

THOUGHTS ON THE WRITING OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
AND
A FEW WORDS ABOUT ILLUSTRATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

by

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In writing literature for children and young adults, I think it's wise to keep in mind the following points:

- 1) Writing works of quality for young people is an important endeavor and a high calling.
- 2) A writer must be honest and never be condescending, or "talk down" to young readers.
- 3) Writers should remember that children are "people" first, and children (or "young people") second. Children are logical; they are perceptive; they know when they are being treated with respect, and when they are treated with disrespect. They know when they are being taken seriously; and they expect to be. They can recognize honesty and good intention, and are quick to spot insincerity and phoniness.
- 4) A writer may be well-intentioned and still fail to understand the nature of the audience. In writing for children, it is useful to pilot-test early drafts by sharing them with young people to get their criticisms. Writers must be open and receptive while doing this, and take the criticisms and suggestions under serious consideration in writing subsequent drafts.
- 5) Regardless of what genre the writer is working in—fantasy, historical fiction, biography, adventure, mystery, realistic problem-drama, humor—the writer must realize the potential impact (immediate, or possibly lifelong) and future consequences that a compelling and well-written work may have for the young reader. (My own aesthetic taste and understanding of literature were shaped and molded by the poems and stories in the 1939 edition of *Childcraft*, my reading of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, the 36 Oz books, the complete Sherlock Holmes, Poe's short stories, Thoreau's *Walden* and

Civil Disobedience, and the works of various science fiction writers such as Bradbury, Heinlein, Van Vogt, and Asimov. This early encounter with *Alice* led, some years later, to my writing a doctoral dissertation, subsequently published as a book, *Language and Lewis Carroll*; and when I came to write my novel for young people, *Sticklewort and Feverfew*, in the period 1971–1980, I drew upon Lewis Carroll’s practice of relying on the basic Anglo-Saxon wordstock for my narrative language, gaining thereby clarity and force, and losing nothing of expressivity by eschewing Greek and Latinate polysyllables.)

- 6) Children can quickly grasp concepts: they don’t want just “a cute story”. Writers should give them intellectual nourishment: something to work with, something to play with, something to grow on.
- 7) While writers should know the general capacities of the age group they’re writing for, they should keep in mind that there is nothing wrong, but there is much good, in making young readers stretch a bit. Writers should leave some work for the readers to do. This will enable readers to expand their imaginations and critical faculties and also allow them to participate in the act of creation. It then becomes their work and experience too, and not just the author’s.
- 8) Some people write for children because they think it’s easier than writing for adults. Not necessarily so. Writing well for young people is not easy: it is extremely demanding—requiring keen sensitivities, psychological empathy, and language skills of a very high order. The writer should strive to make the work interesting to adults as well, because (a) they may be in the position of reading the work aloud to children; and (b) if children develop affection for the work, they may wish to pass it on to the next generation by introducing it to their children.
- 9) One of the best tests for good writing is to observe how it goes when read aloud: how it feels in the mouth and sounds to the ear. All writing should be tested orally (in the compositional process this will help to know whether something is well or awkwardly written); but also many children’s works are (and should be) designed to be read aloud—by parents, teachers, the children themselves. Converted into speech, the written text should provide a source of pleasure and play. The oral/aural test is crucial for good writing.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT ILLUSTRATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

In illustrating a story, it might be helpful to visualize the narrative unrolling like a motion-picture film. The illustrator's job is to select from the flow of action the single "frame" for illustration which best reveals the essence of the passage and, in addition, accomplishes the following purposes: (in general) to provide (1) maximum dramatic impact, (2) revelation of character, (3) pleasing composition, (4) memorable images, (5) irony, humor (or pathos), and (6) opportunity for the viewer's imagination to play. There is generally one best frame that will effectively accomplish the multiple tasks required.

In deciding how this single scene should be graphically presented, one could benefit from the principles suggested by Ezra Jack Keats in a radio broadcast from Urbana, Illinois (which I heard in Iowa City in July, 1963). I think Keats' principles are excellent, and I paraphrase them here, with my own additions.

- (a) Illustrations should not simply depict in a literal manner a scene or event in the text; rather, they should add another dimension of meaning to the work, supplementing the text, providing a counterpoint to what's going on in the words.
- (b) Illustrations should be an experience in themselves, in harmony with, but distinct from, the experience provided by the text; seen in order, as a group, they should have their own sequential meaning—a trajectory paralleling the story but not simply telling the story in pictures.
- (c) Illustrations should avoid "cleverness"—cuteness or slavish accommodation to current vogues of illustration that render them shallow or empty of feeling. Some illustrators whose aims are primarily commercial frequently design pictures that appeal more to grandmas (who do the buying) than to the young people (who do the reading, and who may find the illustrations boring).
- (d) Illustrations should provide a means for readers to participate in apprehending the full significance of the story. While depicting, they should be neither so literal nor so explicit as to leave no work for the reader to do. Whether the illustrations depict action, present genre scenes, or provide portraits of characters, they should always be sufficiently evocative and suggestive as to lead the reader "beyond the text" (and "beyond the picture"): while being consistent with the text, they should provide interesting details not specifically mentioned in the text, and thus stimulate the reader's imagination to explore. If you do

the illustrations yourself, you take responsibility for the entire process. If you have a friend do it, or if you work with a commercial publisher, it's important to do what you can to insist upon some oversight of the illustration process and style (through providing the artist with visual content). A written text and its effective illustration become a cognitive unit—the parts inseparable—an iconic and unified whole that may have lasting influence on a reader's life.