

Finding Harry

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan Tancock". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'S' at the beginning.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

July 2005

Graduation: July 23, 2005

Abstract

Children's literature plays a large role in elementary education today. It is one of the main facets for teaching many different subjects and topics in the classroom, not just for reading time. From my time spent in my elementary education courses, my love for children's literature has grown even more than before. I have also always had a love for British culture and spent a semester studying in London and traveling the British Isles. While there, I took numerous pictures of my stuffed animals around the country. I used these pictures and my love for children's literature to create a picture book for 6 to 9 year old children. I also gave a brief analysis of current children's picture books, discussing characteristics of the different subgenres that make up the genre of picture books.

Acknowledgements

- I want to thank Dr. Susan Tancock for advising me through this project. She was very helpful in both developing how to write my book and formulating ideas for my analysis.
- I would also like to thank Anne Hanson for helping me to come up with the inspiration and ideas behind this project.

Subgenres of Children's Picture Books

As an adult, one can find a book written on any topic imaginable. The same is true of children's literature. Children's picture books represent a variety of genres. For almost any topic a child can think of, a picture book has been written about it. One can find picture books on topics ranging anywhere from the made-up world of Dr. Seuss' The Lorax, to talking animals in E.B. White's Charlotte's Web, to dealing with social issues such as illiteracy as in Eve Bunting's The Wednesday Surprise, to the folk tales of the Grimm Brothers and everywhere in between. Picture books are often categorized as their own genre, but in reality, this genre is made up of many subgenres, all related by how illustrations enhance the text of the story.

“Even when they are not intended to do so, picture books provide children with some of their earliest takes on morality, taste, and basic cultural knowledge, including messages about gender, race, and class. They supply a stock of images for children's mental museums,” says Ellen Handler Spitz in her book Inside Picture Books. Picture books provide this information and images to children in assorted ways, depending upon the type of book it is. These types are the subgenres of picture books into which each picture book fits. The books in each of these subgenres have been categorized by similar literary characteristics. These subgenres include: fiction, historical fiction, traditional literature, fantasy, informational texts, as well as others. Books that fit into each of these subgenres are related by the broad topics and themes of their text. Although each book is unique, it fits into a larger class of texts related to it.

Fiction is the broadest subgenre of children's picture books. Fictional picture books are stories that the authors have made-up. These include, but are not limited to,

stories about animals, stories about people, stories that take place in fictional places, etc. Fiction can be further separated into smaller subcategories. Each subcategory includes all elements of literature, though more emphasis may be placed on one element more than another. Themes, or subcategories, included in fiction include: realism, animals, regional realism, history, traditional stories, and fantasy (Lukens 12).

Because of the wide range of subcategories, many different kinds of picture books fit into the fiction genre. These stories are very popular because they allow children to escape to another place and time while they are reading. These books take them on an adventure that may or may not be possible in the real world. As with any book, they can teach or entertain children. Many of the bestsellers in children's picture book literature have overwhelmingly been fictional literature. The number one bestselling children's picture book in December of 2004 according to *Publisher's Weekly* was The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg. This is the story of a little boy who does not believe in Santa. On Christmas Eve in the middle of the night, a train comes to take him and other children who do not believe to the North Pole to see Santa. On the way, the magical train takes the young boy on the adventure of a lifetime. At the North Pole, the boy meets Santa and is offered "any gift he desires. The boy modestly asks for one bell from the harness of the reindeer" (Van Allsburg front flap). Chris Van Allsburg's illustrations help bring the magical train to life for the reader. They help the child to feel like they are riding the train through the snow and mountains to the North Pole with the boy, bringing the story to life. Although this story has been made up, children like to read it because it helps them feel good about Christmas and believe that it could possibly happen.

Shel Silverstein's newest book, Runny Babbit has topped the bestseller list this year, being the number one book in April. Silverstein has used verse and wacky words to tell the story of Runny Babbit. "In a forest where the animals have a distinctly peculiar way of speaking, constantly switching their letters around--"ceed the fat" instead of "feed the cat"--the mischievous and playful Runny Babbit is always in search of adventure. Living with his large rabbit family, Runny's enthusiastic mishaps run from innocent haircuts to chiseling his likeness onto Rount Mushmore" (PriceGrabber.com). By using these silly word plays and creative black and white line drawings, Silverstein has created a fictional world where animals talk, mixing up their letters, and inviting children in to join them.

My new book, Finding Harry is another example of an animal fiction picture book. Like Runny Babbit it is animal fiction book, though it takes place in a real place and time. Using photographs taken while spending a semester in London, I created a story about two teddy bears and a pig that have gone to London to visit their friend, Harry. When they arrive in London, they find a note saying that he has gone to Dublin for a meeting and they should join him there. That begins their journey through the British Isles to find their friend, finally catching up with him back in London. The book allows children to explore England and Ireland through the photographs and feel like they are traveling with the animals in search of their friend. It is an example of regional realism as well, allowing children to travel the British Isles along with the animals, without ever leaving their seats. The story has been made-up, but has a sense of reality to it, since it has been set in real places, but children know it could not have happened since teddy bears and pigs cannot talk and travel the British Isles.

The majority of children's picture books today are fiction. They can give children a humorous look at life like Judith Viorst's Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day where everything that could go wrong in Alexander's day does. They can be more serious and reflect emotional or political issues as in Eve Bunting's Fly Away Home. This is a story about a child and father who are homeless, so they live in an airport. Many are written purely to tell a story. Whatever theme, fiction picture books capture the minds and hearts of children everywhere, opening their minds to new worlds and stories to experience.

Another subgenre of picture books is historical fiction books, a subcategory of fictional picture books. "Historical fiction is placed in the past, and the time and place in the past determine setting" (Lukens 14). These are fictional books that reflect real life at some point in history. They may be based on a real person's life or event that truly happened, though the story has been made-up or created by the author as how what they think may have happened based on what is known about that person or event. They may also be completely fabricated stories that are simply set in a historical place or a historical time.

Historical fiction picture books shine a light into history for children, helping them gain an understanding of the past in a way that they can understand and enjoy. Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman by Alan Schroeder gives young readers a look into what Harriet Tubman's life may have been like as a slave living on a Southern plantation. At the beginning of the book, the author has written a note for the reader explaining that the story is not necessarily true, but is a reflection of how he assumed life was for young Minty from what he knows about her personality and desire to be free and

later help free other slaves herself. The story is then a carefully illustrated look into life on a plantation for a strong-willed young slave, Minty, who gets herself into trouble often for disobeying her masters.

For young children interested in nineteenth century life in Paris, Mirette on the High Wire by Emily Arnold McCully shows a glance into that historical period.

...Mirette is a spunky heroine if ever there was. Her widowed mother runs a boardinghouse for traveling theatrical players. The great Bellini, a world-famous aerialist now beset with fear, arrives. Mirette secretly practices on the wire in the courtyard till she persuades Bellini to teach her. Lovely lush illustrations, and telling details of Parisian daily life and work. (Lipson 176)

Although the story of Mirette is made up, this Caldecott Medal book gives children what life in Paris was like in the 1800s for a typical girl, like Mirette.

“History presents facts. To turn facts into fiction, the writer must combine imagination with fact, bringing about an integrated story with a fictional protagonist in a suspenseful plot” (Lukens 15). Historical fiction authors and illustrators use their imaginations to bring the past into the present for their readers. In Mailing May, written by Michael O. Tunnell and illustrated by Ted Rand, they portray the story of a five-year-old girl who is mailed to her grandmother by train. The text and illustrations bring the story to life and help the reader feel like they are on the train with May, on their way to Idaho. Other books that bring the past to life for children include: Baseball Saved Us by Ken Mochizuki about a baseball team formed in a Japanese internment camp, Dear Benjamin Banneker by Andrea Davis Pinkney, Follow the Dream: The Story of Christopher Columbus by Peter Sis, Barbara M. Joosee’s The Morning Chair, and . Their

illustrations help add to portraying the history of it correctly and help the reader to visualize what they are reading. They can experience the story and life in the past through such books.

Traditional literature comes in many forms. The material can be legends that have been passed down from generation to generation. They can be the folk tales of the Brothers Grimm. Aesop's Fables are also included into this subgenre of picture books. Exploring folktales and fables of other countries and cultures helps children become more aware of the world around them (Marantz 107). They can be enjoyable stories that inspire and teach young children the morality and basic cultural knowledge Spitz refers to. Many of these stories were originally written for and told to adults. They were written to convey a message or teach a lesson. Authors and illustrators of children's picture books have taken these stories and adapted them for children. "Good stories – whether realistic or fantasy, for younger children or older – grow out of universal understandings that are as valid for adults as they are for children" (Karl 37). The lessons and messages from these stories are valuable for people of all ages to learn.

Traditional literature picture books are very popular and very easily become classic favorites. Because of this popularity, many authors tend to write their own version of the story, bringing more popularity to the story and deepening society's appreciation for them. Take the ever-popular tale of the three little pigs, originally written by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm. All children seem to know this story by the time they are in the second grade. This is in part due to the numerous variations that have been published for children today. James Marshall retold the classic tale, illustrating the story of three pigs whose mother has sent them off to live on their own and a wolf comes to blow down their

houses and eat them. Jon Scieszka's The True Story of the Three Little Pigs tells the story from the wolf's point of view. The wolf claims that the police made up the story about the big bad wolf because the real story (that he had a cold and kept sneezing when he was trying to ask his neighbor pigs for a cup of sugar to make a cake for his granny) was not exciting enough. His illustrations help make the story more entertaining for the children reading the story, including creating newspapers with articles that are written upside down and do not match either their title or the story itself. Taking another comedic twist, David Weisner allows the three little pigs, one by one, to leave their own story to fly away from the wolf on a paper airplane. They end up rescuing the cat and fiddle and a dragon about to be slain from their fairy tales on their way. His illustrations help show how the pigs leave their own book and fly into other fairy tale storybooks. Another variation, The Fourth Little Pig by Teresa Celsi, continues the story when the three pigs' sister comes to find them holed up in the brick house. She convinces them, after blowing down their house, that there are no more wolves outside and they cannot spend the rest of their lives in the house; they must get out.

These are just four variations to the classic tale. Other cultures have adapted the story to make it their own as well, with the story written for children, including The Three Little Cajun Pigs by Berthe Amoss and Susan Powell's The Three Little Javelinas. The story of the three little pigs is just one traditional story that has been retold in many diverse versions. Others include Lon Po Po, a Little Red Riding Hood story from China by Ed Young, Paul O. Zelinsky's version of Rapunzel set in the Italian Renaissance, and the many versions of The Gingerbread Man.

When a child opens a fantasy picture book, they have opened a whole new world to read about and experience. “The writer of fantasy creates another world for characters and readers, asking that readers believe this other world could and does exist within the framework of the book” (Lukens 18). From looking at the phenomenon of the Harry Potter series, one can easily see how fantasy can capture a child’s mind. Fantasy picture books present a child with a new world to explore, allowing them an escape from the world they live in today.

Writers and illustrators of fantasy picture books strive to open children’s minds to new experiences. They may show how magical life could be. Some popular fantasy books include the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, making those books overlap genres. The Ugly Duckling is one example. The characters are personified animals, a feature of many fantastic picture books. In fantasies, the illustrations play a large part in helping to develop the fantastic world and characters. They help children to visualize these new worlds, since they are different from our world. A classic fantasy story is Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are. The night Max wore his wolf suit and was sent to bed without supper, his room turns into a magical dream world, taking him by boat to where the wild things are. The illustrations help children picture the wild things and open their imaginations to picture their own ideas of what wild things look like. Though it takes place in a magical, made-up forest with strange, fictitious animals, children enjoy this fantasy because they can relate to it. Children can identify with Max, his temper, his need to pretend, and his longing for a place where he is loved. Fantasies allow an escape from real life but allow children to relate to the characters because

although they are different, they have similar thoughts and feelings to the children themselves.

Informational texts are nonfiction works. They have been written to teach children. Jean E. Karl states that “picture books are foundations for learning and understanding and do not attempt to present all that is known on the subject” (34). Informational picture books give children a glimpse into something from the world around them. These picture books include true stories about real people, living or deceased, and the world in which they live. These books give information and facts to stimulate curiosity in the reader (Lukens 33). A popular new series of informational books are the So You Want to Be... series. The first in the series was the Caldecott Medal Book of 2001, So, You Want to Be President? “There are good things about being President and there are bad things about being President. One of the good things is that you get to live in a big white house called the White House” (1). So starts the book that gives many lesser known facts about each of the first forty-two Presidents of the United States. The main focus of the book is to let children know that anyone, from any background can become the president if they want to. It tells children which Presidents played instruments and which had animals living in the White House. The book also tells the students of problems with past presidents, like President Nixon’s resignation. Made up completely of facts, it gives children a look at the job of President of the United States and empowers them to dream big, encouraging them that if they want to be the president one day, it is a possibility.

Another nonfiction picture book is the biography of Wilson A. Bentley, Snowflake Bentley by Jacqueline Briggs Martin. He was a self-taught scientist who was

obsessed with snowflakes and began photographing them in the late 1800s. He discovered that no two snowflakes are alike. This story “conveys a sense of wonder as well as appreciation of Bentley’s determination and achievements. Several of his photographs are included along with an excellent bibliography” (Lipson 208). Illustrator Mary Azarian helps bring Snowflake Bentley’s story to life for the children reading about him. This book can spark an interest in science and discovery in children. It tells the story of a man’s life whose name many people do not know, but his work and discoveries they do. Nonfiction picture books help open the world to children, giving them an inside look on people, places, events, or discoveries of the world that they cannot get from any other source than simply experiencing them themselves.

No matter the story, topic, or theme, picture books allow children to take a new adventure every time they open the cover. It may be Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of the ugly duckling that grows into a beautiful swan. It may be the story of a simple scientist discovering his love for snowflakes. It may be three animal friends on an international adventure to find their friend. It may be the fantastic story of a boy named Max who sails to a faraway land to rule the wild things. The illustrations of these stories help young children to experience the book more fully. Pictures add to the story, helping to make the book come alive for the reader in a way it never could without them. “The picture book, because of its unique blending of illustrations and words, is considered a genre apart from any other kind of literature” (Cianciolo 1). Each subgenre comes together with all of the others to form one larger genre of children’s literature like no other, giving children memories that will last forever and developing a love of reading at an early age.

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