

Creating Picture Books

Unit 1: Know the Form

- ‘Picture books are for babies.’
- ‘Picture books are so short they must be easy to write.’
- ‘That picture book is so easy – I could have written it better myself.’

Have you ever heard comments like these? Have you said them yourself?

Perhaps you have stood admiring the beautiful displays of picture books in the window of your bookshop or library and wondered if you could be part of the team that creates these works. Before you start, you need to understand how visual and literary texts fit together.

Picture books are always short. Thirty two pages is the standard size although sometimes, for very young children, books of sixteen or twenty four pages are published. There is no prescribed word length. Some very successful picture books have been written with fewer than a hundred words. There are illustrations on every page and these are almost always in colour.

Pictures are not there as merely decoration but to contribute meaning to the story.

- Much information can therefore be left out of the written text because it will be apparent from the illustrations. Descriptions of people and places are an obvious example but some action can also be detailed in the visuals. E.g. One Sunday, Dad and Amy drove to the dump. (The illustration will give all information about Amy’s age and appearance.)
- Sometimes the visual text contributes a parallel story, contradicting the written text and/or bringing drama, humour or irony. E.g. Look at *Rosie’s Walk* (Pat Hutchins), or *Drac and the Gremlin* (Allan Baillie/Jane Tanner)
- Sometimes the pictures alone can carry the story, so that some pages (or occasionally some books) are completely wordless. E.g. *The Great Bear* (Libby Gleeson/Armin Greder), *An Ordinary Day* (Libby Gleeson/Armin Greder), *Sunshine* (Jan Ormerod) or *Moonlight* (Jan Ormerod)

Libby Gleeson

Eleven of Libby’s twenty-six titles have been shortlisted for CBC Awards! *The Great Bear* is the only Australian picture book to have won the prestigious international ‘Bologna Ragazzi’ award.



Always generous with her knowledge, Libby is in great demand as a conference presenter. www.libbygleeson.com.au

Fill in this section:

Find a picture book you like. What do you know from the pictures that is not in the written text?

Types of picture books:

- **Concept books.**

Written for the very young, these detail concepts such as colours, shapes or spatial relationships. Similar books focus on faces, animals or modes of transport. These books are often illustrated with solid blocks of primary colours and minimal detail. Sometimes a text of only one word will accompany each picture.

E.g. *My First Number Board Book* (Dorling Kingsley) or *Night and Day* (Herve Milet)

- **Nursery Rhymes and Traditional Tales.**

Rhymes and tales from ours and other oral cultures are presented in book form with varying kinds of illustrations. Some titles subvert the traditional tale by telling it from a different point of view. These stories are for the more sophisticated reader.

E.g. *Walzing Matilda* (A.B.Patterson/Desmond Digby), *The Two Bullies* (Junko Morimoto) or *The Stinky Cheese Man* (Jon Scieszka/Lane Smith)

- **Stories for very young children.**

Written about absolutely anything, these stories can be fantastic or realistic. Texts are short and suitable for reading aloud. Illustration styles vary from paintings, to free flowing sketches in any of a number of media to collages of tissue paper or found objects.

E.g. *Harry the Dirty Dog* (Gene Zion/Margaret Bloy Graham), *Meg and Mog* (Jan Pienkowski) or *The Midnight Gang* (Margaret Wild/Ann James)

- **Stories for older readers.**

More mature ideas and more sophisticated writing and illustration styles combine here to produce work that challenges readers from the middle of primary school to adults.

E.g. *The Lost Thing* (Shaun Tan), *Memorial* (Gary Crew/Shawn Tan) or *The Great Bear* (Libby Gleeson/Armin Greder)

ACTION ACTIVITY

Browse in your local bookshop or library. Talk to the bookseller or librarian about which books are popular with children. List two titles in each of the following categories:

- **Concept Books**

- **Nursery Rhyme or Traditional Tale**

- **Story for the very young**

- **Story for the older reader**

Find a number of picture books that have stories that appeal to you. Can you work out why? Are these the kinds of stories that you would like to write?

NEXT WEEK: Where do picture book ideas come from and how can I get some?