

“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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Word Count: 2552

Course: BA Illustration

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Browne's quotation within this essay question refers to parents sheltering their children far too much, for example not teaching their children about difficult topics such as death or illness. This type of excessive protection can lead to children growing up to find that they are quite naive compared to their peers, as well as forcing them to face harsh truths suddenly in adulthood. Research has found that overprotective parents can cause their children to develop a dramatic dependence on their parents, as well as chronic anxiety and a predisposition for other mental illnesses (Chae, 2019). In recent times it is becoming more common for parents to protect their children from the difficult realities of the world, particularly regarding death and illness. I will be discussing why this is not necessarily a good thing and why we need to teach our children about real life situations they may face in their lifetime. Additionally I will be exploring the different ways in which parents can gently bring up these topics to their children in a safe and loving way (Longbottom and Slaughter, 2018). In this essay I will discuss the purpose of difficult topics being discussed in children's picture books, as well as the pros and cons of them becoming more widespread.

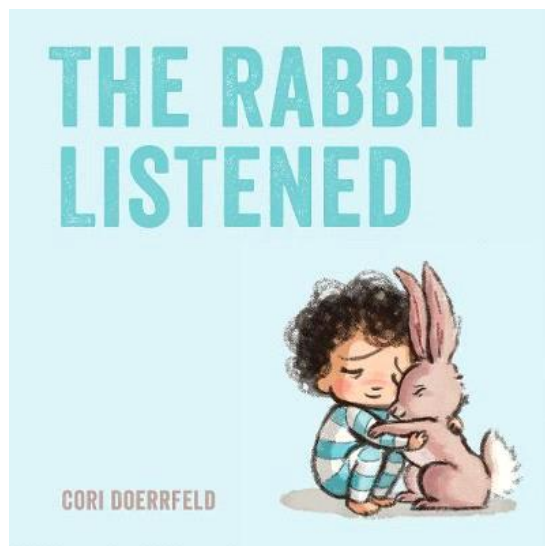


Fig 1, Illustration of a young boy hugging a small rabbit.

Loss is defined as “a sense of grief, the processing of losing someone or something” (Oxford Languages and Google - English | Oxford Languages, 2021). Loss is an extremely strong and powerful feeling often especially after a loved one passes, whether they were family, a friend, or a pet. The first book I will be discussing that covers loss is called *The Rabbit That Listened*, by author illustrator Cori Doerrfeld. It follows the story of a young boy named Taylor, whose tower has just fallen down. He visits many animals for help, but they cannot help him. Finally, the boy sits down, alone and upset. Soon a rabbit comes up to him and sits close to him, together the two come up with a solution to rebuild the tower. The rabbit supported the boy by providing the proper support unlike the other animals.



Fig 2, an illustration of four different animals attempting to comfort the boy.

Fig 3, an illustration of the young boy is upset and a rabbit comes and sits by him.



Fig 3, an illustration of the young boy, he is upset and a rabbit comes and sits by him.

The book is about loss and introduces children to this topic in a gentle way, allowing them to learn vital lessons in the process. The illustrations in this book are simple spot illustrations for the most part, the other animals are bigger than the boy and therefore could reflect how adults may not listen to children. Whereas in comparison the rabbit is a similar size to the boy, which shows that children are often listened to and taken more seriously by those of a similar age. Taylors loneliness is reflected in the empty space around the spot illustrations, additionally the scale also has an impact. Taylor is smaller compared to all the animals, besides the rabbit, which could show how small he feels because of this feeling of isolation caused by not being listened to properly. The simple appearance of this picture book disguises the depth of the story itself. The story has both the literal meaning, and also the metaphorical meaning which is one of loss. Taylor has built something up and spent time on it only to lose it. He is understandably upset by this, as we all are when we lose something or someone that meant a lot to us.

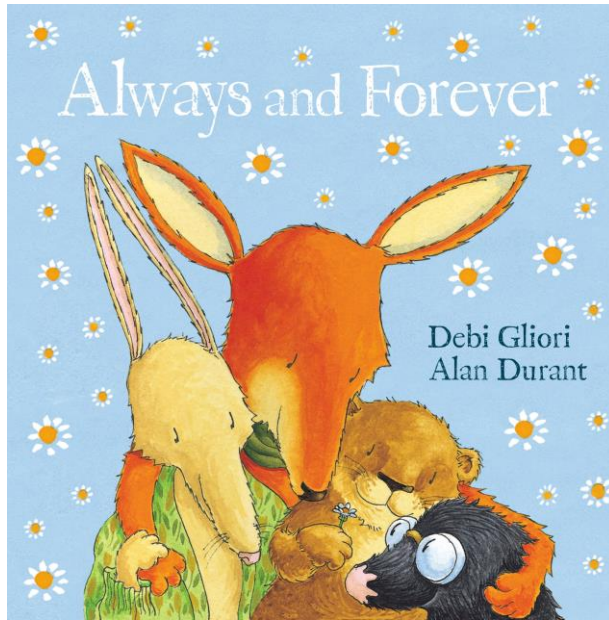


Fig 4, an illustration of Fox hugging his three friends.

Always and Forever is another children's picture book that discusses the topic of loss tackled in a more literal way. This book centres on a group of animals following on from the death of a friend, it begins by showing their lives together with the fox who later passes. It continues on to discuss his passing and how his friends cope together, they do so by looking through old photos and reminiscing on happy memories they all made together. The story is said to be uplifting in reviews, despite how sad it may sound. This makes it a good intermediate tool to help children learn about loss. Reviews of this book say it is a moving story that handles loss gently, however it is still upsetting and may particularly upset younger audiences as it is less metaphorical and more literal than the previous book. One review says, "I love how at first, talking about Fox makes their grieving worse. They grieve for months...Then all the animals find their own way to honor fox's memory and keep it alive in the present" (Forever, Durant and Gliori, 2021). His friends begin the difficult grieving process by avoiding the topic, but when Squirrel comes to visit they all share good memories of their beloved friend who has sadly passed. The colours within this book are vibrant

and bright, this could be to support the idea that loss doesn't have to be scary, dark, and lonely. If the colours were more muted it wouldn't be able to get the same point across that these characters are warm and there to be comforting in a sad situation. These illustrations have relatively detailed backgrounds compared to the previous book, which creates a comforting atmosphere throughout. This could mean that the sadness does not consume the book. It is still there but unlike the previous book it still has a bright and chirpy appearance within the images, unlike the blank backgrounds of the previous book about loss. The soft textures of the characters adds to this comforting feeling.

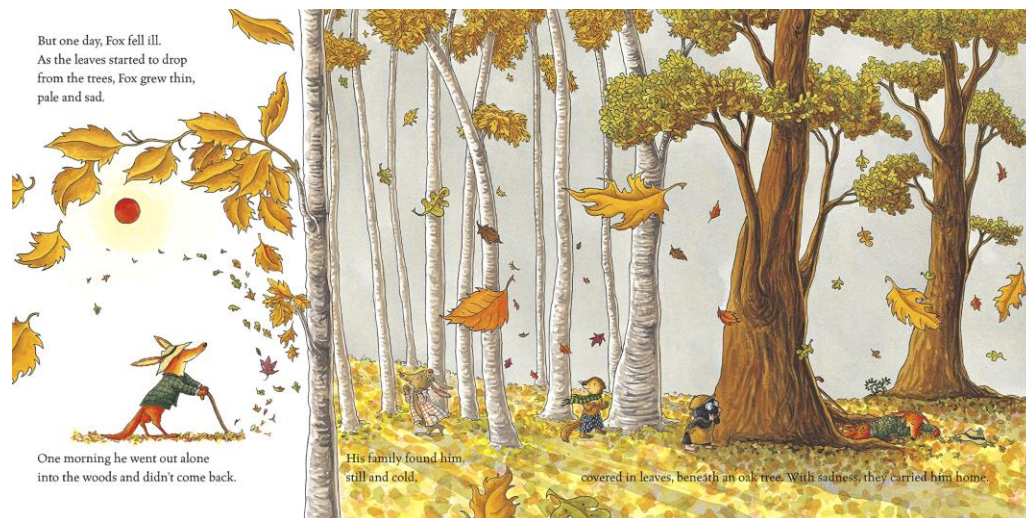


Fig 5, An illustration of Fox going for a walk and not coming back, his body is laying in the woods and his friends find him and bury him.

Depression affects 5% of adults globally, approximately 280 million people. It is key that children learn about feelings such as depression as it may well affect them later in life (Depression, 2021). *The Red Tree*, by author illustrator Shaun Tan, discusses this topic in a metaphorical way. He does this by having hope represented by a red tree and the world around the girl in this book is dull and at times frightening.



Fig 6, an illustration of a young girl speaks into a cone, gibberish comes out and spills over the white border of the illustration.

The medium used in these illustrations is oil paint and acrylic paint, these are intense heavy mediums which reflect the feeling of depression represented by this picture book. Within the illustrations the colours are very dark and muted besides the red tree itself, which also emphasises the feelings of the little girl within the story. Also, the illustrations are framed, which may create a feeling of being left out and further away from the story, giving the reader a limited view of the world. This could also emphasise the feeling of the little girl being alone and isolated, as even we are distanced.

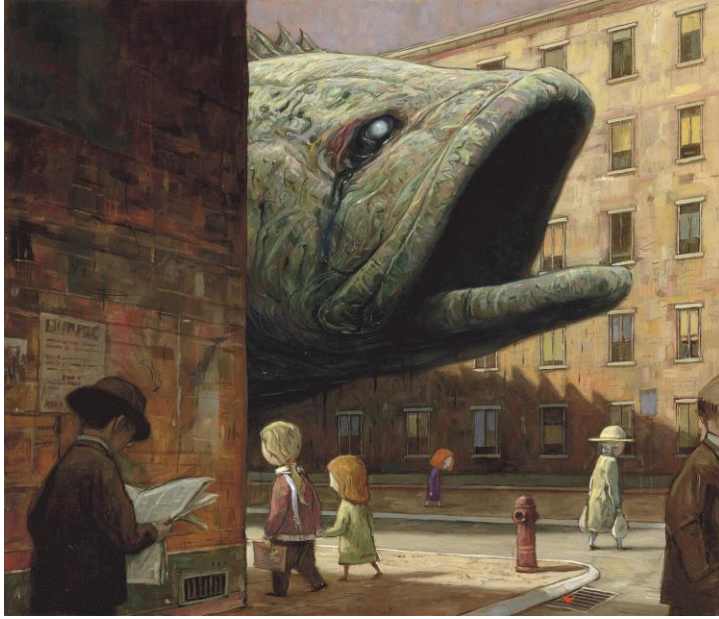


Fig 7, a detailed dark illustration of the girl being followed by a large rotting fish floating above her.

This book is full of surrealism which shows the viewer how depression can distort the sufferer's view on the world. The level of detail in the images creates an uneasy atmosphere, for example the fish. It is grotesque, and the details in particular, significantly add to this aspect of the images. On every page in the book there is a red leaf, this represents hope, and also implies that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. Also that it is vital to always have hope, no matter how small it may be. This story shows that sadness will pass if you let it, but to never lose hope or the sadness may linger, which is an incredibly important story for children to learn.

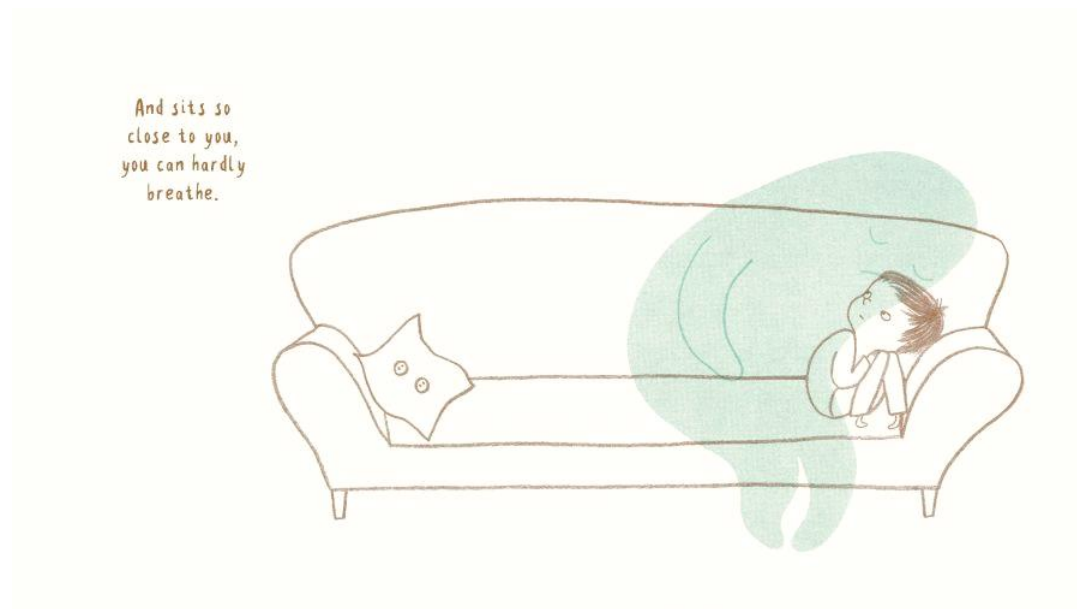


Fig 8, an illustration of a boy sitting on a sofa with a transparent blue figure, the figure is invading his personal space.

When Sadness Comes to Call is another children's picture book that tackles this topic of depression. It is also symbolic as the feeling of sadness is represented by a blue figure. The boy sits down with the figure and gives it a name which demystifies it. Getting to know the figure is a metaphor of how getting to know your own sadness helps you feel better overall. It's important for people to get to know their feelings as well as learning how to cope with those feelings. Sadness is represented by blue which ties in with the previous book, *The Red Tree*, as the tree is a vibrant red and represents the end of her dark

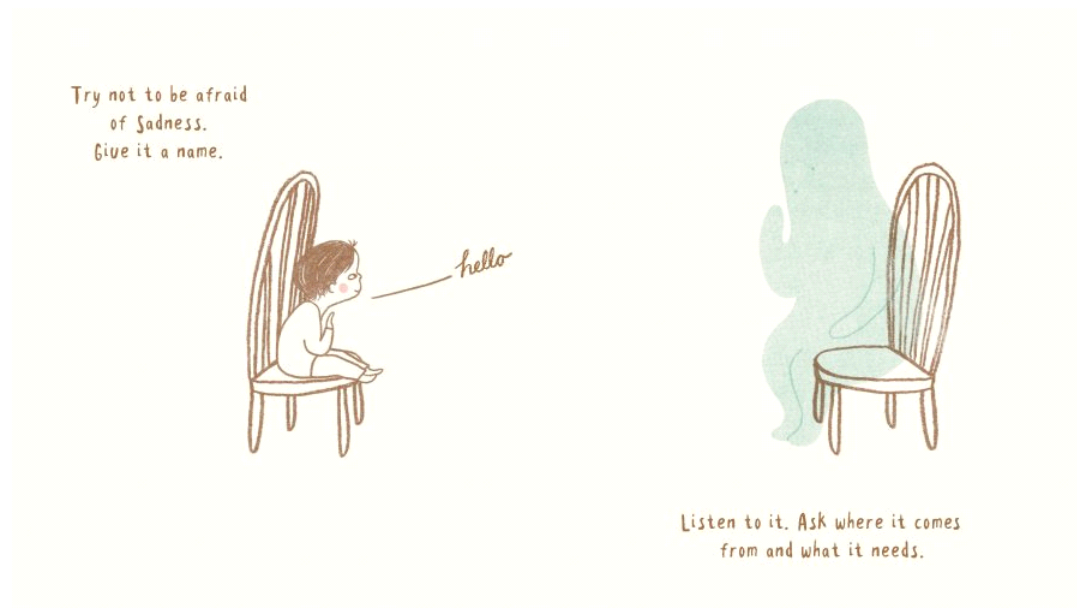


Fig 9, illustration of the boy and the figure sitting on chairs talking to each other.

depression. These colours are juxtaposed yet are used in the same way in these books, red is on one side of the spectrum, happiness, and blue is the other, sadness (Meiklejohn, 2013).

There are no visible frames around the illustrations which causes the feeling of the reader being welcomed in. This is much like the way the boy welcomes the sadness and treats it as though it is a guest.

This book is quite the contrast to the previous book that also tackles depression, it is bright and light in colour. In this book the illustrations are very pale and seem to not be as layered as the previous books illustrations. The images in *When Sadness Comes To Call* are almost transparent, particularly the sadness which is very ghostlike. Children need guidance with dealing with new feelings, and this book provides that. It shows that getting to know your feelings can help with the feeling at the moment but also with future emotions, demystifying difficult feelings is very important (Abdelghani, 2021). This book shows how sadness does not need to be frightening.

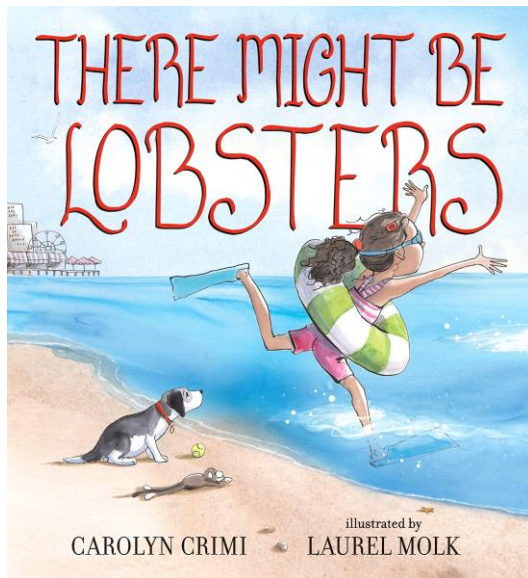


Fig 10, illustrated book cover of a girl running towards the sea to go swimming, behind her sits a small anxious dog and a smaller toy monkey.

Everyone experiences some form of anxiety in their lives, but chronic anxiety can be debilitating. The book *There Might Be Lobsters* tells the story of a nervous dog, Sukie, she is worried about being at the beach, everything is overwhelming her, and she is very scared of going into the ocean. Sukie's fear disappears when someone smaller is in need, she overcomes her fear to help someone in need. It is a good representation of anxiety because it displays the overwhelming feeling experienced when very anxious. The style of the illustrations is very colourful and playful, this creates an inviting atmosphere within the book. Sukie faces her fears in order to help someone smaller than her. This shows her kind and caring nature coming through her initial fear. Positioning Sukie the dog as the main character frames the story around the idea of innocence and makes it more relatable for children (Rippin, 2012). She is a symbol of someone that is pure of heart, but full of nerves. This makes the story and the characterisation of Sukie feel endearing. This, paired with the colourful illustrations, creates a welcoming atmosphere. It is a story about overcoming your fears in a setting that feels welcoming and inviting to both the reader and the character at the same time. Ultimately, this is

a book that tackles rather dark feelings in a contrastingly bright way. It shows the reader that things aren't always as bad as they seem and that there's always something to look forward to at the end of the hardship. Showing a small dog with anxiety is relatable to young readers as well as a fun cute story, Sukie overcoming her fear gives readers dealing with similar issues hope for themselves.

The next book is about Ruby, who is very happy being herself until she finds a worry, her worry grows bigger each day and turns her world dim and grey. When she finds another child who also has a worry, they talk about their worries and before you know it they both feel better. It shows that a problem shared really is a problem halved. The colourful nature of the cover is inviting to the reader and yellow is a very happy and positive colour, showing how content she was before the worry came along (Smith, 2021). The worry represents her anxieties, this feeling is personified in this little grey character within the book. Ruby sharing her problems with a friend helps lift the weight off her shoulders, her friend also shares her problems and both their worries disappear. Their worlds go from lifeless grey tones to bright vibrant colours once again, this shows the kind of effect that anxiety can have on someone's well being and general worldview. This story is very important for children, as it teaches them that everyone has their own worries and that talking about it can really help. It teaches children to talk about their feelings which helps them in lots of aspects in their lives, such as avoiding misunderstandings with others as well as not keeping her feelings bottled up until they burst (van Delft, Finkenauer, De Schipper and Lamers-Winkelman, 2018).

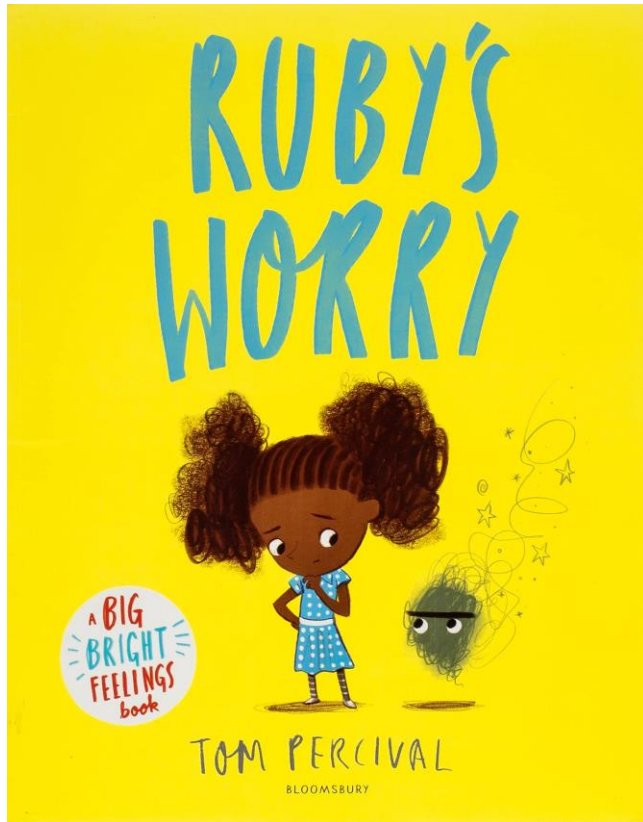


Fig 11, an illustration of a girl and her worry, displayed as a scribbly grey figure, on a bright yellow background.

To conclude, children's picture books need to tackle difficult issues in order to help children understand their own feelings as well as those of others. These books gently prepare children for issues they will likely face in the future, such as feelings of depression or helping someone else manage their feelings of anxiety or loss. Also the issue of teaching children important lessons about consent is extremely important, as they need to know how to set boundaries as well as respect those made by their peers. Leesa Waters says "that means stopping tickling your child if they say no, not making them kiss Grandma or Grandpa", letting children set their own boundaries is important but respecting your child's boundaries is key to teaching them about consent (Dillon, 2021). These picture books can help prevent issues such as lack of communication, self harming due to emotional frustration and not knowing how to discuss their

feelings. As well as sexual abuse, children knowing their own boundaries and teaching them when young about how to respect others boundaries. The negative of these picture books is that if they are suddenly introduced to a heavy book, for example on loss, it could frighten them or make them avoid the topic even further. This could create more issues so they need to be used with caution, parents need to gently introduce their children to these books rather than throwing them in at the deep end. “The innovation lies in the maturation of the picture book as a serious medium of communication, one that has taken on humanistic responsibilities” (Schwarz and Schwarz 1991), this quotation refers to the evolution of picture books in modern society and how important it is to teach children about issues they may come to face in their lives.

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