

Illustration in Children's Books

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Children delight in stories. Stories give them access to the workings of the existing world, makes it less confusing, and more interesting. But much before their association with words begin, children can relate to the visual language. Picture books therefore, are an excellent source with which to familiarize children with their surroundings, and to acquaint them with the values of the adult world.

Illustrations in a children's book do not merely serve the purpose of supplementing or supporting the story. Nor are they replacements for parts of the story. The story and the illustrations have equal roles to play in a picture book. They are parallel experiences, both of which a child enjoys separately. That is one reason why a good illustrator would never merely or strictly follow the description given in the text, but try to add to it. What is written and described would already produce vivid images in the child's mind. Instead of defying and directing the imagination, an illustration should create an atmosphere and a parallel experience. This, combined with the written word, can lead to a heightened and totally delightful experience

In any case the words and the pictures can never give the same experience in a picture book. This is especially so if the illustrator and author are different. The illustrator reads the text. And translates it according to his or her own experiences. Even when the author and illustrator are the same, I don't think the experience of the two can be exactly the same. Some times when I do illustrations, I wait for surprises, and instead of preconceiving the whole totally, I let it take its own course and develop on its own.

Contrary to comics, which have almost every part of the story illustrated, children's book illustrations portray only some incidents. As I mentioned before, that is because it is not supposed to guide each part of the experience. It should lightly nudge the child's creativity, and let it take off from there into the grip of the child's imagination. That makes a children's book a deeper more personalized experience. Just as an adult chooses a favorite book because he or she can relate to it out of his or her own experience or add something new to it, a children book too is a process of give and take.

It is very important that the illustrations in a book be of a high quality. It is where a child's early aesthetic education begins. In terms of illustrations, one cannot underestimate children. They can distinguish between good and bad art. That is not to say that they can tell if a figure or object is anatomically or factually correct, but whether it exudes a positive energy and harmony in terms of color, form or expression. Some illustrators give more attention to making illustrations more representative and naturalistic and closer to the external world in terms of perspective and proportions. While it is important to have knowledge of that, when it comes to very young children, I feel that one should not get constrained within that limitation, but try to go beyond. Young children don't really care about factual accuracy. That requirement comes as children grow older and are conditioned to identify things more with their external appearances. That is why illustrations in older children's books are more factually correct. Adult books don't have illustrations because when children reach adulthood, they have experienced the external world enough not to require visual references for an understanding of a situation or idea.

Some of the best illustrators I know of are untrained ones, who rely more on their sense of delight and trust their own judgement, rather than relying on rules and techniques.

Illustrations in a children's book play a very important role in a child's aesthetic education. As grown-ups then, they can more easily distinguish good art from bad. The influences can also reflect on the environment. A heightened sense of beauty will urge them as citizens to make their environment more beautiful and harmonious, and to demand and deliver higher standards.

It is important that a children's book give free reign to a child's imagination also because it can give an added vision of the world than what merely exists. It can prompt the child to create such a world if something delights it. I can remember that as a child, some beautiful images from a book would stick to my mind. I can remember bits of the images even now, long after I have forgotten the book or the context. Sometimes I try to recreate that experience. Since I don't have the reference before me, I rely on the sense of delight I derived from it. As a result, I would come up with something very different, but which would delight me all the same. It is important, therefore, for an illustrator to give vent to their creativity, and give a child a world full of possibilities.

Speaking of art and aesthetics, I would like to add that that most fine arts began as illustrations, in temples or churches, or courts. Most depicted religious mythologies. It was a way of acquainting ordinary people with the gods, goddesses, kings, religious leaders, their lives, values and teachings. They represented certain events denoting the values or morals attached to them. But there was always a story behind them. Paintings, sculptures, architecture, all would nudge the people's imagination, and invoke faith, fear, devotion, compassion- but what underlay beneath was always the human experience.

I have seen people wonder, looking at illustrations, that what does one say when a child asks why a certain creature looks like that, when a real one doesn't. what does one say? I think that is just why one needs illustrators, so that children can experience something visually that they might not have thought of before. Otherwise one might just as well use photographs. Sometimes though, truth can seem to be stranger than fiction. There are a number of creatures and objects in the world that seem quite unbelievable, like a stick insect or a sea dragon. Introducing strange and unknown things in a positive and delightful way may teach them tolerance, and to accept new and strange things and ways.

When it comes to buying books, it is mostly the parent who does the buying. A lot of children's books, hence, are targeted at the older buyer. As a result, one sees a number of children's books on epics, mythologies and folk tales, illustrated in a more naturalistic way. Probably because with the onslaught of western values and objects, parents want to remind the children of their own traditions and values. While most of them are witty and delightful, a number of them being animal tales, some of them contain values and morals which are pretty outdated. Instead of confusing child further by giving them extremes of values, we need to strike a balance. It is important it be in keeping with the present situation, which is a mixture of local and western ways, especially in cities.

India also has a vast treasure of folk art. These contain the same naivety and expressiveness required for illustrations for children. With some experimentation, these can be an excellent source for illustrations in a children's book.

I would like to conclude by saying that we have all the resources to create wonderful books for children. Books which can relate to children of all kinds, and from all over the world, at the same time contribute with it's own uniqueness, which can make them stand out as well.

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