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Programme of Study: Illustration (BA)

Module: Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Word count: 2349

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

By Neve Morgan

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak." Berger (1972, p.7)

Picture books have always been an important part in a child's development. It helps develop their language, reading and understanding skills; "Through experiences with picture books the young child can develop socially, personally, intellectually, culturally, and aesthetically." (Jalongo, 2004, p.8). It is an important bridge for a child's understanding of the world around them and how it functions, even when they are very young "...by providing children with simplified and therefore more easily manageable images of the outside world" (Tucker, 1990, p.23). A variety of topics can be found in picture book form that is formatted in an easy-to-understand way for the child to learn from which is crucial. While the majority of children's picture books are about light-hearted, simple, or fun topics and concepts, it is also imperative to analyse the works of illustrators/author illustrators who tackle more difficult and sensitive topics. This essay will explore this concept and see how it would benefit the persons that read them. It will analyse how different topics are explored within these books and how the author/illustrator portrays them, with topics such as anxiety, grief, sadness and more.

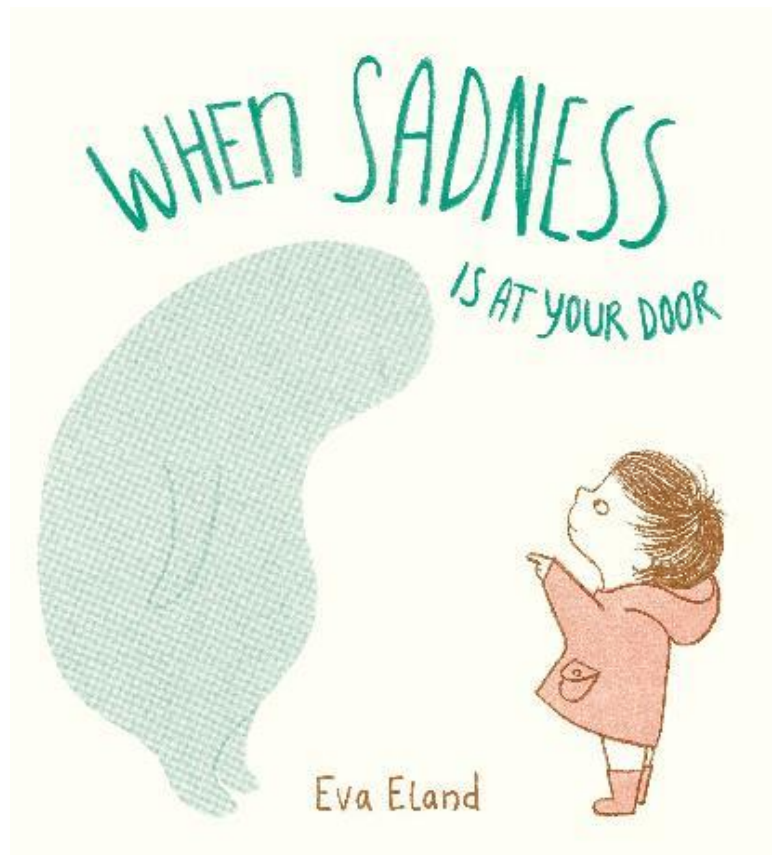


Fig. 1. Eva Eland (2019), *When Sadness is at Your Door*

The first picture book this essay will focus on is a book titled “When Sadness is at Your Door” written and illustrated by Eva Eland and is directed more to younger readers. This book follows a young child and their experience with sadness. Within this book, “Sadness” is shown following the child around, not leaving them alone and appearing claustrophobic, encompassing the child at times. It does well in showing the feeling of sadness in a physical way, making it more comprehensible to the reader what the child is feeling and that that feeling belongs to the child.

Sadness in this story has been personified to have a humanoid appearance; being blue in colour and having an appearance similar to a human but not exactly. Personification is defined as: “attribution of personal qualities, especially : representation of a thing or

abstraction as a person or by the human form.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) It is a valuable tool in storytelling as it helps the reader identify more with the story and empathise more with the characters. As Lipson (2008, p.72) states, “This strategy is used to give objects, things or animals human characteristics which we recognise in ourselves” ... “Personification heightens and emphasizes any description in terms we can relate to”.

Within her book, Eland uses her minimalist style and limited colour pallet to her advantage, the use of negative space in most panels allowing the reader to focus on the two main characters and what they are going through, making it simple yet effective, only showing what needs to be shown. She uses limited colours to show the contrast between the child, Sadness, and other background characters. The character Sadness being blue, a colour commonly associated with sadness and depression: “Negatively, blue suggests melancholy and sadness (“feeling blue”)” Greenberg and Patterson (2008, p.17), the background characters being red, contrasting with the blue of Sadness, and the child going through their own colour journey, starting out with no colour and ending up mostly red, “Traditionally it stands for love, energy, strength and courage” Greenberg and Patterson (2008, p.17) This effectively communicates at the beginning of the story how alien Sadness can make you feel in comparison to others when the child is being surrounded by it in blue while the others are red, as well as gradually showing red on the child’s design as they slowly see sadness as something they can manage and accept.

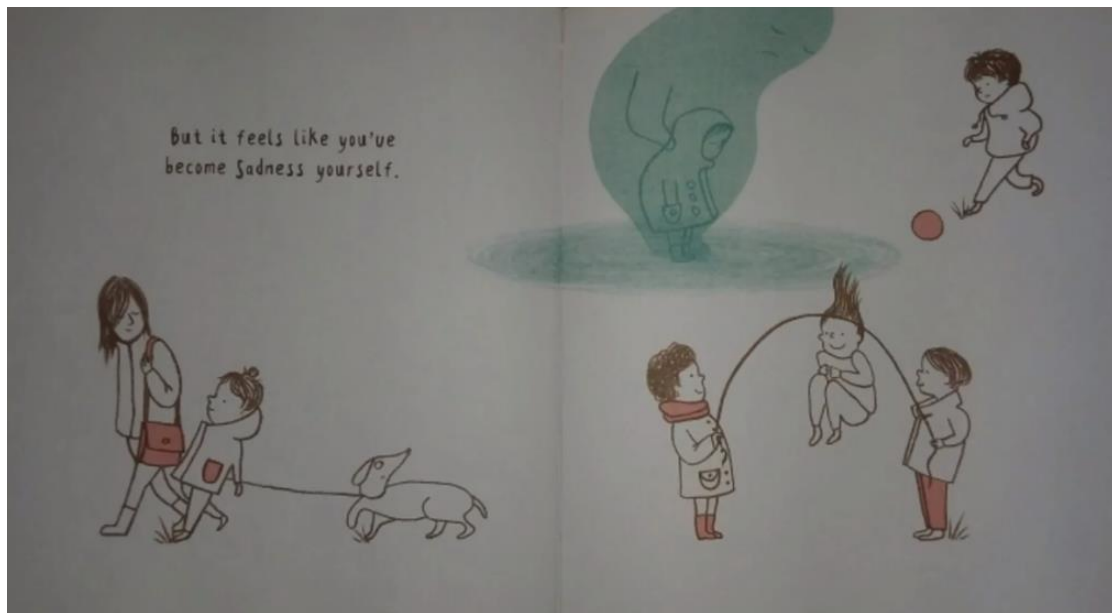


Fig. 2. Eva Eland (2019), *When Sadness is at Your Door*



Fig. 3. Eva Eland (2019), *When Sadness is at Your Door*

One interesting thing about *When Sadness is at Your Door* is that it doesn't just show a child experiencing sadness, which is important for a child to see and identify with, but it also shows healthy ways to cope with sadness, showing healthy coping mechanisms and

ways to deal with it, such as asking “sadness” where it came from, showing them how to identify where their emotions are coming from and what might be causing it (Fig. 2), as well as doing things they enjoy to help alleviate it (Fig. 3), and to not be scared or worried when the sadness is gone.

It is vital that children know how to identify their emotions and put a name to what they are feeling, “Naming feelings is the first step in helping kids learn to identify them. It allows your child to develop an emotional vocabulary so they can talk about their feelings.” (Kids Helpline, 2018). It also allows the child to reflect on what others around them might be feeling too. As Schwartz and Schwartz (1991, p.20) state: “Certainly, childhood is often a very happy period, but it is never carefree. Stress is one of the conditions of our lives. For children, it is one of the conditions of growing up.” Children having a name for an emotion can help them with communicating issues they might have as well as be more emotionally intelligent. Learning this through picture-books is helpful as it is an easily accessible media and is written so that a child could understand it in simple terms.

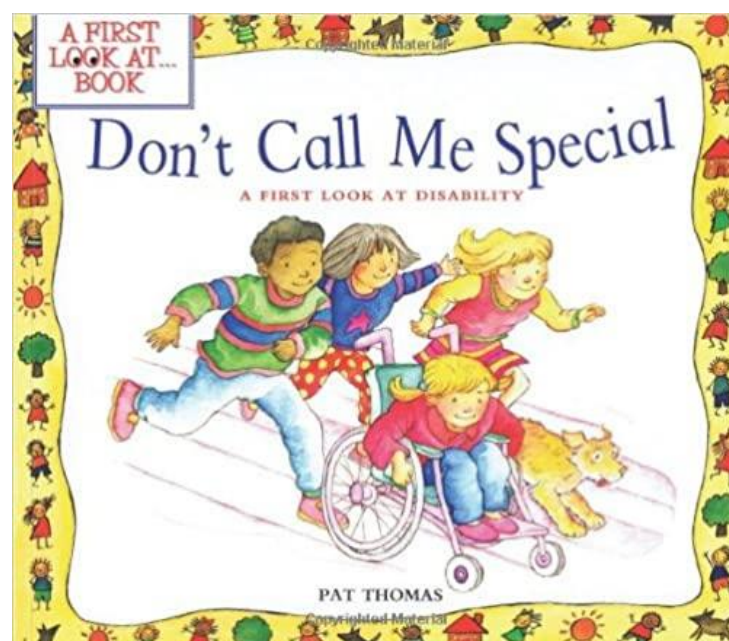


Fig. 4. Pat Thomas (2002), *Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*.



Fig. 5. Pat Thomas (2002), *Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*



Fig. 6. Pat Thomas (2002), *Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*

Another book this essay will focus on is titled *Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*. This book explores the topic of different disabilities children may have and many questions and answers others may have about this topic. It is written by Pat Thomas and illustrated by Lesley Harker. This book is shown to be engaging towards the reader, asking them questions, and letting them make assumptions based on the illustrations to let children reflect on their answers and why they may think the way they do. The illustrator uses bright, vibrant colours to capture the reader's attention:

When bright colours are used in children's books, children are more likely to start connecting what they see in the books with what they see in real life. The vivid colours hold interest and stimulate young minds to make associations that will become the building blocks for later learning.

Wills, (2015)

The illustrator uses these colours with a minimal background, only showing what needs to be shown, similar to *When Sadness is at Your Door*. It draws the viewers' attention to the characters as they are the most important part of the story while also separating the text to make it easier to read against the white background. There is a greater emphasis on reading body language in this book compared to the previous example. As Salisbury and Styles (2012, p.81) states: "Even the youngest children are good at reading body language". The emphasis on body language shows in a variety of ways throughout the book, one such example being in Fig. 5. Where a group of children are dancing happily, with one child left out. With the text as context, we can see that they are upset and frustrated at being left out while the others have fun. This communicates to the reader to never assume something without asking them first and encourages them to reflect on how to interact with their peers in a more thoughtful way.

This book challenges the reader's biases and prejudice and helps younger and older audiences learn something they might not have known before, as well as help them be more accepting of those with disabilities. It is important for children to learn about topics such as disabilities so that it is normalised and when they grow older they know to be more empathetic and understanding and to not be hurtful or malicious and to be able to point out when someone else is being hurtful or malicious. It also shows several types of disabilities, showing the spectrum and how it can affect different people, such as in Fig. 6. Where there is both a physical disability as well as a learning disability being shown. The illustrator also shows several types of people living with disabilities which is impactful as it shows that anyone can have a disability and allows disabled people to see themselves in these illustrations. Good representation in media is especially important for children and allows them to feel less alienated, especially as most disabled representation in media is the opposite. As Butler (2017) states: "If disabled children don't see themselves represented in literature, they have nothing literary to aspire to and react to." One last detail about this book is that it shows adults or helpers of students the disabled student's perspective and that they might also need to reflect on how they interact with them too, the illustrator and author showing that if they are too overbearing or do everything it can be frustrating for the student. It is a valuable thing for a book to not only teach children, but adults too.



This is me being sad.
 Maybe you think I'm being happy in this picture.
 Really I'm being sad but pretending I'm being happy.
 I'm doing that because I think people won't
 like me if I look sad.

Fig. 7. Quentin Blake (2008) *Sad Book*

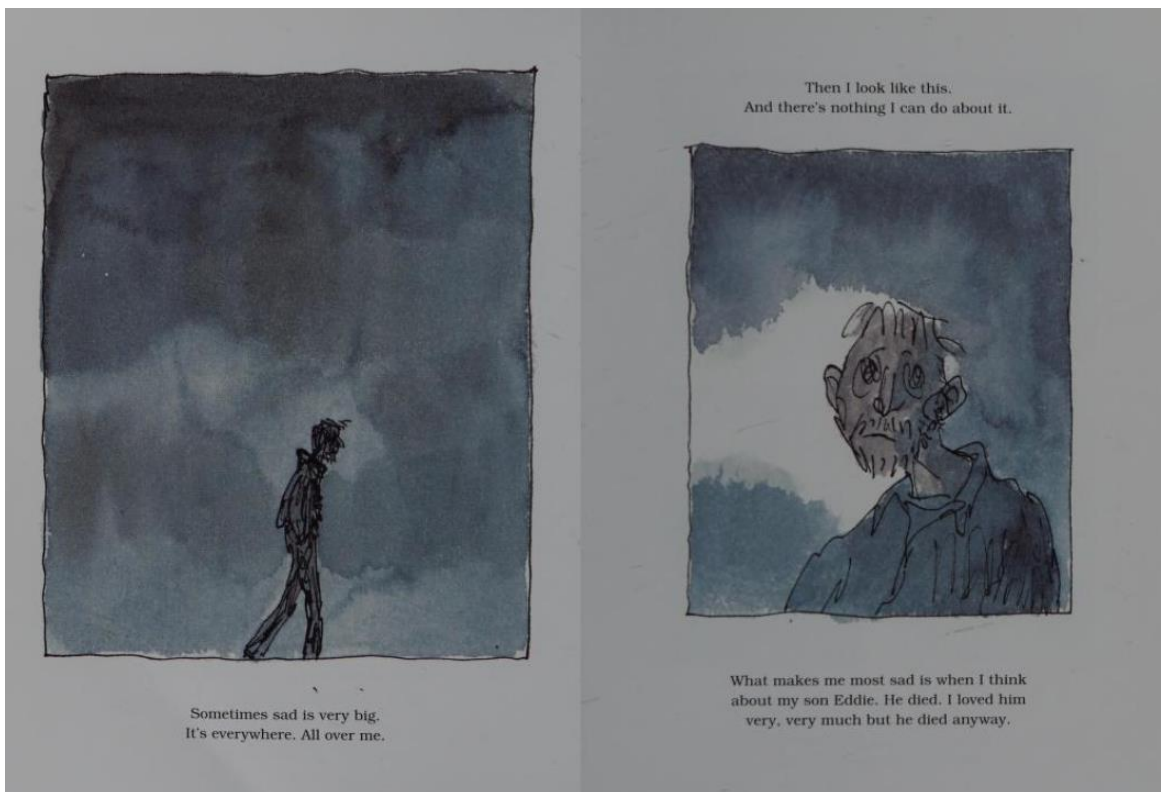


Fig. 8. Quentin Blake (2008) *Sad Book*



Fig. 9. Quentin Blake (2008) *Sad Book*

The last book this essay will explore is titled *Sad Book*, written by author Michael Rosen, and illustrated by Quentin Blake. This book is a non-fiction account of the authors personal experience with the grief of losing a child and explores his emotions throughout the book. Although it is marketed towards children, it is explicitly stated by the author that his story “speaks to everyone” (Rosen, 2008.). Rosen’s matter of fact style of writing about grief is complimented by the classic style of Blake’s artwork, the scratchy linework of Blakes illustrations enhances the text and shows the fragile-ness of the author throughout the story. The illustrator in this book plays around with colours a lot, using vibrant, bright colours in the first page along with the big smile (Fig. 7) contrasts with the text saying that it is him being sad, and as soon as you turn the page you are hit with the murky, muted colours that truly encapsulate the grief of the author talking about the passing of his child (Fig. 8). He also uses composition to his advantage,

making the figure look and feel small within the box, as well as drawing him smaller in the second portrait to contrast with the first, really capturing the vulnerability.

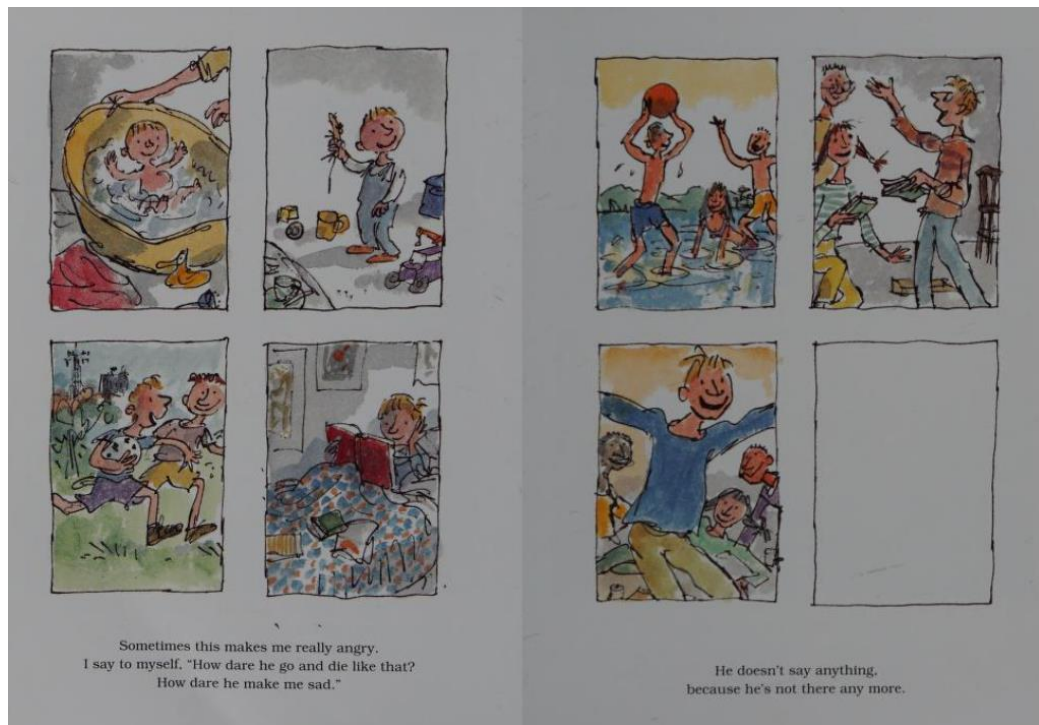


Fig. 10. Quentin Blake (2008) *Sad Book*



Fig. 11. Quentin Blake (2008) *Sad Book*

Another example being in Fig. 10 where he draws little moments in time in each box, almost cluttered, where it suddenly stops abruptly and only white space remains, suggesting that his death also came suddenly. He uses this contrast of colours all throughout the book to show the reader the emotional journey that Rosen was going through. Using bright colours for happier, hopeful, or funnier moments in the story, and using muted colours for more serious and sombre moments. One colour that appears quite a lot, specifically in the latter half of the book is yellow. “Reflective and radiant, vibrant yellow is the symbolic colour of hope, happiness, and good cheer” (Eiseman, 2017, p.38) To focus on the last page of the book, at first glance with the grey background and his expression the reader might think this is a sad ending, however, with the candle shining so brightly onto him and there being less grey in the background than usual, the author may be suggesting that there’s still hope, that even though the grief will never truly leave there is still much to look forward to. This is further suggested by the previous pages where he talks about the things that keep him going when he’s at his worst.

This book differs from the previous two examples as it focuses on a much darker and difficult topic matter, with the topic being death and grief. Some might argue that it might be too much to introduce to children, Salisbury and Styles (2012, p.113) stating that “many commentators ... have increasingly come to believe that young children must be protected from all things unpleasant and dangerous” however,

Although children cannot be protected from loss, they can be exposed to it in ways that range from the sensitive to the callous, the inquiring to the hushed, the slow and careful to the swift, sudden, and overwhelming.

Spitz (2000, p.76)

Not only can this book help children and teenagers navigate their experiences with death and grieving and broaden their understanding, but it can also be helpful for adults reading it who are going through the same thing. Some may find it refreshing how *Sad Book* doesn't sugar coat anything and is very to the point in its delivery. The reader can have a connection with the author in their similar experiences without having to talk to anyone, which is amplified by the illustrator's ability to draw exactly how someone feels in that moment, such as in Fig.9. where the author discusses how sometimes he feels sadness unexpectedly and out of nowhere, highlighted by Blake's illustration where you can see the colour transition from a vibrant sunny day out with lush trees, to a stormy dark sky and trees that are withered, incorporating pathetic fallacy into the environment outside to symbolise how the author is feeling inside.

To conclude, this essay has explored the works of illustrators/author illustrators who work on difficult, sensitive or shocking themes and how the illustrations work with and compliment the text of the book, as well as how it benefits those who read them. When exploring these books, each of them had differences such as subject matter, but similarities such as dealing with sensitive topics and helping younger people to explore the emotions they feel and put a name to them and to be more emotionally intelligent.

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