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GOOD ILLUSTRATIONS ARE WORTH 1,000 WORDS

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The exposure of today's young children to an ever increasing variety of illustrations produced in picture books designed for them can be a cause for great joy and excitement. Young children need pictures to convey meaning to the printed word and to help them understand concepts they have not yet experienced. It would be difficult, indeed, for a youngster to understand the differences between a dog and a cat if he had never seen either animal before. Good illustrations can be thought of as appetizers on the road to reading, leading to an appreciation and interest in literature for the young child. Because of society's emphasis on visual communication as an aid to instruction and to education it seems imperative to present only good visual images in illustrated books. However, many parents, teachers, and librarians, although knowledgeable in choosing excellent books from a literary standpoint, lack ability in evaluating illustrations.

Because of an emphasis on the text of a book in past years, illustrations were often times unnoticed or given little attention. In 1938, an annual award for the most distinguished American picture book for children was established by the Children's Services Division of the American Library Association in honor of Randolph Caldecott. Caldecott was a celebrated English illustrator of children's books in the nineteenth century. This award is presented to the illustrator of that book.

In more recent years other awards have been established for illustrated books. Among these is the Children's Book Showcase begun in 1972. This yearly award, sponsored by the Children's Book Council, is given to a selection of books judged to be of outstanding graphic quality by a committee of children's book artists and book designers. This committee selects the best illustrated children's books published in the United States during the previous year.

Guidelines set up by the first Showcase Committee continue to be used as

criteria each year. They are as follows: (1) illustrations must be appropriate to the text; (2) illustrations must serve to extend and interpret the text; (3) illustrations must be consistent with the mood and feeling of the work and (4) illustrations must be original in conception and execution.¹

An additional purpose of the Children's Book Showcase is to function as an educational activity wherein the selected books would be on display in communities throughout the country with the hope of fostering the ability to recognize graphic excellence in children's books by those interested in children's literature.

In order to better understand the criteria for good illustrations set forth by the Showcase Committee, let us look at some examples of the Showcase books for young children. A book that embodies all of the criteria for excellent illustrations is *The Maggie B*, written and illustrated by Irene Haas. This is the story of a small girl's dream of having a ship of her very own to sail out to sea for a day with her baby brother as her companion. The watercolor illustrations bleeding to the edge of the page help portray the dreamlike quality of the story as well as delighting the reader with their detail. Alternating pages in black and white wash are executed with such fine draftsmanship that they, too, convey the mood and theme of the book. Because of the high cost of publishing picture books with full color illustrations one is viewing a trend toward black and white illustrations done in alternating fashion with color, or used throughout an entire book. Mrs. Haas' illustrations portray convincing character development as well as serving to extend and broaden the text. Young children should certainly be exposed to this book.

An intriguing and unconventional alphabet book by Mitsumasa Anno is entitled *Anno's Alphabet: An Adventure in Imagination*. The illustrations in this work, without text, serve to extend the imagination of the viewer. If one looks

carefully at each of the letters painted to look like wood, one will find a touch of surrealism embodied in the use of perspective. Done in watercolor and tempura, the illustrations are printed in four colors. The decorative borders surrounding each picture serve more than that purpose. They are actually objects beginning with the letter appearing on the page, intricately entwined in a pen and ink scrollwork. In addition, the objects representing the letters are unusual and carefully follow the carpentry theme of the book. There is continuity in this book from beginning to end, enabling the reader to gather the essence of the theme through the illustrations.

In recent years a trend toward more and better executed information books for young children has been seen. In my opinion, *About Owls* by May Garelick and illustrated by Tony Chen is certainly one of the best published recently. Tony Chen brings the owls to life on the pages through the use of brown and black tones on stark white paper, so appropriate for his subject. His talented and imaginative drawings serve to broaden and extend the text without duplicating it. This is an accurate, dramatic rendition of three types of owls; the Elf Owl, Barn Owl and Great Horned Owl and how each hunts for food, wards off enemies, and practices daily survival techniques. A description of each is provided in addition to information about their habitat and diet. This is truly a fine example of an information book for the early elementary age child.

The intricate black line watercolors found in *Father Fox's Pennyrhymes* written by Clyde Watson and illustrated by her sister Wendy Watson should delight most young children. Many of the illustrations are done in cartoon fashion using boxes and captions as seen in the comics; a trend in a great many books recently published. The fox family characters portrayed in old fashioned American country life blend beautifully with the rhymes and jingles. The colors are soft and fit the nostalgic mood of the book.

A very dramatically illustrated picture storybook that portrays the essence of a beautiful Chinese poem is *Dawn* written and illustrated by Uri Shulevitz. The progression of the text from nightfall to dawn is spectacularly and simply stated

in the illustrations. An old man and his grandson camp out for the night awakening before daybreak to begin their journey by boat across the lake as the sun slowly rises in the East. The illustrations in deep blue, black and green appear to be watercolors, but, in fact, are wash drawings with overlays. The mood and feeling of this poem is accurately portrayed in these breathtaking illustrations serving so well to convey meaning to the printed page. The natural beauty of a sunrise should be much better understood by young children after an experience with this book.

The essence of friendship is delightfully told in this very clever book using animals with human characteristics. *George and Martha*, written and illustrated by James Marshall has simple, humorous cartoon like representations blending perfectly with the subtle humor in the text. The book is divided into five short stories of everyday happenings in the lives of two hippopotamuses. One of the most delightful is entitled "The Tub". George is discovered peeking in the bathroom window while Martha is bathing. The emotions of each character are vividly shown through actions and text during this occurrence. "We are friends", said Martha. "But there is such a thing as privacy!" James Marshall has written and illustrated other delightful books recounting the adventures of George and Martha in *George and Martha Encore* and *George and Martha Rise and Shine*. Each book conveys the humor and character delineation in the illustrations that harmonize perfectly with the text.

An example of a very fine wordless picture storybook is John Goodall's *Creepy Castle*. The story of a pair of mouse lovers set in medieval times, it is authentic in every detail of the talented Goodall's paintings. The mice, in period costumes, are trapped by a villain inside the castle and confronted with many dangers, including a fierce dragon. Children delight in the suspense and action portrayed through the illustrations and are also satisfied with the happy ending as the mice outsmart the villain and escape. A unique feature of the book is the use of full page illustrations alternating with half pages, allowing the story to move rapidly along for the reader. This book has appeal on various levels for

young children as well as for the older child and the adult.

Collage illustrations in mixed media and full color set the stage for an exquisite book done in the style of Persian miniature paintings. *The Girl Who Loved the Wind* by Jane Yolen is illustrated by a very fine artist, Ed Young. His attention to detail and color conveys the feeling of the Persian miniatures and the story. Obviously he must have done much research and spent many hours painting in order to achieve such intricate, authentic reproductions. The story concerns an overprotective father, the king, and his beautiful daughter, as he tries to shield her from life's unpleasant realities. This fine work has won an award from the American Institute of Graphic Arts in addition to being selected as a Showcase book.

These titles just discussed are but a few of the fine examples of illustrated picture books included in the Children's Book Showcase during the past five years. Hopefully these are enticing enough to lead you to others. If it is true that 80% of our information comes to us visually, then, for the child not yet proficient in reading skills, perhaps good illustrations really are worth 1,000 words. The well illustrated book stimulates a child's imagination and whets his appetite for reading. The book artist's responsibility is not only to the text of the book but also to the audience to whom the book is directed. "For the child, illustrations are to words as jelly is to bread - increasing the nourishment, making it more delicious and adding a flavor of its own."²

¹*The Children's Book Showcase Catalog*, (New York: The Children's Book Council, Inc., 1974) p. 5

²Rosalind Mosier, 'Illustrations are Important', *Instructor*, Vol. 76, (November, 1966), p. 87.

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