

Carys Pedler

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Tutor - Delyth Lloyd-Evans

Course - Illustration

Student Number - 2003556

Word Count – 2509 (without figure captions)

2646 (with figure captions)

“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.

Children's picture books are often thought of as telling wonderful, perfect stories to entertain the child reading it. There is often the belief that children do not experience the issues that make adulthood so difficult and stressful. This, however, is a misconception. Children can experience the same amount of turbulence in their childhood as an adult does throughout their lives. It is important to acknowledge the difficulties children can face, and hence, discover a way of educating them about such issues. Children should not only be aware of the issues they may face, but also know how to deal with them in the most effective manner.

Perhaps the most effective way of educating children is through their picture books. Children take an active participation in understanding the illustrations included within a picture book. It is argued that children begin to understand stories by associating shape and colour with different emotions (Bang, 2016, p.5). By illustrators and authors tackling difficult issues, this could help children to understand and develop their own thoughts and feelings surrounding an issue, but also to perhaps empathise with another child experiencing such an issue. There are many illustrators, and author illustrators, who tackle difficult themes within their work. These issues can include, death and grief, depression and mental health issues, the effects of divorce on the family unit, and so on. It is important for these issues to be represented accurately, but also in a way a child can understand. Many illustrators succeed at this challenge, and it is necessary to analyse their work and how they manage to do so.

Divorce is common within the UK. For instance, in 2019, there were 107,559 divorces of opposite sex couples, seeing an increase of 18.4% from 2018. (ONS,

2019). Therefore, it can be implied that children may have to deal with a divorce between their parents during childhood. Karen Stanton addresses this issue in her book, in which she was both the author and illustrator, *'Monday, Wednesday and Every Other Weekend.'* Stanton focuses on the challenges that divorce can bring for children such as being split between parents, living between houses, and losing a sense of home.

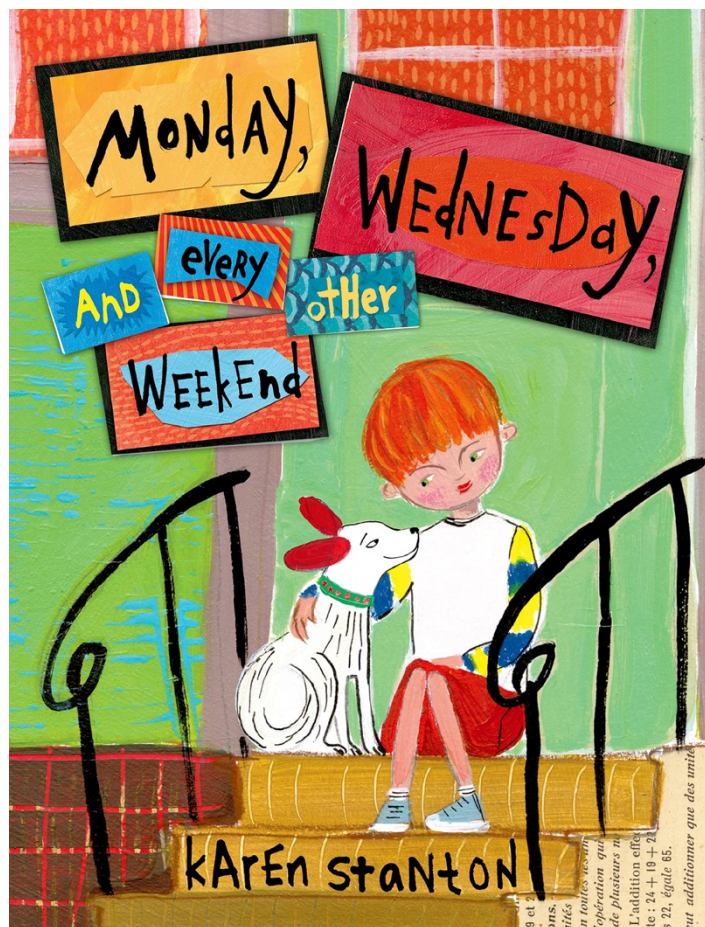


Fig. 1. Monday, Wednesday and Every Other Weekend, Karen Stanton, 2014

The book shows a child, Henry Cooper, and his dog, Pomegranate, living with Henry's mother and father, but in separate homes. Both homes are very different, in location, in colour, in food, in decoration. Henry seems to enjoy both homes, and his

time with each of his parents. Henry's dog, Pomegranate, however, begins to struggle with finding a sense of home in each house, and during the story, Pomegranate escapes to their old family home, where they all lived together. Henry understands Pomegranate's struggles and helps him to find sense of home within his parents' separate houses.

Stanton conveys the issues of divorce for a child mainly through the character of the dog, Pomegranate. This could be a way of taking the issue away from the child, and hence making it much easier for the child to deal with. It has also been argued that humans tend to have more empathy towards dogs than people (Independent, 2017). Therefore, the dog dealing with the issue may cause readers to be more sympathetic about the issue and hence understand it with greater ease. The child is also later portrayed as the hero as he rescues the dog and brings him home. This again could allow the child in the story seem capable and strong enough to deal with the issue of his parents living separately. Stanton writes the story in the narrative of the child, which helps the reader understand how the child is dealing with the divorce and how he understands it. The child describes his favourite parts about each of his parents' houses and how each house differs. For instance, his mother's apartment smells of "chapati, tortillas and miso soup" (Fig. 2) whereas at his father's apartment, they eat "Papa's perfect pepperoni pizza" (Fig. 3). This could encourage the reader to consider the positives of a difficult situation and may allow for greater understanding of the issue.



Fig. 2. Monday, Wednesday and Every Other Weekend, Karen Stanton, 2014



Fig. 3. Monday, Wednesday and Every Other Weekend, Karen Stanton, 2014

“Monday, Wednesday and Every Other Weekend” is illustrated using paint and collage, in a somewhat simple illustration style. The words and images work together in a complementary relationship. The use of simple, 2D illustrations within this book could be to contrast with the difficult message of the book. Though the story is written simply and is easy to follow, made possible through the narrative of the child, the issue that the author is tackling is a difficult one. The simple, yet detailed, illustrations could allow the reader to comprehend the message of the book much more clearly.

The illustrators use of collage in the book as seen in Fig. 4 adds more depth to the illustration. The very process of collage in cutting and tearing up other papers could suggest to the reader the torn-up feelings that an event such as a divorce can bring, particularly to a family. This could also reference the child feeling torn between parents and houses. The design of the endpapers particularly suggests to the reader the hectic schedule that the child in the story is facing and how difficult it may be to deal with this issue. The illustrator uses colour rather vividly, which would not only appeal to a younger audience, but helps the reader to differentiate between the child’s time with each parent. It also could suggest a different mood and atmosphere that the child experiences throughout the story.



Fig. 4. Monday, Wednesday and Every Other Weekend, Karen Stanton, 2014

Stanton manages to effectively portray the issue of divorce through her story and accompanying illustrations. This picture book allows the reader to understand how a divorce can affect those surrounding the issue, and hence what feelings can be evoked by it, particularly for the children involved.

Another author-illustrator who has attempted to portray a difficult and sensitive topic is Shaun Tan. Tan has illustrated many books that look at different social and political issues. One book of particular interest is *The Red Tree*, written and illustrated by Shaun Tan. (Fig. 5) Tan describes the book as “self-contained images which invite readers to draw their own meaning.” (Tan, n/d). This means any reader would be able to draw any meaning they see fit from the story. Having said this, Tan

does later explain the story as a young girl experiencing “many dark moments, yet ultimately finds something hopeful at the end...” (Tan, n/d). This seems to allude to the issue of mental health problems. Mental health problems can be experienced greatly by children. For instance, the National Health Service reported that “in 2020, one in six children aged 5 to 16 were identified as having a probable mental disorder...” (National Health Service, 2020). These statistics in England demonstrate how common mental health problems are within children, with numbers growing greatly in recent years. Therefore, it is of great importance to represent this through children’s picture books, with many children beginning to understand emotions and words through shapes and pictures, as previously stated. This could be helpful for a child suffering with mental health problems and beginning to understand their emotions.

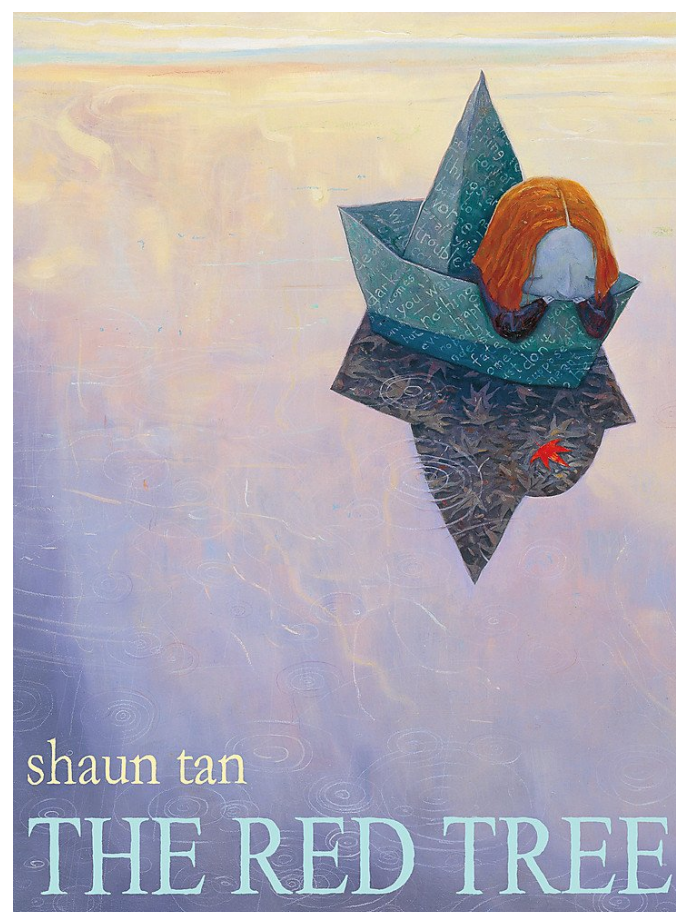


Fig 5. The Red Tree, Shaun Tan, 2001

The book is written very simply, with few words on the page. This points to the reader having to decipher meaning from the detailed illustrations of the book. The level of detail in the illustrations could be suggestive of mental health issues, which can be extremely complex and sometimes difficult to understand. The surreal nature of the illustrations could point to the disassociation some people suffering with mental health problems can undergo (Mind, 2019). People with mental health issues can also sometimes struggle to express their issues and how it may be making them feel. Many of the illustrations seem to relate to the feelings and experiences that mental health can bring such as feeling trapped, being consumed by darkness, feeling misunderstood, overwhelmed and as if the feeling is never-ending. Indeed, the design of the endpaper (Fig. 6) could suggest to the reader these feelings. The words coming from the only character in the illustration, the young girl, are jumbled and falling out from the character perhaps again trying to establish these feelings of being unable to express oneself when suffering with a mental health problem. Tan manages to convey these feelings through the character of the young girl successfully, making the reader understand to a greater extent the feelings that mental health issues can bring, and allowing the reader to empathise greatly.



Fig. 6. The Red Tree, Shaun Tan, 2001

Upon the first reading of the book, the reader experiences the dark moments that the young girl is also experiencing. When the reader reaches the end of the book (Fig. 7), they discover the 'red tree', which is bright and full, having grown from the dark, rotting leaves it was at the start of the book.



Fig. 7, The Red Tree, Shaun Tan, 2001

The tree seems to represent hope for the young girl. It seems to be a symbol that though the reader has experienced such tough times, there is hope at the end, which is what Tan alludes to when describing his book. When closely examining the illustrations of each page, it is possible to spot one of the red leaves that is on the tree at the end of the book on each page. (Fig. 8) (Fig. 9) This is likely a task many children would find enjoyable. Having said this, this task is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the book, which could suggest the disguise of mental health issues within not only the person but society too. To hide the leaves existence in each page

could suggest how misunderstood mental health issues can be. However, it can symbolise the possibility of hope throughout the girl's struggles. Though she is experiencing some of the darkest times, it is possible to find even the smallest glimmer of hope. This could be an important message for a child suffering with mental health issues, which can sometimes feel as if there is no end. It would be useful to teach young children that there is hope and they can get through their mental struggles.



Fig. 8. The Red Tree, Shaun Tan, 2001 – The red leaf is spotted in the bottom left corner of the illustration.



Fig. 9. The Red Tree, Shaun Tan, 2001 – The red leaf is in the bottom right corner of the illustration.

Shaun Tan very successfully portrays not only what mental health issues can feel like, but also how there is a way to overcome them and having hope through these times. He seems to capture the essence of mental health issues, whilst also establishing a possible situation for younger readers. Tan focuses on the impact of his illustrations in this book, which successfully demonstrate to the reader the impact of mental health issues.

The issue of death and having to deal with grief is indeed one that children may experience in their childhood, particularly regarding parents and grandparents.

Nicola Davies in her book “The Pond” writes about the death of a child’s father and the aftermath of his death for the family. (Fig. 10) The book begins with a son and his father creating a pond together in their garden. However, things take a turn when the father dies suddenly, and leaves behind “the muddy, messy hole” in the garden.

(Davies, 2018) The story goes on to explore the family’s journey with the loss of the father and dealing with the different stages of grief. Kübler-Ross (2014) identifies the five stages of grief after working with ill patients. She defined the five stages of grief as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The reader can recognise these stages through the book and the accompanying illustrations.

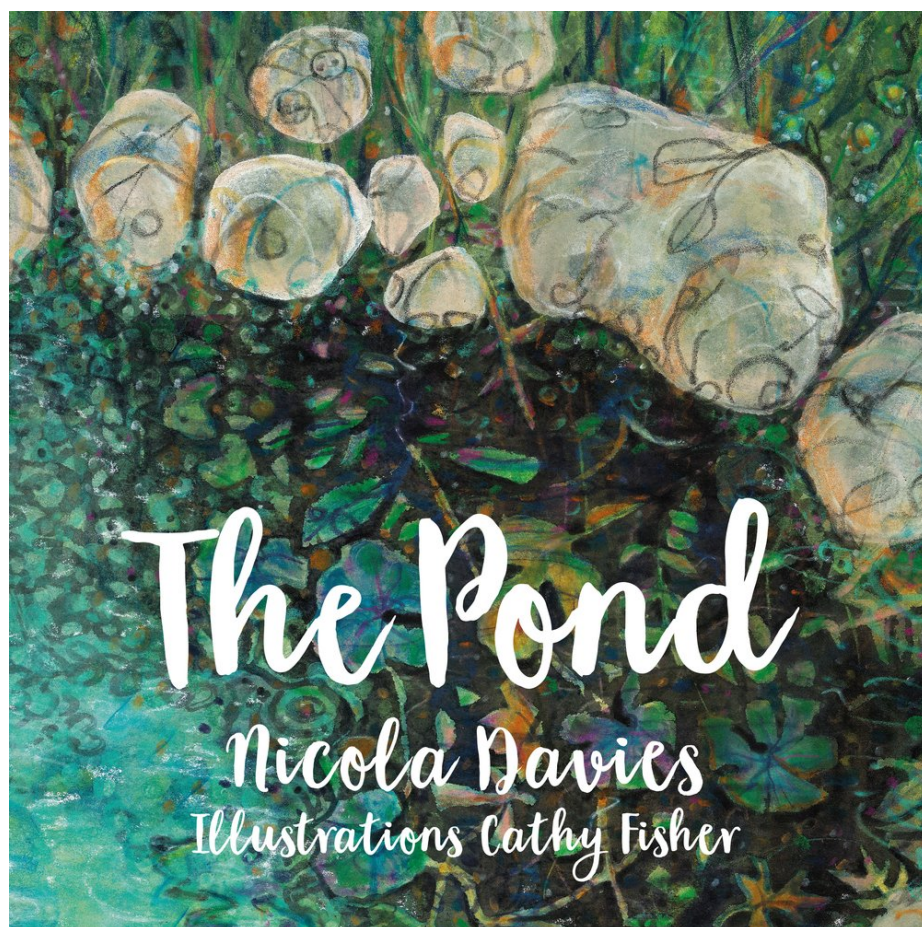


Fig. 10. The Pond, Nicola Davies, 2018

The book is written in the narrative of the child, similarly to Karen Stanton's book as previously analysed. This allows the reader to understand how the child is reacting to his father's death, and how this is directly affecting him. The book is illustrated by Cathy Fisher. The illustrations once again are a part of a complementary relationship with the text. The accompanying illustrations are very reflective of the natural world, tying in closely with not only the title of the book, but the pond that the father wants to create. The illustrator accomplishes this reflection through the use of the colour palette. The colours included tend to be green, blue, brown, and yellow, which can all suggest the existence of the natural world within the story. Indeed, the illustration of the end papers seems to place an emphasis on the natural world, perhaps stressing some importance on it.

The illustrations of the characters really portray the emotions that the characters are feeling. The illustrations in Fig. 11 particularly demonstrate the level of emotion being felt during this time. Being able to capture emotion in the illustrations is particularly important in a book that addresses such an emotional time.

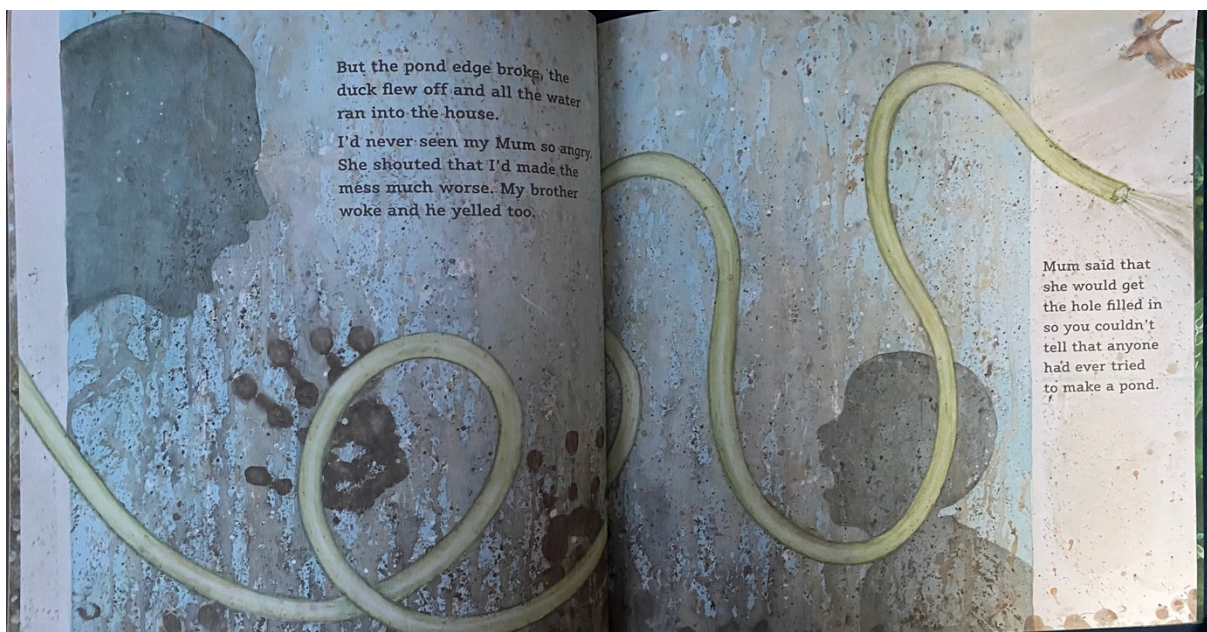


Fig. 11, The Pond, Nicola Davies, 2018

The illustrator also manages to capture the emotions of the young boy in pages 11-12. This illustration in particular is a really powerful one which places much emotion onto the character and the situation.

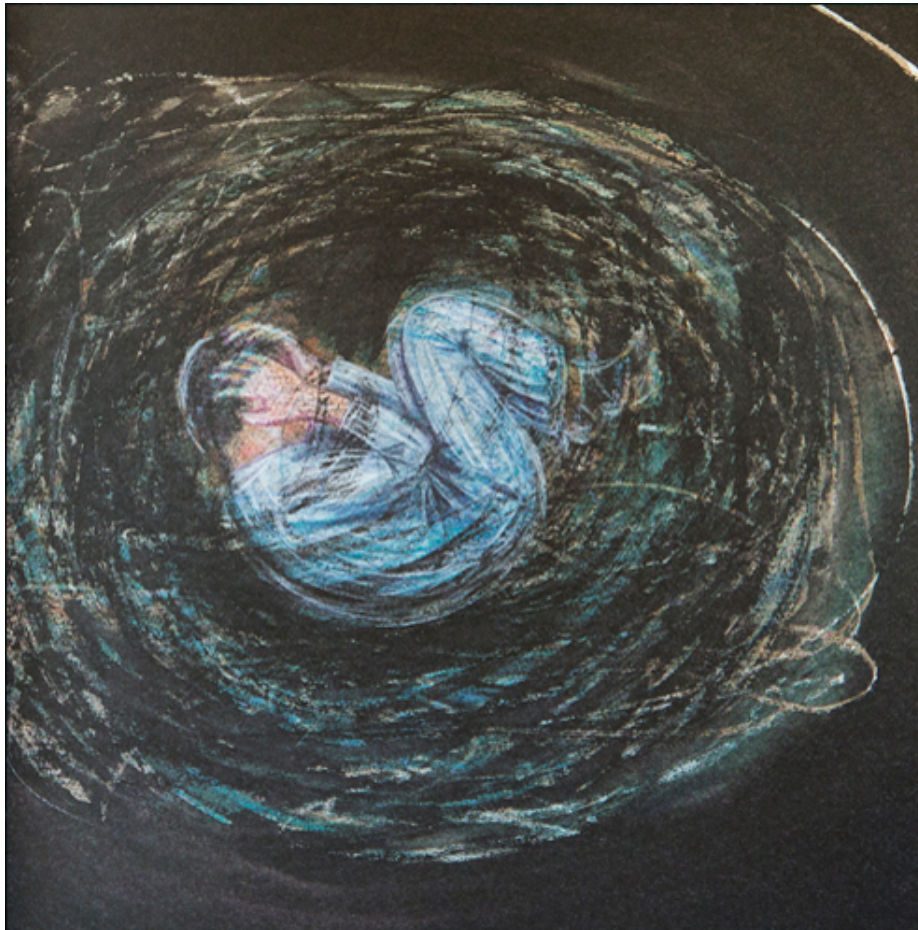


Fig. 12. The Pond, Nicola Davies, 2014

She uses darkness and negative space in a way that could allow the reader to truly understand the grief that the young boy is experiencing. The illustrations tend to differ as the young boy and his family are experiencing the stages of grief and hence the different emotions of such stage. The illustrator uses the darker colours and negative space during much more difficult times. This could be to reflect the struggle

of the family. Fisher then uses much lighter colours in moments that are bit more hopeful. One of the final pages (Fig. 13) captures the acceptance and possible hope of the family through the very colourful flower of the now thriving pond. Though she uses this dark colour palette around it, the flower does seem to provide a beacon for the family. This could be attempting to teach the important message of dealing with grief and having to undergo the stages of grief before reaching a time where it may be much easier to cope.



Fig. 13. The Pond, Nicola Davies, 2014

Both Nicola Davies and Cathy Fisher manage to portray the emotions of dealing with a family bereavement. The illustrations seem to capture the feeling of having to experience grief accurately and can allow the reader to not only empathise but have a greater understanding of such a time.

It is of great importance to teach children about the difficulties they can face within their lives, as Browne suggests. Having said this, it is important to capture the topic

in a way that not only represents it accurately, but sensitively. All three illustrators manage to portray the emotions that each of these issues can bring, particularly for children who may feel these emotions are overwhelming. The books tackle the issues differently, with Tan's focus not being directly on text but the feelings that the illustrations can bring, whereas Stanton and Fisher have more text to go alongside their illustrations. Despite this, all three illustrators capture the sense of the issues, which is the most important factor of portraying an issue. Picture books are an informative way for children to learn about their emotions and understand them in relation to the images. Therefore, it becomes a much easier task for children to understand the potentially difficult issues they may face and hence deal with them.

Bibliography

Bang, M. (2016), *Picture This: How Pictures Work*. Anniversary edn. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Berger, J. (1972), *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books: London.

Davies, N. (2018) *The Pond*. Alternate Edition. Llangenech: Graffeg Publishing Limited

Dyches, T, T; Heath, M, A; Moulton, E, E; Prater, M, A. (2011) *Portrayals of Bullying in Children's Picture Books and Implications for Bibliotherapy*, 51(2), p. 119-148.

Available at:

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/910283103/fulltext/3EE85B6FE13D4405PQ/1?acountid=130472>, (Accessed: 29 October 2021)

Independent, (2017) *Humans have more empathy for dogs than people, finds study*.

Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/humans-empathy-dogs-more-people-study-animals-pets-a8033056.html>, (Accessed: 4 December 2021)

Lampert, J; Walsh, K. (2010) 'Children's Literature in Education', *'Keep Telling Until Someone Listens': Understanding Prevention Concepts in Children's Picture Books Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse*. 41(2), p146-167. Available at:

<https://web-p-ebshost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=b4c36153-e25b-41e4-90c5-0441ac283eda%40redis> (Accessed: 29 October 2021)

Kübler-Ross, E, (2014) *On Death and Dying*. Reissue end. New York; Scribner

Mind Mental Health Charity, (2019) *Dissociation and dissociative disorders*. Available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/dissociation-and-dissociative-disorders/about-dissociation/>, (Accessed: 4 November 2021)

National Health Service, (2020), *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey*. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up#summary>, (Accessed: 21 October 2021)

Office for National Statistics, (2019), *Divorce*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce>, (Accessed: 11 November 2021)

Prudhoe, C, M. (2003) 'Picture books and the art of collage', *Childhood Education*, 80(1), p. 6-11. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/210387217?accountid=130472&pq-origsite=primo>, (Accessed: 11 November 2021)

Salisbury, M; Styles, M. (2020) *Children's Picture books: The Art of Visual Storytelling*. 2nd edn. London: Laurence King Publishing

Stanton, K. (2014) *Monday, Wednesday, and Every Other Weekend*. New York: Feiwel & Friends

Tan. S, (2010) *The Red Tree*. London: Hodder Children's Books

Tan, S. (n/d) *The Red Tree Book*. Available at: <https://www.shauntan.net/red-tree-book>, (Accessed: 21 October 2021)

Trites, R, S. (2018) *Twenty-First-Century Feminism in Children's and Adolescent Literature*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi

Tucker, N. (1981) *The Child and the Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press