-linguistic material discussing such matter but recognises the benefits of this narrative tone to involve the reader (Jarmila Mildorf, 2012). The use of addressing the reader in second person has an instructional value, 'you' feels more personal. Eland deliberately does not name characters apart from happiness, so each reader can envision themselves as the reader further encapsulating the message.



Figure 3- *Where Happiness Begins* (pages 16-17) by Author, Illustrator Eva Eland (2021)

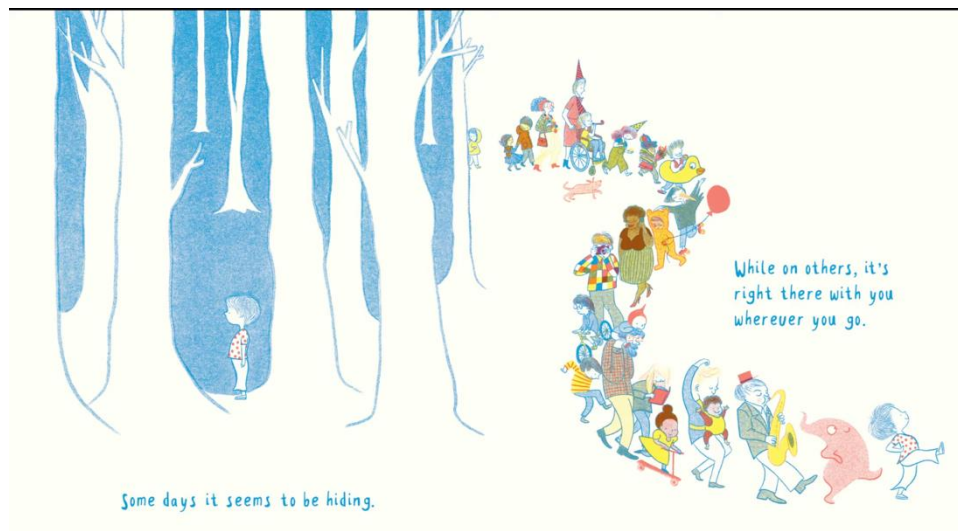


Figure 4- *Where Happiness Begins* (pages 10-11) by Author, Illustrator Eva Eland (2021)

The term iconotext refers to the relationship between image and text within picture books, the term was coined by Swedish scholar Kristin Hallberg (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2013). This book demonstrates the use of iconotext, as the text and image complement one another. Jens Thiele, much like Hallberg highlights the significance in creating “complex interrelations between word and image”, the notion of synthesising interactions within a picture book, solidifies the overall message that the author is attempting to convey. The illustrations in Eland’s book have softer edges creating a more welcoming appearance, opposed to sharper edges that could be perceived as more threatening. In addition, the red and blue hue are complimentary colours which works well with making the illustrations appear more cohesive. Overall, this book creates a cohesive message for young children dealing with new emotions and feelings.

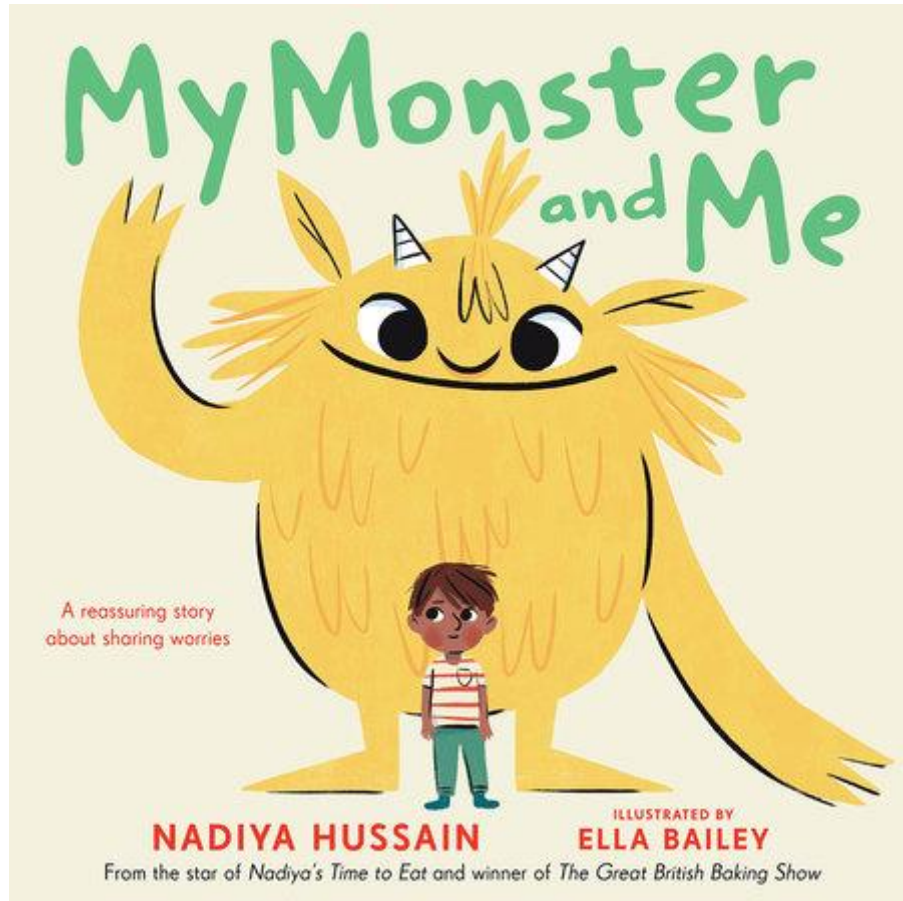


Figure 5. *My Monster and Me* by author Nadiya Hussain and Illustrator Ella Bailey (2021)



Figure 6. '*My Monster and Me*' by author Nadiya Hussain and Illustrator Ella Bailey (2021)

My Monster and Me is a story that explore feelings of sadness and anxiety, the end of the book shows a resolution to deal with such feelings. This book is aimed at readers between three to five years of age (Hussain and Bailey, 2019). Emotional disorders such as anxiety have increased in five to fifteen year olds from 4.3% in 1999 to 5.8%, and emotional disorders were the most prevalent type of disorder experienced by five to nineteen year olds in 2017, at 8.1% (Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [PAS] - NHS Digital, 2018). Evidentially, there is an increased need for books that look at emotional disorders in a sensitive manner for a younger audience. The story is about a young boy whose worry monster follows him everywhere, stopping him from doing activities he enjoys. The story highlights the importance of sharing worries and anxieties with others to lessen ones worries, and touches on techniques on how one deals with anxiety (as shown in figure 7). Like *Where Happiness Begins*, *My Monster and Me* portrays the feeling as a character which can make more sense to the young reader attempting to understand these new feelings. In addition, it is a useful tool for opening a conversation with children, in an education setting or a home. Bailey, the illustrator of the book, creates a playful expression of the monster, emphasising the eyes makes the character appear less frightening. Moreover, the yellow colour used for the monster could denote happiness so there is a playful juxtaposition, that could be intended to detract from the negative association away from the emotion of anxiety.



Figure 7. 'My Monster and Me' by author Nadiya Hussain and Illustrator Ella Bailey (2021)



Figure 8. 'My Monster and Me' by author Nadiya Hussain and Illustrator Ella Bailey (2021)



Figure 9. 'My Monster and Me' by author Nadiya Hussain and Illustrator Ella Bailey (2021)

In addition, scale is quite important throughout the book, as the little boy's worry decrease the monster decreases as well, softened by the yellow exterior (as shown in figure. 6). There is an emphasis at the beginning of the book, "it was always BIG", anxiety can feel like foreboding and a heavy weight upon the individual, it is all consuming. The overbearing and large monster reflects this in a metaphorical way. In figure 9, on the verso side the illustrations show the monster getting smaller and the text also decreases in size, this complimentary dance between image and text aligns with the overall message.

Books that deal with sensitive topics for a younger audience, integrate other aspects such as fictional experiences and entertainment. Books as such create a deeper meaning for those experiencing the same emotions and therefore would be a useful resource for younger children. Often the books show a resolution at the end, demonstrating how the character involved in an upsetting scenario deal with such emotions of sadness. Simultaneously, books that touch upon themes such as domestic abuse for example may be read to children who have not experienced it; however, it may be an educational tool for children to gain

empathy for the character. Books will hold more meaning to some, especially if they relate to the story. “The books are created by authors and artists who know something about the way in which children attempt to master the realities of their lives, as Sendak once said” (Schwarcz and Schwarcz, 1992).

In addition, these books may benefit those who do not understand these feelings on a personal level, however as feelings such as anxiety may affect their peers it can aid them in understanding and becoming more empathetic for others' emotions. “When children read books with believable characters, they can move beyond empathetic feelings toward a feeling of sympathy which leads to pre-social behaviour (Berk, p.374)” (Smith-D'Arezzo, 2006, pg. 336).



Figure 10. *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2001).

The Red Tree by Shaun Tan, in comparison to *Where Happiness Begins* and *My Monster and Me* has a far more complex narrative and surreal illustrations. *The Red Tree* illustrates a fragmented journey of a young girl experiencing isolation, loneliness and hope. These complex themes are carefully illustrated through a surreal and futuristic world, intricately employing elements of surrealism which further adds to the multi-faceted narrative. As shown in figure 10, the girl is in a paper boat looking down at the red leaf, her sad expression is reflected in the use of colour, in comparison with the dream like colours of the foreground, light washes of purple and yellow juxtapose the grey and dark tones of the boat. Looking closely at the illustration, the water has ripples, and it appears to be raining, this is another visual cue suggesting sadness.

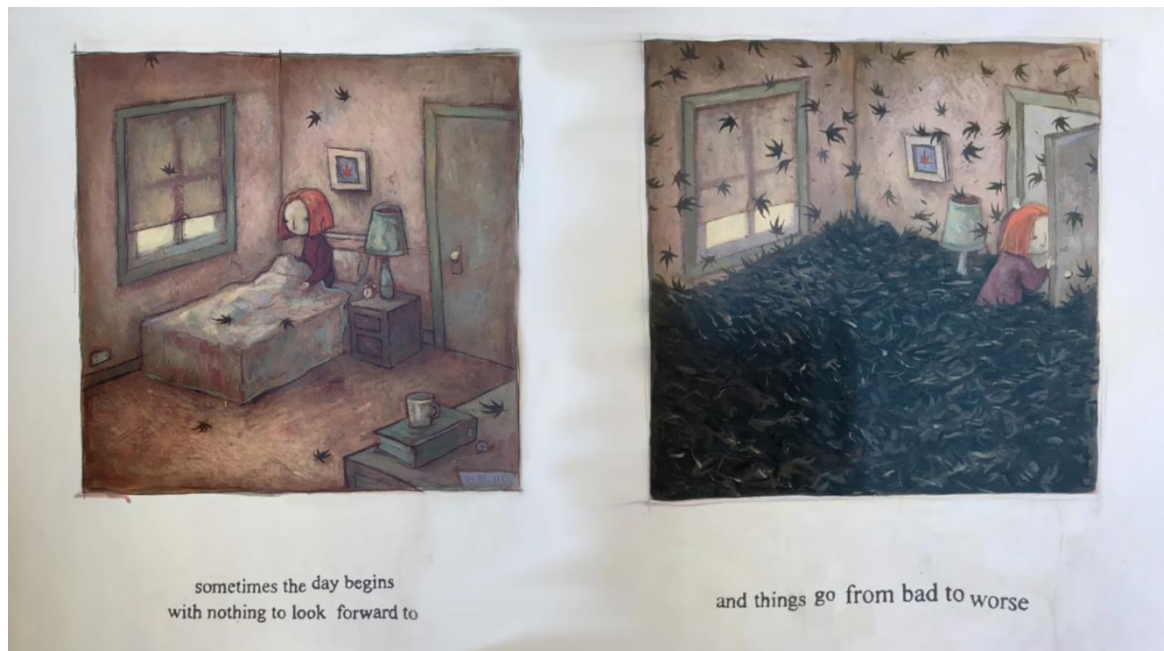


Figure 11. *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (Pages 6 and 7) (2001)

It is widely understood that depression, anxiety and other emotional disorders effect people differently, symptoms vary, and experiences are vast. Dr Benedict Smith looks at the relationship between the body and mind, depression can dictate one's movements and motivation to complete daily tasks such as getting out of bed. "Sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to" (figure 11), the verso shows the girl in bed with scattered black leaves around her, the recto side has more black leaves flooding the room. Trees and leaves have been a symbol in surrealist art for several years, a tool for poetic symbolism of life, death and hope. For example, José Roosevelt who is heavily inspired by surrealist artist Salvador Dali, often has trees in his work to symbolise the connection between humans and nature. William Gilpin describes trees as "Earth's grandest production" (Veal, 2019), the significance of trees is used in this instance of *The Red Tree* denotes hope. The red leaf is a continuous symbol throughout the book, acting as a thread binding it to the tree at the end.



Figure 12. *Autumn Story* by José Roosevelt (2002)

Tan experiments with the lack of explanation through narrative, which encourages the readers to draw their own interpretation in conjunction with the stylised and striking illustrations, "the idea of a book without a story" (Tan, n.d.). This post-modern picture book unlike traditional story books, primarily focuses on the reader's initiative to derive meaning from the images, making for a personalised experience.



Figure 13. *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2001)

Figure 13 shows the girl slogging down the built-up city, with a rather frightening fish creeping behind her, notably the other characters shown in this scene are oblivious to this creature. This is allegorical to the feeling of being unseen, bearing such sorrows drags one down, unaware, passers-by remain unaware. There is an emphasis on shadows in Tan's illustrations, the shadow of the fish reveals sharp jagged edges which only adds to the uneasy atmosphere in the image. Compositionally, each of the illustrations has a dynamic perspective bursting with unpredictability of what the next page may hold for the reader. Tan further experiments with the use of negative space, placing the text in its own situ makes for a more impactful view.



Figure 14. *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2001)



Figure 15. *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2001)



Figure 16. *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan (2001)

Notably, the type face in the book varies in scale and format, unlike *Where Happiness Begins*, where the type is neatly contained. Tan draws upon scale to further solidify the meaning of the words. Figure 14 introduces hope, the character recognises that there are happy moments in life, but to the character they appear unattainable, the scale of the character is significant throughout the book and notably in this illustration, the foreground engulfs the character as she peers out of the window to see the abstract and colourful sky. Figures 15 and 16 reflect the turbulence of the characters mind, with bizarre nuances and hidden messages, figure 15 illustrates the clashing waves upon the characters boat, creating an overwhelming view for the audience. Overall, *The Red Tree* is a surrealist and postmodern picture book that uses different components such as scale and typeface to further enhance the reader's experience. The typeface is chaotic and informal, the words vary in font size and are loosely scattered. The scale of the character is enveloped by the

vast and detailed foreground. As the book comes to an end, the pages become less chaotic and revolve more around the character in solitude, this nuanced balance further solidifies *The Red Tree* to be a post-modern book.

Overall, the three books analysed deal with difficult topics for children to comprehend.

Using the format of the book enables the reader to feel better understood. Mental health conditions and emotional disorders, can often make people feel isolated and unheard, using this as a constructive tool to open discussion in an education setting and at home.

Moreover, although aimed at those experiencing such problems, it is also a useful device to read to children to develop empathy for others. *The Red Tree* is aimed at children aged seven and up (Tan, 2001), *Where Happiness Begins* is aimed at children four to seven (Eland, 2020) and *My Monster and Me* is aimed at three to five year olds (Hussain and Bailey, 2019) there is notably a difference in complexity of metaphors offering deeper and richer meanings. *The Red Tree* comparatively blurs the line between traditional picture books and surrealism. Picture books such as these, offer a safe space for children to express their feelings from an outer perspective as well as removing the stigmatism of anxiety and depression.

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