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To Illuminate Literature

Lori McElrath-Eslick is an illustrator of children's books who lives in North Muskegon, Michigan. She has designed the cover of the MRA 44th Annual Conference 2000 booklet and other conference materials.

An illustrator is a storyteller. While the author most often gets the credit for being the storyteller, the illustrator also tells the story in the pictures that accompany the words. According to Webster's dictionary, the main function of illustration is to illuminate text, to throw light on words. In fact, illustration in medieval books is called illumination. The term *illustration* is derived from the Latin verb "to light up," "to illuminate." An example in children's literature where this can be easily seen is in the Caldecott award-winning book *Where the Wild Things Are*. When the author-illustrator, Maurice Sendak, writes "wild rumpus," the entire scene is wholly conveyed through pictures. Sendak's ability to capture the images of monsters as imagined by children causes readers to climb right into the closet to be in partnership with these very monsters. The purpose of this short article, then, is to show, from an illustrator's point of view, how illustrations and words enhance a picture book, which, in turn, enhance reading.

What Makes a Good Picture Book

The most convincing storytellers are ones who tell stories using their own personal experiences as reference and, in so doing, can transport their readers to the place they are illustrating in their story. It has been said that one picture is worth a thousand words. Authors of picture books who have taken this maxim to heart have produced some twentieth century classics. Even picture books with minimal text work in a variety of ways as they

are being read, looked at, and enjoyed on many levels simultaneously.

While topics and themes have varied over the course of years with picture books, good quality visuals have always helped the reader to learn more than what the text is saying. Like poetry, the brevity of text in picture books allows the picture to impart extra information. The narrative style is a major part of the story that will be remembered, repeated, and enjoyed even when the book has long been misplaced or lost. A good narrative is real, touching the child as well as the child still hiding in every adult.

Good children's literature, like poetry, makes use of the less-is-more principle when referring to fine art. Readers of this type of literature find it difficult to resist the beauty, simplicity, and comedy. A good children's story gives adults the chance to remember, to dream again, and to find joy in the sense of wonder that was theirs as children. However, the picture book is not always looked upon as fine literature, and illustrations are not typically revered as important literature. Yet, pictures as well as words enhance the knowledge base of the reader.

How Picture Books Are Created

The telling of our own narratives happens more readily when we can come up with our own punch line. The great storyteller and author C. S. Lewis describes his process for writing a story in the following way:

I have never exactly "made" a story. With me the process is much more like bird watching than like

either talking or building. I see pictures ... (I) keep quiet and watch, and they will begin joining themselves up ... I have no idea whether this is the usual way of writing stories, still less whether it is the only one I know. Images always come first.

As for myself, my artistic nature is triggered by simple things. For example, every time I walk past an out-building on my daily walk, it becomes a playhouse. A feeling, a safe warm memory, comes to me when I see the building. With white walls, it looks pristine, nestled among the pines in the yard where it resides. Another simple thing that takes me back to my childhood is yellow pulled-back curtains. These curtains must have been in a book that I read as a child. Although I can not remember the specific books, I do remember the safe feeling that both the shed and the curtains evoke. This feeling is the power of imagination that motivates the illustrator to create and ultimately, the reader to read.

In my opinion, pictures do come first, even to authors. Creatively one must be able to visualize what will take place in a story in order to transport the reader into the story. In a picture book, the readers have the unique experience to be able to visit the place where

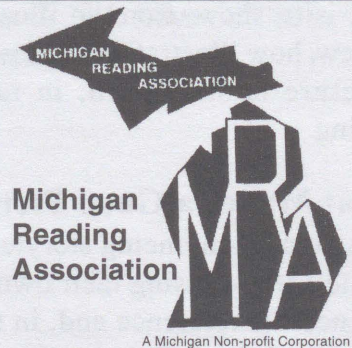
an illustrator imagines. Hence, a picture book illustrator has the unique job of creating illustrations that tell a story and help readers to improve their understanding of storytelling, extra visual information, and creative expression.

In summary, picture books are designed to host a string of ideas that draw readers. To make this happen, the author and the illustrator must successfully combine pictures and text. Through readers' imaginations and the help of illustrations that convey accurate or imaginary information, pictures can tell more of the story than text alone. This elusive quality can best be seen in the words of an editor of children's books, Margaret K. McElderry, who writes, "I look for quality and for an individual way of telling or drawing or painting. I look for originality, but not necessarily an original idea. I like to see a person who has some idea and wants to communicate something."

Like a good work of art, a picture book – a good picture book – should be many things. Above all, the illustrations should communicate something that is thought provoking and imaginative to the viewer and the reader. In turn, what the reader gives back to the book, that is, to the experience of reading the book, is his or her imagination.

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