

Student Name: Alicia Routliff
Student Number: 2006791
Programme of Study: Illustration
Module: Research in Practice (ADAD5004/C)
Tutor Name: Delyth Lloyd Evans
Word Count: 2,506

‘Every picture tells a story’

How children's books are beneficial to emotional development and mental health awareness

Introduction

In this proposal, I will be covering the three key words: Picture books, Mental health and Communication, through the medium of illustrated children’s picture books that deal with difficult subjects. By researching the historical context behind the mention of mental health in picture books along with picture book theory from authors Jane Doonan, Molly Bang and Maria Nickolajeva, I aim to achieve a better understanding of the fundamental elements behind the illustrated picture book. This information is extremely important for my future project where I intend to create my own children’s picture book that addresses serious mental health issues such as depression, which stems from my own personal experiences, to raise awareness and de-stigmatise conversations surrounding mental health issues in children, also being versatile enough to reach teenagers and adults. Exploring pre-existing picture books that talk about difficult subjects, particularly surrounding mental health, by making comparisons and

highlighting the significant elements will provide a well-informed base knowledge for my forthcoming independent project.

Picture Books

Children's picture books began to take a turn the mid-20th century, introducing themes that are now very relevant to discussing mental health such as: dealing with emotions and emotional regulation, feelings of being different, loneliness, and difficult topics like grief and loss. Post the second world war, there was an uprise in research into child psychology and emotional development, influenced by issues surrounding, attachment, trauma, and childhood cognitive growth. Artist and child psychoanalyst Erik Erikson explains in his book *Childhood and society*, published in 1950, that "there is in every child at every stage a new miracle of vigorous unfolding, which constitutes a new hope and a new responsibility for all" (Erikson, 1950, p.225), reflecting Erikson's belief that a child's mind is vulnerable and constantly evolving, which emphasises the importance of mental wellbeing and emotional understanding in children. Although there were no picture books that specifically dealt with the topic of children's mental health at the time, examples of this were beginning to emerge through stories that explored children's emotional worlds. Maurice Sendak's illustrated picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*, published in 1963, explored difficult themes such as anger, loneliness, belonging and fear, which marked a turning point in illustrated children's picture books at the time. Through this story, we follow our main character, Max, as he gets sent to his room for misbehaving, and we watch as he embarks on his journey to an island inhabited by monstrous creatures known as 'the wild things', the metaphysical embodiments of his uncontrollable emotions. He eventually becomes king of the monsters, which puts him in control, though he chooses to go home where he finds his food is "still hot"

(Sendak, 1992), a symbol of safety, forgiveness and love. Sendak provides a metaphor for emotional regulation in children as Max expresses and confronts his feelings, eventually returning to a place of comfort and safety. Academic writer, Ellen Handler Spitz, notes that books like this “do not deny emotional realities, but rather offer the means for children to see, feel, and reflect” (Spitz, 2000), as Sendak provides a story that acknowledges the difficult emotions a child can deal with, and encourages them to be explored through imagination and brings up the conversation of children's emotional and mental wellbeing.

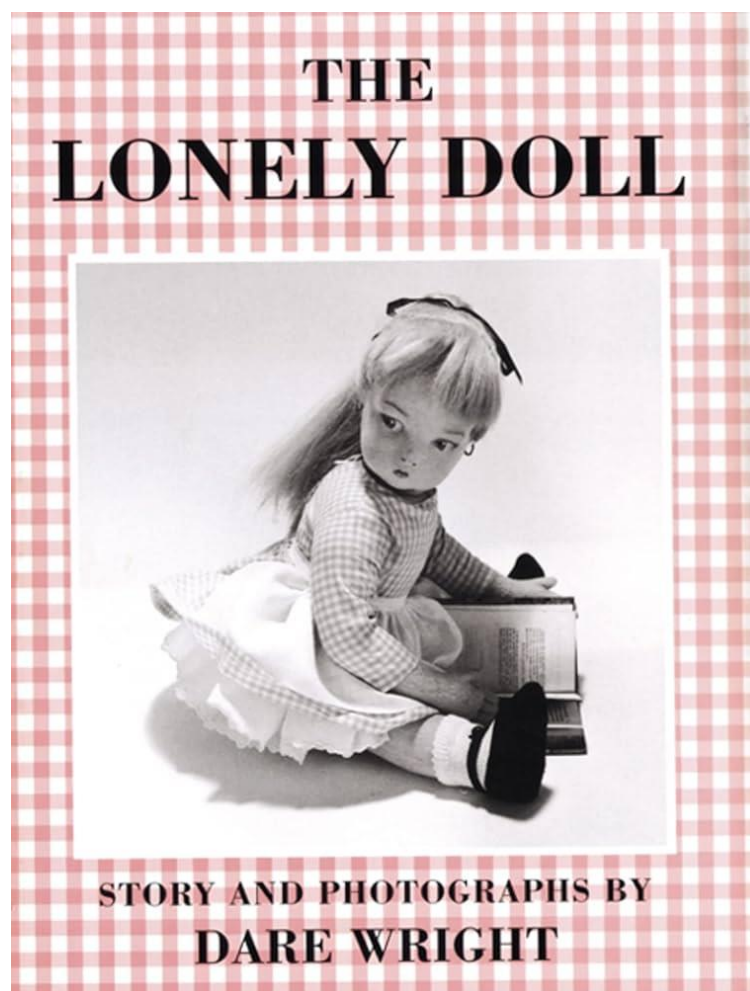


Figure 1: Dare Wright, *The Lonely Doll* (1957)

Another early example of emotional storytelling in children's picture books is seen in *The Lonely Doll* by Dare Wright. Published in 1957, *The Lonely Doll* explores the story of Edith,

a doll who lives alone and longs for companionship. Throughout the story as Mr, Bear and Little Bear come to live with her, Edith experiences feelings of belonging as well as the anxieties of maintaining the relationship and always being ‘good enough’ for them, however, Mr Bear reassures her and states “I will always love you, no matter what you do” (Wright, p.58,1957). This narrative addresses the feelings a child might have regarding isolation, comfort and the fears of conditional love. In the book *The Uses of Enchantment*, published in 1976, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim explains how “the child must be helped to make some coherent sense out of the turmoil of his feelings” (Bettelheim, p.5,1976) highlighting the importance of exploring intense emotions like these through the familiarity of children’s storybooks.

Picture Book Theory

Art critic and novelist John Berger states in his 1972 book, *Ways Of Seeing*, that “Seeing comes before words” (Berger,1972). This presents us with the idea that visual imagery can communicate emotions and ideas even before language, representing how picture books can help children understand and feel emotions even when they may not yet be able to explain them in words. Unlike books that include entirely textual stories, picture books rely on what author and children’s literature specialist Perry Nodleman states as “the symbiotic relationship between words and pictures” (Nodleman,p. 3,1988) which emphasises the importance of the relationship between text and image being used to create a deeper meaning that younger readers can engage with both emotionally and cognitively. In their 2001 book, *How Picturebooks Work*, authors Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott argue that the tension between image and text can create a ‘gapping’ effect

(Nikolajeva and Scott, p. 15, 2006), allowing space for the reader to bridge the gap between the two through their own narrative and emotions. Through this combination of words and pictures, picture books provide children with an important space to experience and process their often confusing and complex emotions, encouraging emotional and mental understanding from an early age. From an early age, we can understand that "pictures are signs to be read, and reading them is a creative activity" (Doonan, 1993), emphasising how young readers are actively interpreting a deeper meaning within the visuals of picture books, finding their own personal story with the help of semiotics. Likewise, in Molly Bang's *Picture this: how pictures work*, she highlights the importance of how visual elements such as colour and shape can evoke an emotional response within the reader through her statement "We react to forms in pictures as we would to the real world" (Bang, 2000). The interplay of image, symbolism, words and narrative provides children with a safe space for exploration of their internal feelings, garnering a healthy relationship and understanding of emotional and mental wellbeing which is an important step into later life mental health awareness.

Examples

Elaborating on this knowledge of semiotics and the relationship between image and text to convey deeper emotional meaning, these techniques have been integrated into many of the contemporary picture books we see today. Focusing more on children's picture books that deal with difficult topics such as emotional and mental wellbeing, authors and illustrators like Shaun Tan and Michael Rosen and Michael Broad combine sensitive

topics and visual metaphors to create picture books that offer a space for young readers to explore their feelings of isolation, grief, sadness and anxiety.

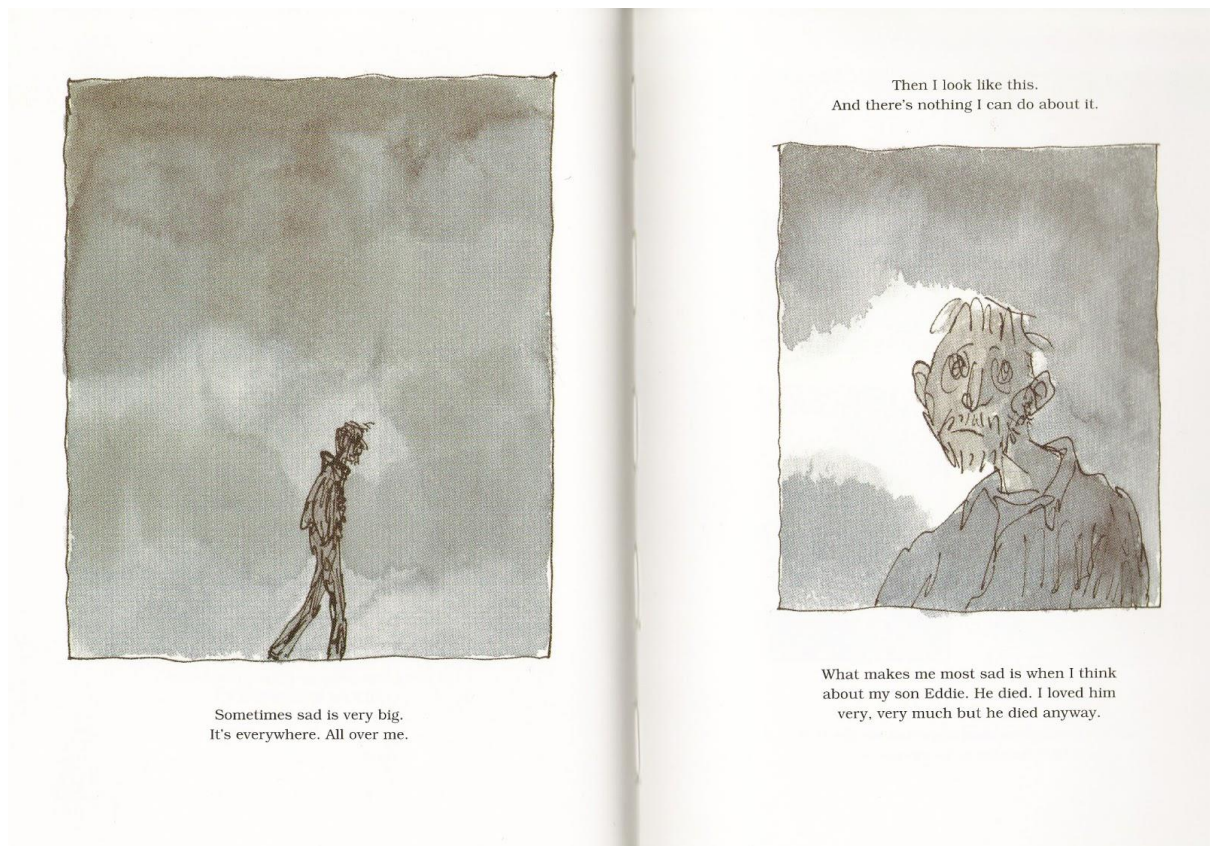


Figure 2: Michael Rosen, *Sad Book*, (2004)

Sad Book

Illustrated by Quentin Blake, Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* is one of the most well-known examples of picture books that openly discusses struggles with mental health, more specifically dealing with feelings of grief and depression. Rosen created the book after the death of his son, Eddie, and explores his experience with grief in a down-to-earth way, portraying how his sadness can exist despite everything appearing 'fine' on the outside. He writes: "This is me being sad. Maybe you think I'm happy in this picture. Really, I'm sad but pretending I'm happy." (Rosen, 2004). Quentin Blake's expressive and loose illustrations along with simple text emphasise the fluctuating emotional state Rosen

conveys throughout the book, providing the reader with the visual representation of these difficult to navigate emotions and confronting them rather than encouraging the reader to find distractions to these negative feelings.

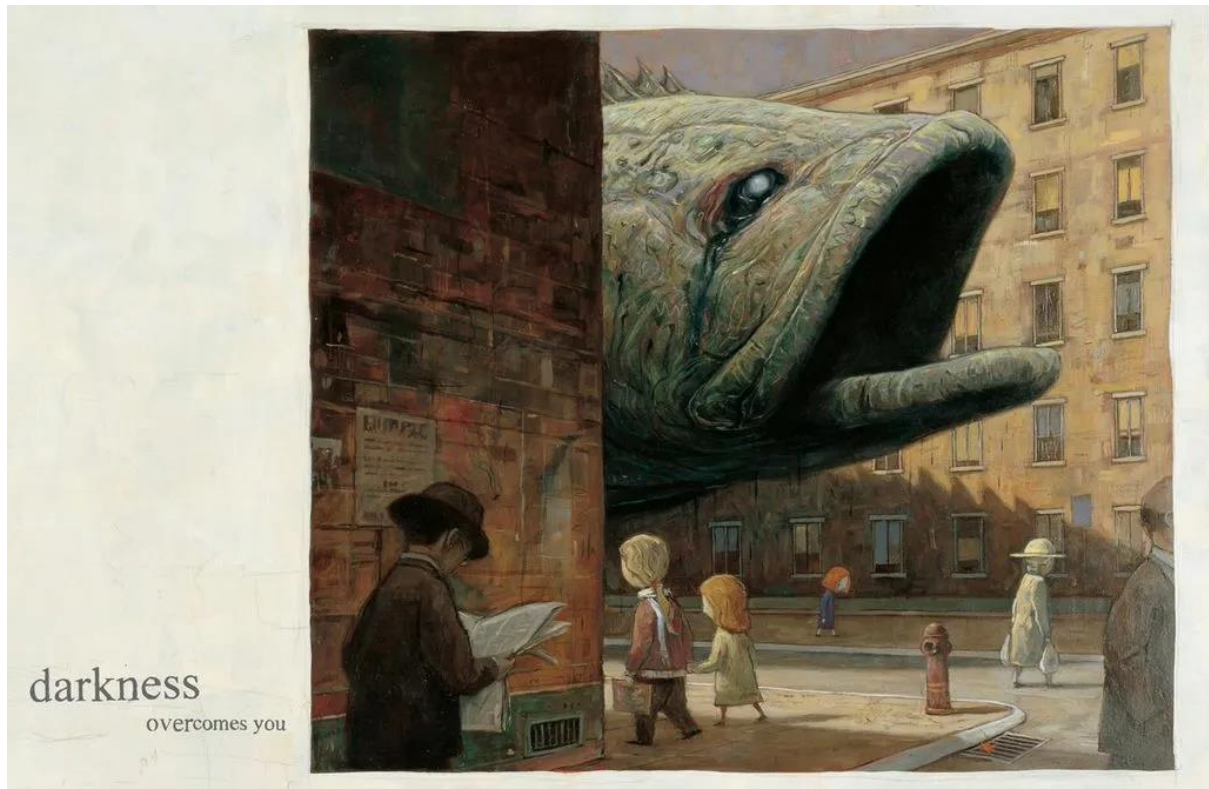


Figure 3: Shaun Tan, *The Red Tree*, (2001)

The Red Tree

The Red Tree by Shaun Tan follows an unidentified young character as we venture through a series of “self-contained images which invite readers to draw their own meaning in the absence of any explanatory narrative” (Tan, Shauntan.net). Throughout the book, Tan explores a range of complex feelings, including; isolation, hopelessness and depression which are portrayed through the illustrations paired with little to no text, as well as the lack of colouration in our character, mouthless and lacking identity as they move through images that depict uncomfortable situations, often getting lost in the sea

of people. A little red leaf acts as a metaphor for feelings of hope as it appears hidden in every illustration, eventually leading us to a vibrant and glowing red tree, blooming in a place that was once very muted and hopeless. Educationalist Peter Hollindale makes the point that postmodern stories like this move away from traditional comforting narratives and explains “Children’s books are inevitably the bearers of ideology” (Hollindale,1992), emphasising the need for introducing modern themes like emotional wellbeing that allow readers to sit with their emotions.

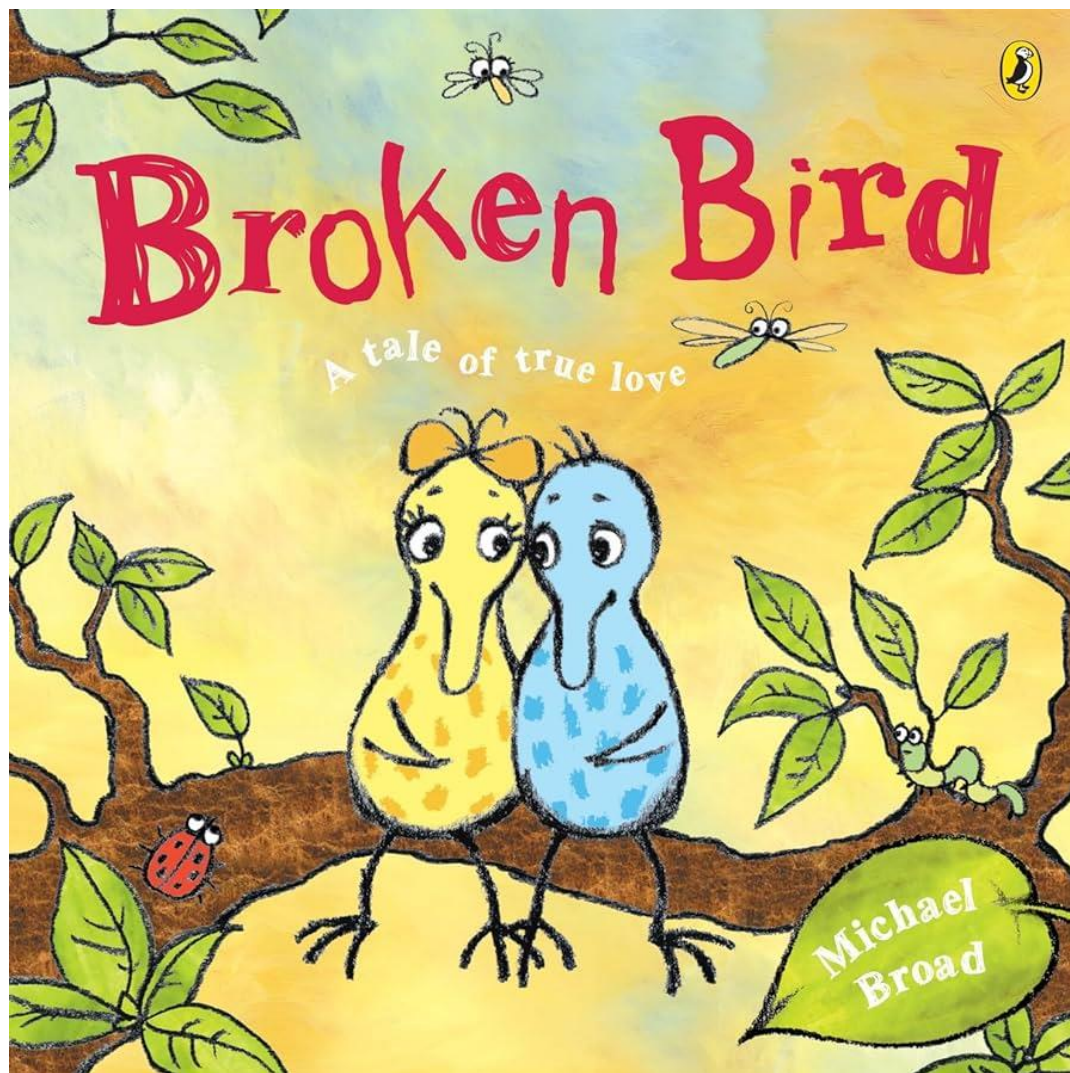


Figure 4: Michael Broad, *Broken Bird*, (2006)

Broken Bird

Michael Broad's *Broken Bird* depicts the story of a small bird who has feelings of hopelessness, vulnerability and failure due to his birth defect, as he was born with a broken wing. We explore the story of emotional understanding and healing through soft and muted illustrations, which reflect these emotions our character feels which can be similarly referenced in author Jane Doonan's *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books*, explaining "the mood of a picture can be shaped as much by colour and space as by narrative" (Doonan, 1993). The story focuses on acceptance and healing rather than on fixing our character and his differences. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott furthers this point in his book *Playing and Reality*, as he explains that children need a dedicated personal space to understand and discover their "true self" (Winnicott, 1971) by allowing themselves to feel and express these difficult emotions, which *Broken Bird* demonstrates perfectly.

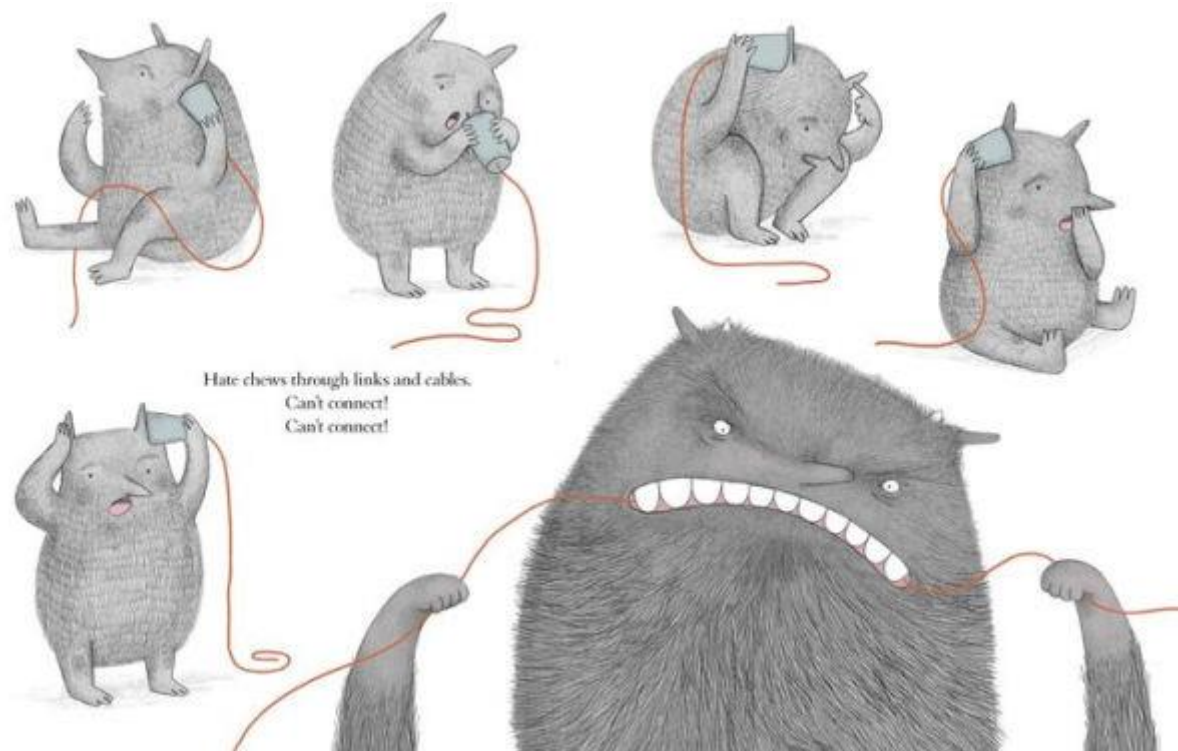


Figure 5: Anna Llenas, *What Feelings Do When No One's Looking*, (2022)

Present Day

Picture books today continue to play an important role in children's emotional and cognitive development and wellbeing. As we gain an increasing awareness for mental health and wellbeing, it encouragingly more important to create stories and picture books that aid children with their understanding of their own internal emotions, as well as to educate about ways they can support themselves with their own mental wellbeing. Child psychologists support this idea and emphasise the importance of the role that picture books can play in a child's cognitive development, providing a safe space and tool to help children understand, explore and acknowledge their feelings. In recent years, books such as; *The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers, *The Colour Monster* by Anna Llenas and *What Feelings Do When No One's Looking* by Tina Oziewicz all explore emotional regulation and open difficult conversations about how a child may be feeling. Nikolajeva states how children's literature "challenges its audiences cognitively and

affectively, stimulating attention, imagination, memory, inference-making, empathy and all other elements of mental processes” (Nikolajeva, 2014), furthering the importance of children’s picture books in supporting emotional development at an early age.

Looking Ahead

As we look ahead, there is a growing demand for children’s media that surrounds talk about mental health and wellbeing, as “one in eight children and young people suffer from a diagnosable mental health condition” (Words&Pictures). Children’s picture books need to demonstrate sensitive topics through narratives that can be easily understood through visual storytelling, using semiotics to convey meaning and emotion that surpasses words. Topics and emotions including sadness, anger, loneliness anxiety and grief are sensitive subjects that can be more easily understood for younger minds using narrative and visual storytelling, allowing parents to encourage openness with difficult conversations and provide growing minds with the tools they need to understand their feelings throughout life. As I intend to create my future project; a children’s picture book about depression, I aim to contribute to the rise of mental health awareness for children and adults alike. Children's book writer, Tom Percival, furthers the importance of these picture books as he explains on his blog that “you’re “never too young to start understanding your own feelings, or those of the people around you” (Nerdy Book Club). Pulling from my own personal experiences and struggles with mental health, I hope to achieve a similar outcome to books like *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan, and Michael Rosen’s *Sad Book*, which address these difficult to talk about themes in a sometimes metaphorical and open way that introduces more sensitive subjects to younger readers. Reducing stigma around children’s mental health and wellbeing, my storybook will pull

from my own perspective, aiming to validate children's feelings and emotional struggles, providing a picture book that can be reflected on by people of all ages. It is important to encourage younger ages to talk about and acknowledge their own feelings and mental health, as society becomes increasingly aware of mental wellbeing and mental health issues it is vital to include young people in the conversation, to provide them with a higher emotional understanding as they grow up.

Bibliography

Bang, M. (2000) Picture this : how pictures work. New York: SeaStar.

Bettelheim, B. (1976) The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, p.5. New York : Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1976.

Berger, J. (1972) Ways of seeing. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

Doonan, J. (1993) Looking at pictures in picture books. Stroud: Thimble Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). Childhood and society, p.225. W W Norton & Co.

Hollindale, P. (1992) 'Ideology and the children's book', p.26, in Hunt, P. (ed.) Literature for children: Contemporary criticism. London: Routledge.

Illustration feature responding to the crisis in children's Mental Health Words&Pictures. Available at: <https://www.wordsandpics.org/2020/03/illustration-feature-responding-to.html> (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Learning how to navigate feelings by Tom Percival (2019) Nerdy Book Club. Available at: <https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/2019/09/29/learning-how-to-navigate-feelings-by-tom-percival/> (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Red Tree Book, Shaun Tan. Available at: <https://www.shauntan.net/red-tree-book> (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Roberta Trites (2014) 'Maria Nikolajeva Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature', Barnboken, 37. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14811/clr.v37i0.189>.

Rosen, M. and Blake, Q. (2004) Michael Rosen's sad book. London: Walker.

Sendak, M. (1992). Where the Wild Things are. London: Harper Collins.

Spitz, Ellen Handler (2000). Inside Picture Books. Yale University Press.

Nikolajeva, M. and Scott, C. (2006) How Picturebooks work, p.15. Abingdon: Routledge.

Nodelman, P. and EBSCOhost (1988) Words about pictures : the narrative art of children's picture books, p.3. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Winnicott, D.W. (Donald W. (51AD) Playing and reality. London: Routledge.

Wright, Dare (1957). The Lonely Doll,p.58. Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday.

Figures used

Figure 1: Dare Wright, The Lonely Doll (1957)

Figure 2: Michael Rosen, Sad Book, (2004)

Figure 3: Shaun Tan, The Red Tree, (2001)

Figure 4: Michael Broad, Broken Bird, (2006)

Figure 5: Anna Llenas, What Feelings Do When No One's Looking, (2022)