



Confirmative Praxis

“Inside”

Carys Williams
1802348

“Unfortunately for art, there is a widely held notion that visual contemplation somehow doesn’t engage our brains, but being able to make ‘deeper meaning’ from a picture rather than just settling for impressions or for what it represents, involves us emotionally and cognitively. Since pictures present something of a puzzle, and our attitude to them must, above all, be open-minded.”

(Jane Doonan, Looking at pictures in picture books, 1993)

Since beginning my master’s course last October, I have seen my style develop and progress exponentially. Furthermore, I have seen development of personal ideas and methods of working. I have explored a range of areas where I previously lacked skill and have developed in these to create a stronger base for not only my illustrative praxis but for my design work overall.

During this final part of the course, I wanted to push my illustrative work into an area that I have previously feared and avoided – picture book illustration. For as long as I can remember, my creative process is rather unplanned and undisciplined, I create spontaneously. I have had to re-establish a control over this and break down my process into steps and careful planning to achieve master’s level quality and to ensure that my creativity is eminently informed by thorough research and development, creating the best possible final outcomes and taking my illustrative work to the next level in all sectors. I also aimed to create more authentically and pay greater attention to details in an attempt to provide the deeper meaning to my work that it sometimes lacks.

Before beginning this project, I saw myself as relatively aware of what was going on in the illustration world and the steps that I need to take to achieve success as an illustrator.

However, for all the knowledge I had about the business side of illustration, I greatly lacked insight into ways of working, creating and the basis of making good picture book illustrations and backgrounds. I found that my previous habit of just looking at other illustrators' work was not enough to understand and then create something great myself, I had to research further into why they created the way they did, why they chose a certain layout and also what is currently trending in the illustrated picture book world.

I enjoyed finding out about the psychological underpinning of illustration and the development of children in relation to picture books. An area that I take great interest in is childhood development, especially concerning the arts and how creativity enhances a child's education, books play such a vital role in childhood academic success, children are given books to read and words to learn in schools from the age of three and given wordless picture books much earlier at home, these picture books play such a fundamental role in those first steps that young readers take into the literary world. It is the pictures that children look to for word cues and thorough understanding of meaning, applying this knowledge to my own work has enabled this project and all future work to take on a freshly informed perspective, with a now, much better understood audience in mind.

Throughout this report, I take the reader sequentially through my process, a selection of artists and research that informed my project and each idea and step that lead to my final outcomes.

Exploring Picture Books

“There’s not enough understanding of how sophisticated picture books can be...If we don’t understand that, then we don’t understand how amazingly sophisticated children are and that they think very deeply and powerfully about things. And we do them a disservice if we don’t see this.”

(Lauren Child, Alison Flood, The Guardian, 2021)

The idea of picture books is something that has always fascinated and intrigued me, an avid book fan, I love books in general and it goes much farther than a great story, finding books with beautifully captivating illustrations and an attention-grabbing cover offers something that can be enjoyed by all, young and old.

I have also always loved to create pieces of literature, from poetry to short stories of all genres. However, as an illustrator, I have always felt that I fall short of the skill required to illustrate a story, something that causes me a great deal of embarrassment and imposter syndrome. Of course, not all illustrators create books, and I am one of those but with countless people telling me that my illustrations are childlike, colourful and ‘perfect for children’s books’ I wanted to try to push myself to give it a go.

There was a lot of back and forth throughout this project, periods of block and desperately wanting to take the easy way out by changing my project entirely to an editorial or graphic

design project but that defeats the object of a master's course. This course pushed me to freely create, try new things and advance my skill. The worst that can happen is it turns out nothing like I envisioned but the experience I can take forward from there is invaluable for my development and career. If it turns out well, then I have a fantastic addition to my portfolio.

"Once we start thinking about picture books as aesthetic objects, which is not the same as thinking about them as tools for literacy and language development, we discover that we do not understand them at all well, however familiar they may be to us."

(Looking at pictures in picture books, Jane Doonan)

What makes a good Picture book?

I firstly set about researching what makes a good picture book. What makes someone chose a picture book? I came across 'Choosing and Using Picturebooks: A guide for teachers' which was created by 'The Power of Pictures' – a resource programme for teachers run by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. Their guide was adapted from Jane Doonan's 'Looking at Pictures in Picture Books' which I had read before finding this online, it was good to see the connections being made based on Doonan's points and how they still remain relevant and have been implemented into the modern curriculum.

The guide has been broken down into key points for consideration such as the size and shape of the text, media, quality of materials, suitability of illustration for subject matter,

composition, facial expression, body language, perspective, scale, visual links, layout, colour, tone and the journey and interaction between words and the pictures.

These points were researched and taken into consideration when I created my storybook, the points forced me to check over my idea and they were fundamental to the changes made from there. I developed my final spreads to reflect the research undertaken and to ensure that the spreads each told the story that they were intended to tell.

The size and shape of the text plays a key role in any picturebook, it allows the audience to understand who the book is intended for. If the text is very small and forms paragraphs, this suggests the book is for an older reader who will be reading the book alone. Larger, simpler and illustrative type suggests a younger audience and shows the book is intended to be read together. I was very conscious of the typography and space for text within my book from the start, I wanted to make sure it blended with the main illustrations, that it was large and/or simple enough to encourage younger readers to read along with the adult and to recognise the words in conjunction with the main illustrative spread.

Ultimately, after continuing my research, I decided to drop the idea of text within my book and so my book became wordless. I instead focused on other points such as ensuring the facial expressions and body language was illustrated as plainly as possible to enable the reader to understand the image. I decided that scale was important in my work, the scale of the dragon could have been intimidating and scary for a young reader so even though I stuck with a large-scale dragon in comparison to the 'girl' character, my character was

designed with the audience in mind – primarily young readers – the character was made to look soft and friendly, this developed over the course of my research.

Later in the development of my book, colour became increasingly important as a method of telling the story, seeing the colour drain from the book mid-way through is a shock to the reader, it makes them question why the colour is gone, where has it gone and how this makes not only the characters in the book feel but also how it makes them feel as the reader. It enables a dual audience, the adult is able to pose questions to the child about how they have interpreted the book, the child is prompted by the adult to look closer to uncover the true meaning but also given the freedom to think much deeper and to create their own meaning.

I started to research picture book layouts and choose those which were aesthetically pleasing to me so that I could examine and evaluate them further, I examined the media used as well as the layout and began to compile a set of images that I could use as inspiration for a quality finish and well-structured double page spreads. My search threw up a range of well-known names as well as illustrators that I had never heard of prior.

Lauren Child is known for children's books such as *Charlie and Lola* and *Clarice Bean* "One of the defining characteristics of Child's work is its playfulness." (Suzanne O'Sullivan, *Playfulness in Lauren Child's Picture Books*, 2018). Child creates her illustrations by using mixed media collage techniques, this gives them a distinctive look and feel that is instantly recognisable as Child's work. "Collage lends itself to playfulness by its

nature, as it constructs a new image out of remnants of others. In doing so it mimics children's imaginative play" (Suzanne O'Sullivan, *Playfulness in Lauren Child's Picture Books*, 2018) Her illustrations play with texture and pattern.



Fig 1 – Illustration from Charlie and Lola, Lauren Child, The Guardian

'The power of pictures' researchers found that "Children who are given opportunities to read and respond to picturebooks learn about sophisticated narrative structure, plot and character development in an accessible way." (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, *The Power of Pictures*) Picture books are fundamental for childhood development and education, they encourage engagement and attainment in literacy.

Lauren Child has spoken openly about how important picture books are to children, how they must be 'sophisticated' and well thought out so that they can connect with their young

audience. Child speaks about how overlooked the industry is on the whole and how little credit is given to children's writers and illustrators as well as the young readers themselves.

My research into different picture books and target audience brought me to the term 'postmodern picture books', these books can include non-linear events, books that are 'aware' of themselves and metafiction. *"It is fundamental that students have experiences with diverse written (and oral) narrative structures at school."* (Sylvia Pantaleo, Young children interpret the metafiction in Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 2004)

I was introduced to Monique Felix's mouse series, which begins with her picture book 'The Story of a Little Mouse trapped in a Book', originally published in 1980, was one of the first to break through the physical boundaries and 'safety' that a book offers the reader, the trapped mouse gnaws its way out of the pages and through the book before flying away on a paper aeroplane made from the pages. "Rather than have the reader enter into an enclosed and even protected world, Felix's series invites the reader to leave and escape the confines of the book. The safety and security of the frame has been abandoned." (On *Beyond Z: The Visual Imagination and Postmodern Children's Picture Books*, Lesley D. Clement, 2013, page 68)

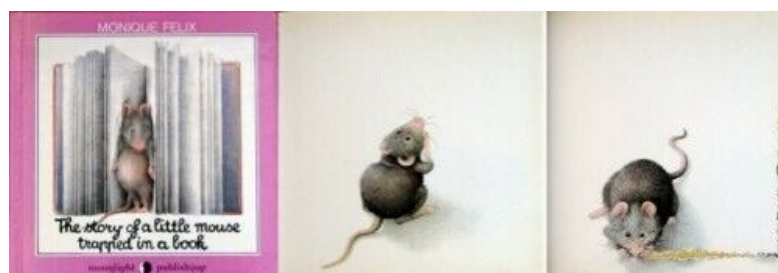


Fig 2 – The story of a little mouse trapped in a book

The most interesting part about Monique Felix's story of a little mouse for me is that the book contained no words and relied solely on the images to guide the reader and tell the story. After reviewing this picture book, I realised that I could omit words from my story altogether and this suited me much better as an introduction into book illustration, one less thing to think about when laying out my pages and so that I would be able to focus on each page as a layout without worrying about where words would go or what words they would be. This arguably turned into a harder task than words would've allowed me as now I found that I had to be extremely careful and pay a great deal of attention to detail as I created my sketches and storyboard to ensure that the reader would be able to decipher emotions and images clearly.

The use of a wordless picturebook also expands the target audience of the book to children who cannot yet read but are able to understand the complexity of the imagery presented to them which usually happens by the age of 3. During this projects' early development, I did some research and sketches relating to early years' books. Nicholas Tucker states that from birth to the age of three, children "usually have the ability to focus on either the details of a picture or on its overall theme and shape but they cannot always fuse these two perceptions into one, comprehensible whole" (Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration*, 1990). This prompted me to create a set of illustrations that wavered slightly from my style, broke it down and became two separate parts of image in one.



Fig 3 – Series of Autumn line art and shape illustrations, Carys Williams

Children begin learning to read by starting with wordless picture books, the illustrations allow there to be discussion between child and adult about the story, it enables the child to think for themselves and scan the illustrations multiple times to look for any hidden clues and cues as to what the story could be about, children learn the basic structure of a story and can recognise what is going on in the pictures without being told. Judith T. Lysaker states that she has “found that the presence of even some words alters their stance toward the reading.” In her book, ‘Before Words: Wordless Picture Books and the Development of Reading in Young Children’ (2018). Young children can become distracted by the words on a page and miss the point of the story and events that occur within it, they question the words as part of the image and wonder why they are there – they have no meaning to a young child that is unable to read yet “In many cases, children’s preoccupation with words takes away from their willingness to engage deeply in sense-making with the images before them, and therefore constraints their sense of agency and confidence as readers.” (Judith T. Lysaker, Before Words: Wordless Picture Books and the Development of Reading in Young Children, 2018). However, sophisticated and well-thought-out illustrative spreads draw

children's interest, they allow them to decipher the meaning on their own, building up their confidence and literacy skills.

"The term 'wordless picture book' seems to suggest there's something lacking in this purely visual form of literature. Which there is. But when pictures are left to do the talking it's incredible to discover how much they have to say."

(Anna Ridley, Look Book Report, Medium, 2014)

Storyboarding

I wanted to create something personal that reflected my own journey and furthermore, challenged me to create something that I have never created before. I initially wanted to write my own story and illustrate the book around that but after viewing various picturebooks and illustrators, the decision to create a wordless picture book was obvious.

At first, I wanted to create an installation of some elaborate pop-up book scene of mountains and trees and be able to walk through these in person within the exhibition. I had planned out a double page and how I wanted it to look from the start of MA. I did however manage to change it slightly and include this scene within my final book, as seen in figure 14.

I created a storyboard which involved a personal depiction about breaking from co-dependency and comfort 'The finding of me'. However, this idea fell short, it wouldn't storyboard very well, it was just missing the mark and of course, as with any marketable picture book, you need a target audience and since I am such a stifler for business sense within my work, this was important to me, I wanted to create something personal, but I also wanted to create something marketable.

My final idea developed as I worked, starting from a very open and undefined project, into something much more refined and reflective of my journey whilst creating it. Initially my idea was sparked from the idea of children's books using animals and humanising them in order to relate to the child. I knew I wanted a dragon, for all that they represent as well as the popularity of dragons within children's literature and media, a dragon brings a very mythical and fairy tale feel to a book. Using the dragon to represent self and feelings allowed me to be personal with my book without creating an unrelatable and dull human character. The dragon appeals to the young reader much more than my initial idea yet uses a very similar concept. This development has been fundamental change for my work and has enabled me to think much deeper and revisit initial ideas to develop them.

The Dragon character masks my personal emotions from the reader, removing 'dragon' from 'girl' even though, for me they represent one in the same, in the book they appear separate. The message of the book will then be interpreted in different ways personal to each reader.

Ways of working

Accepting that I am still very much a beginner and continuously developing has allowed me to break the self-deprecation narrative and to begin to look at my work with a fresh perspective. Further development and introspection are needed to ensure that I'm able to reach my full potential. No artist's work is ever complete, not everything will turn out the way that we envisioned but, these various ideas and trial and error develop into something that is worthwhile.

The freedom to create without meaning for me is something that I never placed much importance on but is fundamental to my mental health and to my praxis. I must continue to create without a rigid final aim and without the pressure of exhibiting or marketing my work. I place a lot of pressure on making my work marketable, so much so that I often skim over the research and development in order to produce something made for purpose, it doesn't truly reflect me, it is a forced subject, made for ticking a box or meeting a deadline. I need to push myself into projects that I feel passion for.

Instead of seeing depression and anxiety as a blocker of work and thus creating an even bigger problem as I self-loathe and pity, turning it on its head and seeing it as a creative gift has allowed me to reflect upon periods of block and the outcomes of each. Just because I am not actively creating, does not mean that I am not creatively thinking, in fact that's pretty much all I do during those moments. Finding similar stories in Eric Maisels book, "The Van Gogh Blues" enabled me to see that creative people seem to have a tendency to fall into

these cycles and that it can be a very normal and surprisingly important part of creative processes.

"I get depressed quite regularly and often... I see my depression as a valuable time for introspection and deep thinking about life. When I am not depressed, I can be fairly active in terms of work... but being depressed gives me time out to be an observer of things that are happening around me and to me"

(Caroline Bertorelli, Eric Maisel, The Van Gogh Blues, 2012)

I did take the opportunity to explore creativity in other ways whilst in this period of 'nothingness' in an attempt to break from the pressure and mundane. I explored outside of illustration and picture books and instead looked to various artists and sculptors to find unusual and often very personal works. The acceptance of an art installation and sculpture just being, without concrete purpose or intention is interesting to me. Creating things that tell a story in a different way to a picture book. I looked at Edvard Munch's 1909 painting 'The Sun', the dominance and brightness of this painting creates a powerful and striking image. This landscape would be a fitting image within a picture book as it could spread across a double page and tell a story all of its own without the need for words.



Fig 4 – The Sun, Edvard Munch, 1909

Once you have taken time to observe and react, stepping away from the ordinary, you are able to look upon your work with a renewed perspective and develop it further. Although I have seen my mental health issues as an undesirable block in the past, they have served as part of my creative process. Allowing time to slow down, reflect and knowing that it is okay to step away from a project for a moment instead of forcing an outcome could help to prevent future blocks, increase workflow, and enable greater development. This is how I work best. I am not methodical or organised, I am chaotic. Acceptance of this part of me forms a major theme in my picture book. Not everyone will agree with my approach and the way that I work, it may shock some people that I manage to get anything done at all, but ultimately self-acceptance is how I progress as an artist. In my picture book we see that self-acceptance comes in the form of girl accepting dragon's flaws and freeing dragon from their isolation regardless of how others have reacted or what they believe.

Inside

My final outcomes showcase my style quite well but lack the detail and skill elevation that I desperately wanted to see come through in this project. The characters are underdeveloped, this is something which needs to be worked on to provide the best possible outcomes to my work in future and in my praxis. All aspects of the development process should be equally explored and so going forward, I realise that instead of focusing on the final page as a whole and becoming overwhelmed, I need to break the page down into multiple parts and characters which all work together to create a story.

Sketching is of the utmost importance when developing illustrations particularly for book illustration, you need to return to these sketches and review ideas carefully in order to develop characters and scenes that tell the story as well as possible and convey emotions accurately, it is particularly important to work on these characters and create a cohesive feel throughout the book, you are able to see in my book that the character of 'girl' is underdeveloped with slight changes throughout to the illustrative style and appearance of character. This could cause a young reader to become confused or distracted by this particular character and question why they are changing.

The outcome expectations morphed from the idea of a final, high quality, polished book into something much more representative of who I am as an artist as well as a personal insight and expression of feelings surrounding my praxis. The dragon developed from a lacklustre character of not much great depth or value to something much deeper and personal. The

middle of the book losing its colour also represents my workflow in general. Starting strong and colourful and gradually losing the stamina and mental capacity to create new ideas and bring new colour into my work as I get easily discouraged by failure and then eventually picking myself up, seeking support and moving forward with a solid idea which is also unconsciously influenced by my workflow and period of thinking, questioning and creative block. I finally found something that sparked back the interest and expressed my frustration at the same time. The outcome was not what I had intended at the very start of MA but it has been developed by my praxis and workflow over time and so, I believe that it does best represent my overall academic and career related journey and has enabled me to view my artistic 'failures' under a new light. This project was ultimately never about the outcome, it was about the journey and development, and I successfully developed my skills and knowledge throughout this final project.

I had planned an e-book of my final pieces, which would display online and those viewing the exhibition could scan a QR code to access it. Unfortunately, due to illness, I was unable to set up my final project within the exhibition which was disappointing after pushing the work forward for completion and preparing print outs for display, despite the blocks and issues that I experienced during the creation stage. However, I was able to complete my e book and exhibit it on my website.

My idea developed from something ambiguous and messy into something much more structural, relatable, and personal. During early development, the idea for the meaning behind the book was that it could be interpreted in many ways, the dragon could be seen as a metaphor for mental health, or a co-dependant nature. I thought about making the

dragon 'left behind' and thus jealous of the new relationship between 'girl' and 'boy' – I likened this to jealousy and resentment that children may feel towards their peers when a friend gets a new friend. It could also be interpreted as a book about families, where boy and girl are representing parents and stepparents. In this case, dragon acts as child who feels left out, jealous and unsure about 'boy' (stepfather) until dragon gets to know him, and perhaps he also has a dragon (child). I wanted to use this book to reflect on the sometimes unstable moments in life, it is relatable on this level to a wide range of readers. In discussions with peers, a book called "My shadow is pink" was mentioned, this book is very similar to my book's underlying meaning of acceptance. It follows a child whose 'shadow' colour is different to that of his family, Shadow's' main character loves things that are traditionally 'not for boys' he soon learns, with the support of his dad, that everyone has a shadow that they sometimes feel that they must hide from others.



Fig 5 - My shadow is pink, Scott Stuart, 2021

Ultimately, I decided to reduce the ambiguous nature of this initial idea down to become much more personal and therefore much more meaningful for myself, I decided to fully

commit to creating 'Dragon' as a metaphor for my own mental health being something that I feel the need to hide. The ambiguous quality isn't entirely lost but each spread is better thought out to represent exactly what I intend it to mean rather than leaving it too open and risking the spreads becoming confusing and boring.



Fig 6 – Reading together, Inside, Carys Williams

I developed the first spread with the intention to form the front cover of the book. This spread features initial development for my dragon character, I returned to this page multiple times to review and edit as the book and characters progressed. I wanted this spread to show that the Dragon is very much accepted and 'safe' to be around. The first few pages set the tone of the dragon and allow the children to form empathy by seeing the dragon do ordinary, relatable things like reading a book. I stuck with my signature colour scheme and style, I still feel that the characters need to be developed in greater depth but I am happy with the 'cute' style of the dragon. It is much softer in appearance to the initial designs. I focused on the leafy frame for this spread as I wanted to practice adding

background and foreground interest whilst keeping my very minimal illustration style. I feel that it needs some texture and this will continue to be under scrutiny for future professional development of my style as I feel that there is something missing within my storybook work and whilst this project has allowed me to advance from where I started and learn much more about making a picture book, my skills in this area are far from finalised.



Fig 7 – Fast food, Inside, Carys Williams

The second spread (fig 7) did not meet my expectations and vision. I couldn't find a way to make it work the way I intended, with food taking over and spilling off a gigantic pile, this is also a spread where I most dislike Dragon's appearance, it doesn't feel cohesive and perhaps wasn't the right pose for the character. However, it tells a clear story and contains all the elements I intended. I just feel this spread is not up to the standard I hope it could be with further development.

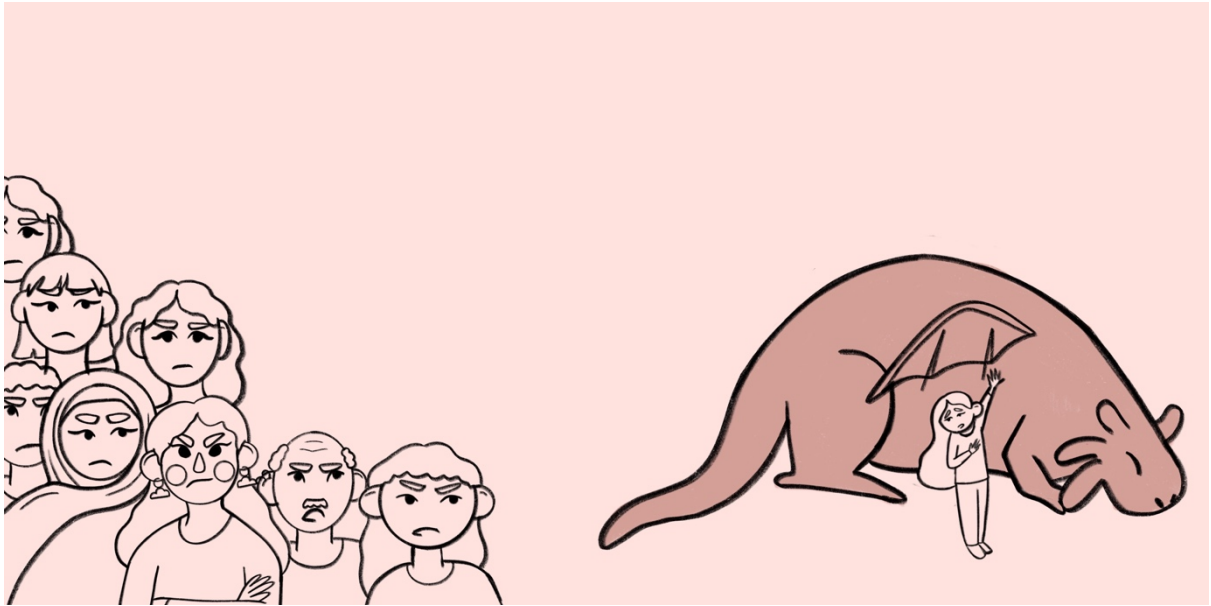


Fig 8 – A concept for the spread entitled Judgement, Inside, Carys Williams

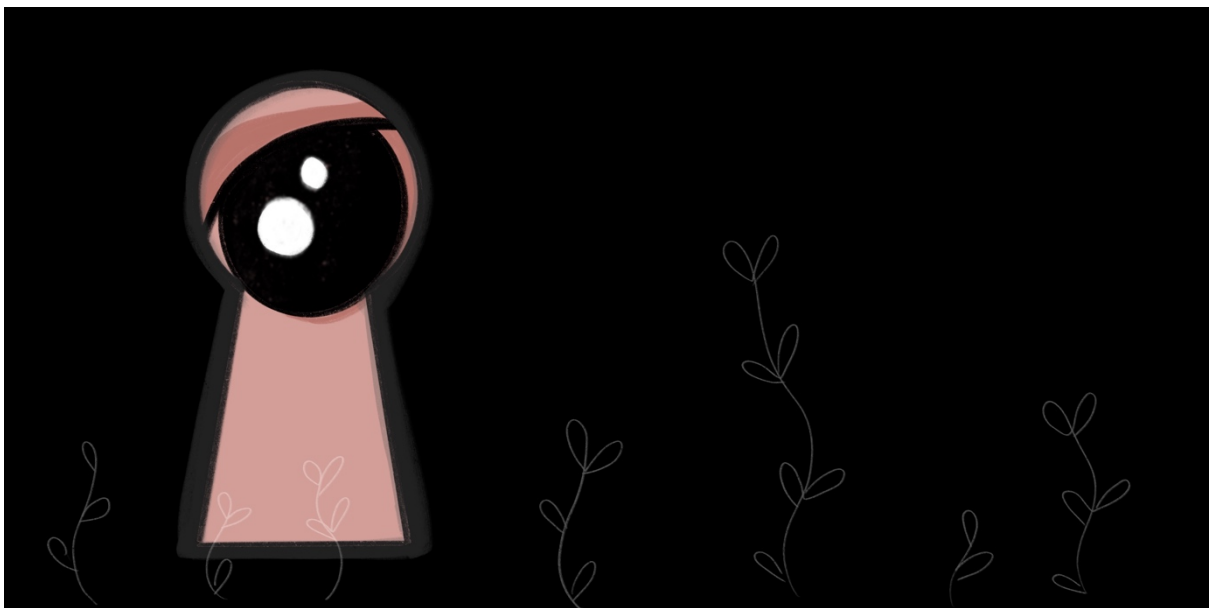


Fig 9 – Locked In, Inside, Carys Williams



Fig 10 – Grey, Inside, Carys Williams



Fig 11 – Waiting, Inside, Carys Williams

“Another way to convey movement and thus the flow of time in picture books is by means of a sequence of pictures. If the same figure is first depicted under a tree and in the next picture in the tree, we read this as meaning that the figure has climbed the tree, which we know

from experience takes some time. The sequence thus conveys the flow of time.”

(How Picturebooks Work, Carole Scott; Maria Nikolajeva, 2006)



Fig 12 – Release, Inside, Carys Williams

A minimal spread with a simple message of acceptance and understanding. The colours work cohesively together and are on brand, the simple layout leaves plenty of space and draws your attention toward the character close ups. This spread works cohesively with others but again, the level of detail just isn't there, it lacks texture which could perhaps be added by making use of patterns or lighting effects.

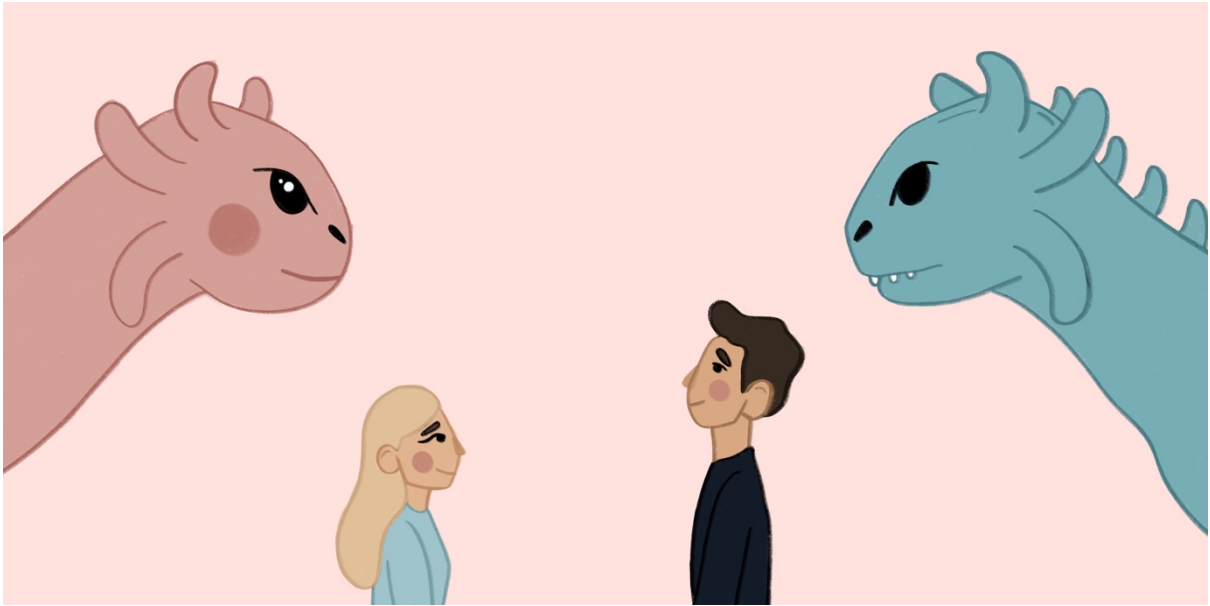


Fig 13 – Meeting acceptance, Inside, Carys Williams



Fig 14 – Free, Inside, Carys Williams

My favourite spread of the book and the spread that holds most in common with my initial visions for this project. It could work as a popup as there is plenty of layering used within this image. The leafy border in the foreground, followed by pink dragon, blue dragon and

then the hilly background image. The two dragons represent the mental health and personality of both girl and boy and symbolise that there are others going through similar situations, people who will understand and relate. Most importantly that there is acceptance surrounding this, the dragons are free, this is the first time that we see dragon completely “free”, not locked away and allowed to explore separately from girl. The beginning of the book shows dragon always with girl when they go out, girl was, in a way, controlling dragon, representative of how we have the tendency to hide or downplay ourselves in order to fit in and be normal. When others react negatively to our personality, we want to shut the “problematic” or “extravagant” part away and dull our personalities and uniqueness down even further in order to blend in completely and not be noticed as different.

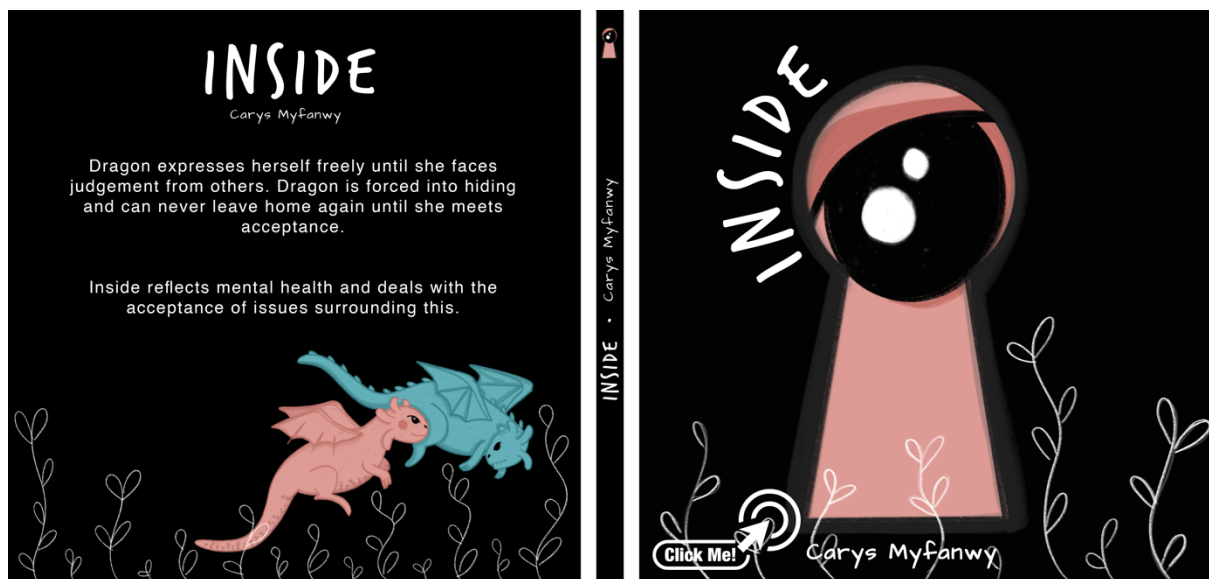


Fig 15 – Inside book cover, the front cover in this example includes the ‘click me!’ prompt used on the e-book.

The cover design comes from the central pages of the book. This decision was made after creating the final storyboarding and was not a route I had initially planned to take when first designing my spreads, I had initially wanted a bright and colourful cover, using figure 6. However, I feel that this dark cover exhibits the significance of the mid-point of the story where Dragon is locked 'Inside' and loses their colour along with the world around them. The cover shuns bright and attention grabbing, for mysterious and moody, much like Dragon in the story, this book hides away, it tries to blend in but on a child's bookshelf full of colour, this dark and plain book can't help but display its uniqueness. It is not a typical children's book cover, but it represents the story extremely well. It would benefit from further development and scrutiny to achieve the finished, high-quality effect that I would have liked to achieve.

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Images

Fig 1 – Illustration from Charlie and Lola, Lauren Child, The Guardian

Fig 2 – The story of a little mouse trapped in a book, Monique Felix - <https://www.ebay.com/itm/391916067470>

Fig 4 – The Sun, Edvard Munch, 1909 - <https://www.edvardmunch.org/the-sun.jsp>

Fig 5 – My shadow is pink, Scott Stuart - <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/my-shadow-is-pink-scott-stuart/1137471017>