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Question:

“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.

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Illustrators and authors have used picture books as a way to convey messages to children for centuries. One of the earliest examples of these picture books would be illustrated fairytales, which were often used to teach children valuable life lessons through the guise of an easily digestible magical tale. Nowadays, children's books are a lot more complex, and although many still do teach simple morals and values, many authors and illustrators have started creating books that tackle extremely sensitive and difficult topics such as death, abuse, or identity, either as a way to help children who do not yet understand these topics, or as a way to allow children who are struggling to identify and relate to a piece of media.

One illustrator who uses his work in this way is Shaun Tan. In his picture book *The Red Tree* Tan discusses depression and all the thoughts and feeling that come with it. He uses powerful illustrations to play with scale and make the main character seem small and overwhelmed, and he uses a dark and sometimes murky colour palette to further emphasise the feeling of sadness throughout each page. Tan uses a small orange leaf as a symbol of hope throughout the story which, although small, is always present and identifiable throughout each page.

In an interview with Stanford University Tan stated that he does not create his stories with a specific message in mind, but rather he creates "an outline of a feeling, into which different details and memories can be easily inserted." (NABIZADEH, 2015). He also describes his work as a vessel which can be used to harbour the reader's own personal thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Another aspect of Tan's work which he mentions in the interview is his imagery. He explains that his surreal imagery is not just a stylistic choice, but rather a choice that serves to further encourage the reader to make their own personal interpretations. Tan gives the specific example of a girl trapped in a bottle in one of the pages of *The Red Tree*, explaining that the imagery came from the idea of becoming completely withdrawn due to verbal abuse, however he believes that illustrating a literal scene of someone being verbally abused could alienate some readers who have never personally experienced it, so creating a surreal illustration based around an idea that readers can then identify with in their own ways is better. Tan states "Even though as a creator I began with a specific idea, I now look at the girl-in-a-bottle image and can consider many other memories, ranging from regret to grief, loneliness, fear, self-pity, survival and endurance... in fact the interpretations are potentially endless." (NABIZADEH, 2015).

Overall, Tan believes that images and stories are successful if they encourage individual thoughts and discussions from the reader rather than creating something clear that some readers might not be able to relate to. It is this mindset that makes his stories so widely appreciated and loved, despite the sometimes difficult subject matter.

Michael Rosen is another well known author who sometimes uses his work to tackle difficult themes. Although much of his work is lighthearted and more of what would normally be expected from typical children's books, works such as Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* show that he is also capable of tackling darker and more difficult themes. Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* is a deeply personal and emotional story about the death of Michael Rosen's son and how he tries to cope with the sadness that comes with such a heart wrenching event. Unlike in

Shaun Tan's work, the message and story presented in *Sad Book* is very clear cut, however the overall theme of the book is sadness and how it can affect us, which still makes it relatable. Although some people will definitely be able to identify with the feelings that come with losing a loved one, the overall message of coping with sadness is something that every single reader will be able to identify with.

While Shaun Tan's work is more abstract and metaphorical, Rosen's work is literal and deeply personal. In *The Red Tree*, lines such as 'nobody understands' or 'sometimes you wait, and wait, and wait, but nothing ever happens' (Tan, 2001) are used as a way to suggest a deeper meaning, while Michael Rosen writes directly from his own personal experiences. We can see this in lines such as 'sometimes because I'm sad I do crazy things- like shouting in the shower....banging a spoon on the table....or making my cheeks go whooph, booooph, whooph.' (Rosen and Blake, 2004). Using personal experiences seems to be a very effective way of relating to the reader. For example, someone who is reading the book may never have banged a spoon on the table because of sadness, but they will probably be able to relate to the idea of doing weird or crazy things due to being overwhelmingly sad.

Sad Book is very good at conveying the message that although dealing with sadness is completely unpredictable and different for everybody, the overall feeling of sadness is something shared that everyone is able to relate to. The illustrations in the book also help greatly to convey this message. Quentin Blake's simple but effective style gives a deeper sense of meaning to the words on the page and makes them much more impactful, particularly on certain pages where all the colour slowly becomes grey and dull to show that the sadness portrayed in the book is one that is completely and utterly overwhelming. It is interesting to note that although the author's styles are completely different from one another, both manage to be very effective ways of tackling sadness as a subject matter.

Another children's book that tackles the theme of death is Wolf Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. Unlike Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*, *Duck, Death and the Tulip* presents death in a much less depressing manner while showing that although death is sad it is something that is inevitable and should not be feared. The story follows a duck who is approached by Death. They spend some time together until eventually the duck passes away and Death sends her away down the river. Death is presented as a character who is kind but also straight to the point about what is going to happen to Duck. He helps her understand that life will take its course and, eventually, must come to an end. The final pages of the book are peaceful but bittersweet as Death watches Duck's body float away down the river and contemplates the time they spent together before her death. Although the storyline is clear, the book does not show where Duck's body goes after she is sent down the river. This is a nice way to let readers insert their own ideas and interpretations about what happens after death while also still being honest about the subject matter. No one knows what happens after death, so presenting it in this way is an effective way of showing this. Even earlier when Duck asks Death if her theories of what will happen after death are correct, there is no clear answer given.

The final page of the book shows Death surrounded by a fox and a rabbit, showing the reader that one day Death will come to them too, and that it is okay and completely natural. It is all just a part of life.

The soft, delicate colour palette and illustrations further convey the message and theme of the book. Although Death is a Skeleton, he is not a scary character, and is drawn in a way that makes him look kind and warm. There is a lot of white space around the characters which helps the reader to focus on them, and the only parts of the background that are shown are ones that are relevant to what is happening in the story. The focus on the characters really helps to show their relationship that is developing as the story progresses, and conveys a little bit more of the bittersweet feeling. The Duck and Death are the only characters that matter and have any significance until Duck's time comes and the focus moves on to Death and another animal. It is a very meaningful book that shows its message clearly and very well.

There are a number of other children's picture books that tackle death, each one being as unique as the last, and all giving their own individual meanings and ideas to the reader.

My Father's arms are a boat by Stein Erik Lunde tells the story of a young boy who seeks comfort in his father's arms on a cold winter's night. They step outside their house and explore the outside world, all while the son asks his father questions about life and death. It is a story that shows the reader the ways in which unconditional love can help us make sense of loss, sadness and anxiety. Similarly to *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, the book shows a slightly kinder yet very honest explanation about death and human mortality.

Another example is *Davey McGravy* by David Mason. This book tells the story of a young boy trying to deal with the loss of his mother. Throughout the book Davey cries, wonders, and tries to accept what has happened to his family. He seeks comfort from his father and the book shows children that loss can be very painful and hard to understand, but help from loved ones can ease the pain and can help you to overcome the difficult feelings that will be experienced with the loss of someone extremely close to them.

Of course, death is not the only mature topic that is covered in children's books. Mental illness, abuse, and trauma are just a few of the many themes that have been covered in children's books.

Angryman by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus is a good example of a book that tackles the issue of domestic abuse between a father and his family. The story centres around a young boy named Boj as he talks about the side of his father's personality he calls 'Angryman'. The book shows domestic abuse from a child's perspective and teaches abuse victims who may read the book extremely valuable messages such as the abuse they have faced not being their fault. The book also pushes the idea that victims should ask for help and that things can improve and get better.

Dahle and Nyhus created the book for group therapy sessions with people of all ages to be used as a tool to help people disassociate from their own situations and speak through the characters in the book. When asked about it, Dahle stated "The book becomes neutral ground, and the story and the main characters become replacements for one's own situation and role in the group. It's easier to talk about a character in a picture book than to talk about oneself and the family and the troubles at home." (Let's Talk Illustrators #109:

Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus, 2019). Dahle and Nyhus used quotes that children had said in therapy to make sure that they were making the book as relatable to abuse victims as possible. They used quotes such as “when dad gets quiet, I go up to my room and under the covers” and “it’s not dad, it’s angry man”. (Let's Talk Illustrators #109: Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus, 2019).

Because the book is intended for all ages, a more artistic illustration and wording style was used to make sure that it would be interesting to anyone who wanted to read it, even though the story is told from a child’s perspective. Dahle states that he wanted the illustrations to be stripped of metaphors and be more stylised so that the emphasis on the text inside the book would be greater. He also tried to make the illustrations as frightening and disturbing as he could to mirror what it would be like to witness domestic violence in real life. “The characters are easily recognizable and "child friendly," with doll-like round heads and dot eyes, almost as in a normal children's book. But the colours are dull and dark, sending out a signal of this being something serious.” (Let's Talk Illustrators #109: Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus, 2019).

When asked about the inspiration for their stories, the authors stated that they think it is very important to have picture books that show a range of emotions and situations so that children who go through frightening experiences are taken seriously and acknowledged. Dahl stated that “pain is part of childhood and part of the world as well.” (Let's Talk Illustrators #109: Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus, 2019). He also believes that children’s taste is very similar to adults – every child has a different preference. Not all children will want to read happy stories, so this is why it is so important to have a wide variety of stories available.

It is clear to see that illustrators and authors all have their own valuable opinions and ideas that influence the way they make stories. Each illustrator also has different beliefs that gives them the drive to make these stories, whether they be about giving children the same opportunities that adults get to experience stories, or believing that children should be able to relate to a story, no matter how difficult the subject matter is.

It is clear that the power of a good story should not be underestimated, and that illustrators and authors are able to create amazing, meaningful and imaginative things that can shape us and change us from childhood all the way into adulthood. Truly, no matter the subject or target age, a story book is a wonderful thing.

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