

Picturebooks

Where literature appreciation begins

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When selecting books for children age zero to two a natural tendency is to choose naming and/or categorizing books. Other default selections for the very young include nursery rhymes, books based on songs, or counting, color, and alphabet books, as it is easy to evaluate the suitability of such texts for very young children. It can be more difficult, however, for caregivers to evaluate which narrative texts are most suitable for the youngest children, given the range of offerings available in picturebook format. In order to aid caregivers and early childhood teachers in the selection of stories for the very young, this paper will propose three easily implementable criteria for picturebook selection and then analyze eight picturebook classics in order to evaluate to what degree they match these criteria. Given the range of evidence that reading aloud to infants is a precursor toward literacy success, the guidelines provided will allow caregivers to confidently select narrative texts to enjoy with babies and toddlers.

1. Benefits of reading aloud to infants and toddlers

It is all too easy to worry about the future of literature – not because of time children spend reading blogs on the computer or interacting with the latest gadgets – but because parents often do not read to their children from a very young age. Even relatively well-off, educated, and well-meaning parents will look blankly at me when I ask what they have been reading to their 0–24 month-old child. “Nothing,” they say in reply to my question. “Isn’t it too early to teach them to read?”

“Of course, it’s too early to teach them to read,” I respond. “But it’s never too early to read to them.”

In fact, gains in language and literacy in relation to early exposure to texts have been well documented for quite some time. Ninio (1983), for example, studied the ways in which mothers reading picturebooks helped infants acquire new vocabulary, while Snow and Godfield (1983) documented how a one-year ten-month child learned vocabulary through scaffolding based on picturebooks his mother read to him. Moore and Wade (2003) in a paper discussing the success

of their Bookstart project, detailed the qualitative evidence for giving books to families of infants to facilitate language learning and literacy.

In addition, in just the past decade, there have been a range of studies showing that reading early and often is the greatest predictor for later achievement. Karras and Braungart-Rieker (2005) looked at 87 infants at four month intervals between four and sixteen months, and found that shared book reading at four months was related to shared book reading at eight months, which was, in turn, linked to the infant’s ability to express him- or herself at twelve and sixteen months. Simcock and DeLoache (2008) showed that 18- and 24-month olds improved in their imitation scores when they were exposed to a picturebook four times in succession as compared with two times. Westerlund and Lagerberg (2008) found that 18-month-old children whose parents read to them six times a week had a larger amount of expressive vocabulary, regardless of the child’s gender. Rodriguez et al. (2009) found evidence that the overall literary experiences of toddlers at 14, 24 and 36 months explained the differences in the children’s respective language skills at the age of three. And in an interesting study that also looked at video watching, it was found that children between 12 and 15 months who watched educational DVDs had no increase in vocabulary comprehension or production, but that an increase in both areas could be seen in relation to the amount of time spent reading aloud (Robb et al. 2009).

With study after study showing that reading often and early to young children gives them a leg up on expressive language abilities and literacy learning, it seems obvious that reading to one’s child is a key precursor to later literacy achievements during the school years. And often, after a bit of discussion concerning the above findings, the parent in question will then ask: “Fine. I see your point. But what should I be reading to them?”

This is a legitimate but loaded question – one that academics, educators, and librarians, are faced with on a regular basis. Our own personal answer may vary considerably depending on our cultural, educational and familial background. Books are one of the many ways in which humans transmit knowledge over distance and time, and the choice of what we read ourselves or what we read to our children is a reflection of our own identity as well as the identity we want to forge for our child. But as educators, we are also aware that the answer that is suitable for our family circumstances may not be suitable for another’s. How then can we go about answering the question so that parents can take ownership and feel confident about the choices they make for their child? Given that transmitting one’s cultural identity is one implicit goal in raising a child, one reasonable answer therefore is: read to your infant whatever you yourself find interesting to read aloud. A person interested in design could share a beautiful book on chairs with a child, and a financial analyst could read the stock report. Most infants would

be quite happy to sit on a caregiver's lap and feel the rumble of his or her voice as they pat (or drool on) any page in front of them. In fact, whatever one finds relaxing to read to their children when they are newborns (or even in utero) is fine. They will respond to the fact that their caregiver is relaxed and happy, and enjoy the cadence of his or her voice. But once they can wriggle around and/or take interest in the object being held, the question takes on more urgency and is not as easily answered, as at this point the caregiver will most likely want to put his or her hands on something that is more suitable to the child's cognitive level. And in order for the caregiver to continue to enjoy the reading time, it is also an important (but often overlooked) point that the material also be engaging at some level for him or her.

The most likely candidates once infants start reaching and teething are sturdy board books, which may be picturebooks resized (and perhaps edited) for the shorter, chunkier format, or board books specifically designed for the very youngest readers. Books having to do with naming objects or events are popular choices, as are counting, color and alphabet books, and nursery rhymes and song books. Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2005), for example, point out that early-concept books often present information thematically, through similarity, or contrast, or through the grouping of related objects, and that these books are in fact important precursors for the acquisition of language and literacy.

However, narrative texts have always held a special place in the hearts and minds of children and the adults who read to them. The satisfying thump of a book closing at the end of a well-loved narrative is entirely a different sensation from reaching the end of a straightforward naming or counting book. Moreover, narratives that resonate in the hearts of reader and child alike are the ones that are read repeatedly, which benefits the child's language acquisition.

Given the above suggestions, the question the caregiver is asking can then be rephrased from "What should I be reading to them?" to "So you're asking what books, in addition to concept books and nursery rhyme books, will provide you and your child with a sense of emotional satisfaction when you reach the end of the story?" This places their request in a context that acknowledges that they can and should provide the staples for infant reading, at the same time that it opens a window to the possibility of the additional pleasure to be gained from reading narrative texts. But how then should caregiver determine which books provide emotional satisfaction?

Of course, the simple response is to suggest a book list from a reputable source. There are many out there, including Trelease (2006) and Fox (2001) for all age ranges, and Dell'Antonia & Straub (2006), who focus on the ages of zero to two years. In their book, Dell'Antonia & Straub not only provide a range of suggested titles, but they talk about how to read to a child who is crawling away

or gnawing on a book, and they also discuss choosing books for this age group. However, while they discuss how to choose among the different types of books that can (and should) be read to young children (i.e. nursery rhymes, counting books, categorizing books, and naming books, among others), in this paper, I will focus exclusively on what questions we as researchers can suggest that parents ask themselves when they select narratives for their newborn-to-two-year-old child. In this way, caregivers can more easily discern the wheat from the chaff when they enter a library (and face a basket of gnawed-on board books) or a bookstore (where they face tables of the hottest movie tie-ins before getting to the shelves filled with thin book spines). In addition, it allows caregivers to move away from static book lists that can become out-dated (i.e. McMahon's 1996 book list for infants only contains a few books still in print), or that, even when updated, lists books that for one reason or another may be difficult to locate. Indeed, what this paper will propose is that it is possible to identify a certain set of questions that can be asked when a caregiver flips through any picture-or board book, and that these questions can help them select relevant narratives for the children in their care. In this way, a commonality of shared experience will grow between the caregiver and the child, setting the child on the path to appreciating literature not only for its aesthetic value but also for the emotional resonance that it creates when it is read and shared with others.

2. The secrets of emotionally satisfying picturebook narratives

While an examination of the literature shows that an analysis of how complex picturebook narratives relate to their readers has been done for older readers (Goodwin 2009), there is no such analysis to examine how picturebooks for the very young (0–24 months of age) do the same. For example, although Lowe (2007) presents children's experiences with, and reactions to, narratives from a very early age, the work does not examine the narratives of the texts themselves. The goal of this paper, thus, is to examine and explain how in two hundred words or less, seemingly 'simple' narratives provide a sense of closure and emotional satisfaction. As with fiction that has evolved from the Aristotelian tradition for older readers, the starting point is to examine what tension exists in the story and how it is resolved. This resolution of tension brings about a change in the main character or the state of events between the beginning and ending of the book. Thus, the first key point is to check whether a change of state – this may be either a physical, physiological, or emotional change has occurred between the beginning and the end of the book. Books that simply list the animals found on a farm in declarative sentences do not qualify under this condition. They are still valuable

for the purposes of classification and naming and learning more about the world around the child, but they are not literary narratives. Manipulative concept books, such as Cheerio books (in which a circular type of breakfast cereal is placed in a hole in the book) also do not qualify under this criteria. Again, these books have their value, but they are not a pre-cursor to literature appreciation in that they do not expose the child to a narrative story arc.

In addition to evaluating whether there is a change of state, looking at whether the text deals with a relevant developmental stage for the child should also be a consideration in choosing a narrative text. For example, going to bed and falling asleep, learning about cause and effect (objects moving in space) are developmental issues for children zero to two, but are no longer usually issues for children who are older. Moreover, as Lukens (2003) points out, literature serves many functions (i.e. brings pleasure, brings about understanding, and shows human motives, among others), but I would like to propose that one function she mentions is particularly important for the youngest readers; that is, it serves to provide form for experience (i.e. makes order of randomness). For example, the seven-month-old child who cannot push the car in the direction he or she wants it to go, will find a similar problem in *Sheep in the Jeep* (and in addition, a wonderful rhyme scheme). Or the 18-month old who is being told he or she cannot do something will find it fascinating that a pigeon has the same problem in Mo Willems's *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*. As a child's range and depth of experience is limited at this age, finding problems similar to one's own between the pages of a book is a meaningful discovery.

The last point, or secret, to selecting an emotionally satisfying book to read with an infant or toddler, in addition to the above two points of ensuring that there is change, and that it is developmentally appropriate for the child in question, is that it be short and easily read aloud. This is not only because the attention span of a young child may be limited, but because young children love to hear stories again and again and it is much easier to gear up for another reading as a caregiver when it will take only a minute or two to complete the task, and if it will be a linguistically pleasurable event to read it through for the thousandth time. The smoothness of the language is something that can be evaluated independently by reading it aloud prior to bringing it home. If a caregiver stumbles over words because they cannot find the flow of language, then reading it aloud will not be enjoyable for them or the child they are reading aloud to. Many children's movies or TV shows that are later put into book format suffer from verbosity – they contain too many non-informative words and often use syntax that sounds stilted or unnatural when read aloud.

Thus, three guidelines have been proposed: (1) there is physical, physiological or emotional change, (2) it is developmentally appropriate such that it provides

form for experience, and (3) it is quick and pleasurable to read. These guidelines have been selected for their ease in application when making a picturebook selection for a very young child with the express purpose of developing their appreciation of a story and all that it entails in becoming fully engaged with the human condition. In order to evaluate the usefulness of these guidelines, in what follows below I will look at the picturebooks that are identified as being for the youngest child in Knopf's *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury* (1998).

3. Analyzing picturebook classics

In *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury*, forty-four picturebooks from a variety of publishers are included in one volume by reformatting the original picturebook text. Eight books of the forty-four are identified as being for the youngest readers. However, as the editor Janet Schulman notes in her introduction: "there is no pre-tested way to know precisely which stories a child will most enjoy at a particular age" (1998: ix). While I certainly agree with this statement, I would like to propose that a parent or educator or caregiver can make a good guess based on the criteria proposed above (along with their own knowledge of their child's development, likes, and interests).

In addition, it is noteworthy that of the eight stories proposed as being for the youngest child in this volume, seven of the eight are narratives, with only one being a concept book: Helen Oxenbury's *I Hear, I See, I Touch*. As this book has no change of state from beginning to end, it does not count as a narrative text. Of course, it is still a wonderful text for children, and if the caregiver wanted to select a categorizing book, this would be an excellent choice.

Goodnight Moon, the first book identified in the Knopf's *Treasury* as being for the youngest child, is also a selection in the *HarperCollins Treasury of Picture Book Classics* (and it is the only text that is included in both collections). Written and illustrated by Margaret Wise Brown, it was published by Harper (now HarperCollins) in 1947. The classic goodnight book, it tells the story of a bunny who looks around and says, "Goodnight!" to everything in his or her room before finally falling asleep. It has a clear change of physiological state portrayed in the story: at the beginning the rabbit is awake, and by the end of the story he or she is asleep. It deals with a developmentally appropriate issue, as young children find it difficult to settle down when they are tired: just when they find life at home is at its most stimulating, they get sent off to sleep. The word count is low (approximately 130 words), which means the story can stand repeated consecutive readings. And the language is lyrical and soothing. As noted in the HarperCollins's Afterword to the story, "When *Goodnight Moon* is read aloud, it takes on the quality of a

classic lullaby, as though it had been around for centuries. And because the lullaby works, parents never tire of reading *Goodnight Moon* over and over again" (p. 48). All in all, it is an excellent choice for children between the ages of 0 and 2.

The second is *Freight Train*, a deceptively simple story that captures the heart of children aged 24 months and below. The first page starts out with a train track at the bottom of a white page, with the words "A train runs across this track" at the top. Then in rhythmic and concise language (with 55 words in total), the trains cars and train engine are introduced, after which they move across the page until they are "Going, going, gone." The last page has the last word at the top left, and a faint stream of smoke running back from the right above the same train tracks as the beginning. The change of state in this case has to do with physical objects appearing and disappearing again. The behavioural development issue is one the young child is dealing with as he or she watches toy cars and trucks being pushed or learns to push them him or herself. On all three counts of language, change, and relevance to the young child, this book hits the mark.

In *Titch*, by Pat Hutchins, the problem is quite simple: Titch is smaller than his siblings and his toys are smaller than his siblings' toys. But Titch has a seed and the seed grows taller than his siblings, thus resolving the problem. In about 120 words, the author has skillfully laid out a problem that is a developmental issue for all children – the fact that they are smaller than everyone else around them, and solved it in a realistic manner. The language is simple, with a grammatical structure of subject-verb-object as the primary sentential structure throughout the book. This, in addition to the use of 'and' to start sentences having to do with Titch, make for a very structured cadence throughout the book, as if a drummer is drumming repeated lines. To emphasize that Titch (and his toys) were smaller than everyone else and their toys, 'and' is used at the beginning of the contrastive sentences, as in "Peter had a big drum. Mary had a trumpet. And Titch had a little wooden whistle." However, in the final sentence, "and" conjoins not only the sentence about Titch, but also conjoins verbs describing the growth of his seed: "And Titch's seed grew [page turn] and grew [page turn] and grew." This skillful use of language contributes to the sense of closure at the end of the story.

Peggy Rathmann's *Goodnight Gorilla*, tells a classic goodnight wish of every child. Like the animals in a traditional zoo, a majority of young children in America sleep behind bars at night, in a crib. From the adult point of view, this is to keep the child safe while the parents rest and cannot watch over him or her. But in this story, a child's wish to be let out of his or her crib and sleep with his or her parents is fulfilled as the gorilla takes the keys from the zookeeper and lets the animals into the zookeeper's house. Then, even after the zookeeper's wife sends all the animals back to the zoo, the gorilla (with a mouse) still manages to sneak into their big bed and sleep with them. The developmental issue (wanting

to not sleep in a crib, but be out and about, or at least, sleeping with the parents) is skillfully dealt with implicitly. But explicitly there is the problem, endemic to all children and their tired parents, that children want the reassurance that their parents are there and will be there when they wake up. Thus, the multitude of "Goodnights" that echoes throughout this text also echoes in the hallways outside bedrooms night after night. Those "Goodnights", along with the animal names, take up around fifty words of text. Again, this text succeeds in the three proposed criteria, as the text is short and easily read, there is a clear change of state at the end (i.e. the gorilla is no longer in his cage; instead he is in the bed of the zookeeper and his wife), and the story focuses on the classic developmental issue of going to sleep, with the added twist of providing form for an experience the child would like to have!

Molly Bang's classic goodnight book, *Ten, Nine, Eight* is a short, simple, rhyming text that takes the main character from checking out all her toys (from 10 down to 6) and then preparing herself to go to bed (from 5 to 1). Told in less than 70 words, in short, simple adjective-noun-prepositional-phrase fragments, the main character moves from being outside her crib to being tucked happily in her crib, and is another example of a classic bedtime story.

Simple sentence structure is also found in *I Am a Bunny* written by Ole Risom and illustrated by Richard Scarry. The story shows Nicolas Bunny and recounts what he likes to do in the spring, summer, fall, and winter in the simple present tense, which implies he does this year after year. The story, told in less than 150 words, shows the physiological change that the bunny goes through (again, from awake to asleep, but in this case, the time period is over the course of a year, and the sleep is the longer winter sleep). In addition, the story gives form for experience as the seasons are named. Moreover, the ending provides a circular closure, as the bunny dreams about spring. Thus, the listener realizes that the bunny will wake up and do all the same activities again next year. This story thus provides linguistic and cognitive structure for the experience of seasonal change.

Whose Mouse Are You?, written by Robert Kraus and illustrated by Jose Aruego, is an interesting contrast to the previous stories for the very young, as it deals with issues of identity and loss. It is the story of a mouse whose parents and sister are all individually lost or trapped, and how he goes and saves them all. There is clearly a change from start to finish as first he is alone, and by the end he is with his whole family, including a new brother. In addition, the language of the story is wonderful with a question-answer pattern that moves along quickly in a lovely near-rhyme pattern. This 100-word manuscript is the quickest read of all the ones mentioned above precisely because of the short question-answer format and the judicious use of rhyme. However, this picturebook cannot be argued to provide form for experience for most children in the first two years of life, as they

are not questioning their identity, or their role in the family, or saving their parents from imminent death. So this text alone, of all the texts examined above, does not meet the suggested criteria for being developmentally relevant. However, the delightful rhyming text and bright illustrations in this case override the criteria of developmental appropriateness.

Thus, after examining eight books in *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury* according to the criteria suggested above, one is found to be a concept book, and not a narrative (i.e. Helen Oxenbury's *I See; I Hear; I Touch*), and one (*Whose Mouse Are You?*) is considered to be a narrative with strong use of language, but not developmentally relevant for the age group discussed in this paper, namely newborn to two years of age. This is not to say that they should not have been included in the treasury; what I am suggesting is that if a parent were to use these three questions to evaluate the eight books contained in the treasury, they might exclude these two books from consideration, while they might include as suitable narratives for their infant or toddler the other six selections. Moreover, of the seven narrative texts included in this treasury, six clearly fit all three guidelines suggested herein, indicating their usefulness.

Of course, there are a variety of other criteria that can be used for picture-book selection. In 2002, HarperCollins published the *HarperCollins Treasury of Picture Book Classics: A Child's First Collection*. It included 12 reproductions of HarperCollins' picturebooks from 1947 to 1998. In the Acknowledgements and a Little History, HarperCollins editor Katherine Brown Tegen noted that all the books "share some universal qualities: they tap into children's emotions, the stories are told with language that endures repeated readings because of its poetry and simplicity; the artwork extends the text so that the whole of the book is always more than the sum of its parts" (p. 442). There are differences in the criteria with what I have suggested above, but the issue of language is considered crucial in both instances. In the latter set of criteria, however, it is noted that the artwork is evaluated as to whether it extends the text, and while it is certainly an important consideration from an editorial point of view, it is more difficult for a caregiver to make that evaluation immediately. This is not to say that illustrations are not important, only that it may be difficult to determine if it is extending a text. Parents and readers of all ages respond viscerally to images, and as such it is obviously a crucial consideration, and one that bears further analysis on the relation of pictures to a child's emergent visual literacy. My point is that this particular criteria of how the pictures extend a text does not lend itself well to analysis while a parent is standing in a bookstore or a library. A 'naive' reader will either be drawn to the visual images or not, and this response will result in either the reader moving his or her eyes to the words to ascertain the suitability of the text or closing the book and returning it to the shelf.

Similarly with the issue of tapping into the emotions of the child: it is important, but difficult to evaluate when stated in that way. While this is obviously a critical criteria for an editorial team, for a parent or caregiver who wants to select a book that will engage their 0-to-24-month-old child and provide a sense of completion and satisfaction at the end of each reading, assessing the criteria of change and behavioral development portrayed in the book are argued here to be more easily graspable and implementable when trying to make a quick decision.

In sum, if caregivers want to begin leading the child into the world of literature appreciation, the three guidelines proposed should help them get there: select books that (1) show a change of state (in the object or character) from beginning to end, (2) are developmentally relevant to that particular child (i.e. deal with emotional, behavioral, physiological or social issues that that child is currently experiencing, or has recently experienced and can identify with) and (3) are very short and are well-written in that they invite repeated readings with the child.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the rationale for reading picture narratives to babies and toddlers: to create a commonality of experiences between the caregiver and child. In addition, I reviewed the recent psycholinguistic literature that clearly points to the benefits of reading, especially repeated reading, to the very young. Lastly, I have proposed three criteria that educators, academics, and librarians can suggest to parents to help them quickly identify an emotionally satisfying picturebook narrative, and then I tested those criteria on picturebooks that are considered to be classics in the American picturebook tradition of the past fifty-some years. The findings suggest that caregivers can use these three questions in the bookstore or in the library to judge whether or not the text will provide a satisfying experience for both reader and child, which will, in turn, pave the way for language and literacy development, as well as extend the emotional and cognitive landscape of the child by providing a range of situations and experiences through the pictures and text.

However, what if there is a conflict between the three questions? That is, what if the picturebook has concise and lovely language and a change of state, but is not developmentally appropriate? Or what if there is no change of state, but it is developmentally appropriate and has a wonderful sense of rhythm? Does that mean a book should not be selected? Certainly not. The questions, first off, are simply

guidelines. Second, they are provided to stimulate the caregiver's own evaluation process. If, for example, the caregiver was planning to select a narrative, but instead found a wonderful counting book in rhyme, these questions then allow him or her to realize she was hoping for one kind of book, and came away with another. If a book is not developmentally appropriate, but has a wonderful sense of rhythm (as in *Whose Mouse Are You?*) it would still be worth selecting that picturebook if the caregiver found it so enjoyable to read that it encouraged repeated readings (*Whose Mouse Are You?* is, in fact, very enjoyable to read, as are *Madeline* and *Where the Wild Things Are* even though they are also not developmentally relevant for a newborn-to-two-year-old child.)

In fact, as the psycholinguistic literature clearly shows that repeated readings increase a toddler's vocabulary and pave the way for acquiring language and literacy skills, what is critical is that parents enjoy the reading-aloud process. This paper suggests that providing guidelines to caregivers to seek out short, well-written narrative texts which involve change and are developmentally appropriate will aid caregivers in their selection of picturebooks and, in turn, add to their enjoyment of the reading-aloud time for both themselves and their child.

In conclusion, narrative picturebooks may be considered beneficial for the youngest readers, not only for purposes of language and literacy acquisition, but also so that infants and toddlers may begin to join in one of the benefits of being part of the human race: to appreciate another's point of view as one's own and to enter into the greater humanity of a shared knowledgebase that embraces individual and cultural differences at the same time that it transcends them.

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