

Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks

Children's responses to *Smoke* by Antón Fortes and Joanna Concejo

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Abstract

This chapter will begin by considering what is meant by the term challenging and controversial picturebooks. It will go on to look at some strange, ambiguous and sometimes shocking picturebooks and consider who they are for. Finally the thoughts and opinions of some 11 year old children will be considered along with their written and illustrated responses to the picturebook *Smoke* by Antón Fortes and Joanna Concejo (2008).

Introduction

Picturebooks, defined here as visual texts where the text and image work together to create the whole, are often considered to be for very young readers due to their emphasis on the illustrations and scarcity of text. There are, however, increasing numbers of picturebooks where the age of the implied reader is questionable; picturebooks whose controversial subject matter and unconventional, often unsettling style of illustration challenge the readers, pushing them to question and probe deeper to understand what the book is about.¹ In addition to this kind of book challenging the reader, the reader often challenges the book, delving into the gaps in an attempt to understand what is being said.

Many of these picturebooks work on many different levels, they are multifaceted, polysemic texts worthy of in depth analysis. They compel the reader to respond to them by asking questions and in many instances they are intrinsically philosophical, dealing with fundamental issues and asking “big questions” which often form the basis of life. We need to ask who these picturebooks, often dealing with controversial issues that evoke fearful responses about the psychological safety of the reader, are for. Who exactly is the audience? Are they for children or should we be asking if picturebooks such as *Lejren (The Camp)* by Oscar K. and Dorte Karrebæk, *Smoke* by Antón Fortes and Joanna Concejo, and *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch are actually “[...] poetic and philosophical works of art for young adults.”²

¹ Evans 2015.

² Rhedin 2009.

Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks

What Are They?

There is no existing term that is commonly used in the study of children's literature to describe and classify these kind of picturebooks; words such as strange, unusual, disturbing and controversial are suitable for describing *some* of these books but not *all* of them.

Many authors of these kinds of texts are aware that they can be hard to categorise. Oscar K., author of numerous challenging and controversial award winning picturebooks shared his thoughts in stating:

Every so often, books appear that are hard to categorise, because they are not aimed at a particular age group but at readers in general; they do not have monochord themes and plot sequences but are complex; they allow the dizzyingly incomprehensible to become the object of a reader's wonder – books that do not invite rapid and comfortable reading but require effort and contemplation.³

Many adults feel that challenging and controversial picturebooks may not be suitable for children to read, however, not all adults feel this way. In an attempt to identify and describe who these books might be for, a group of adults, all teachers and parents of young children, were asked for their thoughts about challenging and controversial picturebooks. Many encountered more questions than answers however, it was Carmel, a teacher and parent of two children, who gave a very thought provoking description of the genre as well as clearly showing how a close consideration of such texts calls for responses which are creative, critical and analytical:

Challenging and controversial picturebooks offer neither safe passage nor guaranteed results for teacher or pupil. They call into question our beliefs; they stimulate our ideas in directions we may never even have dreamed of and lay claim to our emotions. They invoke a passionate response, which can sometimes be so overwhelming that they leave the reader exhausted from the effort expended in trying to make sense of the puzzle in the visual feast before them. Such books cannot be fully appreciated in splendid isolation but instead need discussion with others, consideration and conjecture, careful observation. They are demanding, dangerous and difficult. Unexpected twists and treats emerge as each page is turned. They are fascinating, frightening, frustrating. They are a risk. But the freedom of expression, creativity and collaboration they facilitate provides riches for the soul and lessons in life, which reach far beyond the confines of the classroom. And therein lies their immeasurable reward.⁴

Children themselves also have clear thoughts on what challenging and controversial picturebooks are. They are under no illusion that these kinds of books are capable of arousing deep thoughts and emotions. Eleven-year-old Patrick commented: "A chal-

³ K. 2008, 46.

⁴ Personal communication September 2014.

lenging picturebook may be challenging for one person but not for someone else. I mean it might be really hard for one person but not hard for another person.”

Who are they for?

As Patrick noted, what is challenging and controversial to one reader may not be to another, however, there are increasing numbers of picturebooks that are ever more strange, ambiguous and unconventional in their subject matter, form and illustrative style. So who *are* they for? They are not simply for very young children as some people think. They can be so powerful and moving that even adults find them extremely emotional and thought provoking. The majority of people do not realise how complex picturebooks can be. In a review of the *Picture This* exhibition at the British Library in 2013, it was noted that many illustrators did not pander to the perceived needs of children, they were not worried about frightening them or needing to keep them safe, in fact, in creating different worlds for the children they are given space and freedom to let their imaginations run wild. The reviewer stated: “Children will always risk a nightmare as long as there is somebody to soothe them when they wake.”⁵

The question of who is the audience for children’s literature is not new. In 2008 Rachel Falconer and Sandra Beckett both wrote about crossover literature, books that address both children and adults. A decade earlier, Beckett (1999) wrote about this same issue in her book on dual audience in children’s literature. Even earlier than this, Kimmel asked if there could be children’s literature without children? He saw that adults as well as children were reading children’s picturebooks and he noticed, “the appearance of a growing number of exotically illustrated, high-priced picture books that appear to be far too unusual or sophisticated to attract many children.”⁶

In 2012 Beckett used the term “crossover picturebooks” to describe picturebooks that can be read by people of any age, not just children. Her extensive research describes and analyses differing categories of picturebooks, many of which deal with difficult subjects. Åse Marie Ommundsen takes this question of audience one stage further and focuses on picturebooks for adults, whereby the intended audience is adults and not children. Ommundsen defines this kind of picturebook as, “a narrative text addressed to adults with a picture on each spread”⁷; she notes that they are a new trend in Scandinavian literature and although there are various types they all, “borrow their visual expression from advanced picturebooks for children.”⁸ The idea of picturebooks for adults is an unusual concept to accept for many people who grew up reading picturebooks in their own childhood and who now think of them as being for young children.

⁵ Colgan 2013.

⁶ Kimmel 1982, 41.

⁷ Ommundsen 2014, 17.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

What makes a picturebook challenging?

Words, Pictures and Subject Matter

The way in which the words and pictures, the iconotext⁹, work together is important, but the actual subject matter is crucial in determining if a picturebook is regarded as being challenging and / or controversial. In her work on controversial issues in children's literature, Lehr (1995) noted that some books deal with disturbing and often intensely thought provoking subjects such as: death and dying; love, sex and violence; depression, sadness and loneliness; intolerance; murder; suicide; drugs; bullying; racism; the holocaust; domestic abuse; abortion and even child burial!

Many people would argue these are unsuitable subjects for picturebooks, however, we need only look at the origins of some of these stories and themes. They are not new! In the early 19th century the Grimm Brothers were recounting traditional folktales that reflected life as it existed at that time. Subjects such as murder, cannibalism, incest, child cruelty, sex and violence were all significant elements in the original Grimms' folktales and were accepted in their stories. The Grimm Brothers' stories and those, half a century later, of Hans Christian Anderson, who also wrote stories with disturbing themes, have always been viewed as suitable for children. Many adults allow, even encourage, children to read these traditional stories dealing with dark, psychological, sometimes harrowing themes and yet, those same children are often denied access to contemporary picturebooks covering similar themes.

Picturebook Themes

Despite the fact that the use of taboo subjects, to include violence, is nothing new, some picturebooks are *so* complex with subject matter that is *so* intense and difficult to grasp that it is sometimes hard to accept that they may be considered suitable for children. Many of these books are troubling and frequently shocking. *Sinna Mann (Angry Man)* by Norwegian couple Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus (2003), is an award winning picturebook about domestic violence and a little boy's way of coping (cf. Figure 1). Bjorvand (2010) called this book, "a revolution in children's literature", not just because of the subject matter but also because of the way in which physical abuse and domestic violence is portrayed in a picturebook.



Fig. 1: Papa gets angry. – Dahle, Gro / Nyhus, Svein (2003): Sinna Mann. Oslo: Cappelen, non paginated.

⁹ Hallberg 1982.

Snowwhite, Ana Juan's hypnotic adaptation of the Grimm Brothers' traditional fairy tale, is a story of jealousy, hatred, cruelty and murder where, instead of a poisoned apple, Snowwhite is given drugs and instead of the prince giving her a kiss, he rapes her (cf. Figure 2). This book mesmerises the adult reader for its sensational coverage of universal themes in the guise of a traditional folktale.



Fig. 2: Snowwhite is raped. – Juan, Ana (2001): *Snowwhite*. Onil: Edicions de Ponent, non paginated.

Die Menschenfresserin (The Female Cannibal) by Valerie Dayre, illustrated by Wolf Erlbruch (1996), now over twenty years old, is about a female ogress who eats her own son. It is about cannibalism! One of the most disturbing illustrations in this book is where the female cannibal has just devoured her own child. Erlbruch depicts this scene in the most compelling and powerfully shocking manner: the wind up toy monkey previously depicted quietly regarding the little boy as he plays his bandonion, is shown screaming hysterically, his mouth wide open and his eyes wildly protruding in shock at what he is seeing (cf. Figure 3).

In studying extremely controversial picturebooks, Lissa Paul (2003) focused on *Die Menschenfresserin*, becoming quite obsessed with it in the process. Whilst listening to adults' responses when this picturebook was read aloud, Paul noted, "The initial reaction was the same everywhere: a dismayed intake of breath, a shiver of horror, instinctive recoil. I felt it everytime. The message was clear: keep this book away from children."¹⁰ Despite this message Paul did use this book with a class of 10 and 11 year old children and found: "Unlike the adults, the children did not respond with revulsion. Not even a hint. There was no shock, horror or fear. They engaged in the story with calm, intense interest and curiosity [...]"¹¹

¹⁰ Paul 2003, 173.

¹¹ Ibid., 177.



Fig. 3: The boy is devoured. – Dayre, Valerie / Erlbruch, Wolf (1996): Die Menschenfresserin. Wuppertal: Hammer, non paginated.

Ein roter Schuh (*One Red Shoe*) by Karin Gruss and Tobias Krejtschi (2014) (cf. Figure 4) is another difficult story telling of the violent unpredictability of life in a war zone. A school bus is blown up and a newspaper photographer rushes to the nearest clinic to capture the story. What he sees changes the way he thinks forever. Inspired by events in the Middle East, this challenging picturebook recounts a school bus attack and the ensuing fate of a nine-year-old boy who suffers a grenade hit to the leg. *One Red Shoe* is a book of our time, covering issues related to the savage violence and senseless actions of war.

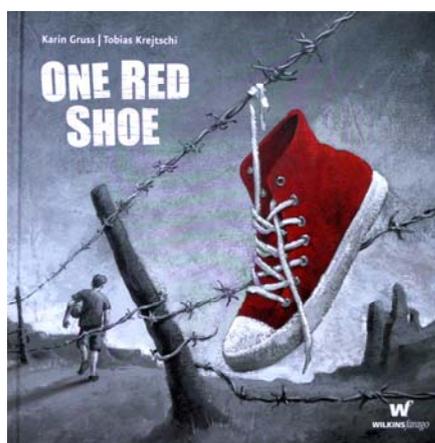


Fig. 4: Is a red shoe all that is left? – Gruss, Karin / Krejtschi, Tobias (2014): Ein roter Schuh. Australia: Wilkins Farago, Cover and non paginated.

Then, drawing on our knowledge of history and the challenge of unbelievable cruelty to other human beings is Oscar K. and Dorte Karrebæk's book *Lejren* (*The Camp*) (2011). In this beautifully executed and yet harrowing picturebook, the words and the illustrations work together to tell the story. It is a deeply shocking and at the same time powerfully moving picturebook portraying children's frightening and sinister experiences of brutal conflict from the recent past and present time (cf. Figures 5 and 6). Not for the faint hearted, *Camp* is the perfect example of a pictorial work for adults and young adults dealing with the holocaust and concentration camps. It won first prize in the National Arts Council's competition for the illustrated book in 2010.



Fig. 5 and 6: The head was shaved. – K., O. / Karrebæk, Dorte (2011): *Lejren*. Copenhagen: Rosinante & Co, Cover and non paginated.

Suitable for children?

Many children who are not allowed access to these kinds of challenging picturebooks, on the grounds that they are too young or immature, are being patronised. Their everyday lives are often filled with far greater personal worries and challenges than those they may find in books. Whatever challenge a picturebook presents is by definition at one remove, it is not one's personal problem and can be thought about and reflected on, at a distance. Carole Scott considered whether some of these challenging picturebooks were, "a challenge to innocence".¹² She concluded that they weren't and in some earlier research she stated that rather than deny children access to these thought provoking texts adults should share them with children and talk about them, thereby mediating any potentially upsetting content of a controversial book.¹³ Challenging and controversial picture books often dealing with shocking material should be for all ages: "It isn't enough to just read a book, one must talk about it as well."¹⁴

The maturity shown by children as they read, think about and respond to challenging texts is often quite amazing; they can cope with and respond to both real life and picturebook problems in a manner that adults frequently think almost unbelievable. In her reader response research, Evans (1998, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), has consistently noted that most children who read these kind of books find no problems with them and accept them at face value. Their previous experiences and level of maturity allow them to respond in appropriate ways for their age, hence, potentially distressing picturebooks about the holocaust such as *Smoke* (Fortes and Concejo, 2008), *Let the Celebrations Begin*, (Wild and Vivas, 1991) and *Lejren (The Camp)* (K. and Karrebæk, 2011) are unlikely to be as upsetting or troubling to an 11 year old child, who

¹² Scott 2005 (cf. title).

¹³ Scott 1999.

¹⁴ Evans 2009, 3.

isn't fully aware of the atrocities perpetrated in the concentration camps, and in the World War II fighting leading up to these atrocities, as they would be to an 89 year old war veteran.

Responding to challenging and controversial picturebooks

Working with the children

In an attempt to discover more about what children thought of challenging and controversial picturebooks, I worked with a class of 30 children who I had known since they had started school at the age of 4 / 5 years. The school, a primary school catering for 4 to 11 year old children, is situated between the cities of Liverpool and Manchester in the North West of England. There were 14 boys and 16 girls in the class and they were used to reading, sharing, thinking about and responding to a variety of different picturebooks. They viewed picturebooks as something to read for pleasure, to think about, talk about and discuss; to respond to in the form of writing, drawing, role-play and drama; and as a catalyst for artistic expression. They had also considered the picturebook as an art form and as a vehicle for discussing controversial and philosophical issues such as death and dying, war and conflict, drugs, immigration, loneliness and old age.

Many of the picturebooks they had read were challenging but beautiful, visual texts that prompted much thought and discussion. On occasion there were texts that made the children feel uneasy in relation to the subject matter, however, for the most part, the books invited the children to respond by sharing their personal thoughts and points of view to the controversial issues being considered.

The 11-year-old children were in their last year at primary school. Over a period of three weeks I worked with the whole class prior to focusing on a small group of 6 children. Before looking at any picturebooks they were asked what they thought the words challenging and controversial meant. They went on to consider what challenging picturebooks are, who they are for, and what makes them challenging. After defining the terms they were asked to sort and classify a selection of 25 differing picturebooks before choosing one in particular to respond to as a group.

Defining the terms

What does challenging mean?

Edward's definition was simple and clear, "challenging means something that isn't easy; something that takes you a while to work out", whilst Molly's definition showed she had really considered differing aspects of the word:

I think challenging means something that is a bit out of your comfort zone and something you are not used to doing. For example, the first time you go to work it may be challeng-

ing but once you get used to it, it is not a challenge any more. There is more than one kind of challenge [...] there are mental challenges where you find something hard because you are in troubling times, and physical challenges that might make your body ache.

What does controversial mean?

The word controversial wasn't easy to define. Charlotte said,

I am not sure what controversial means but after our discussion I think it means causing a problem by saying something that someone disagrees with. So, if someone says something completely different to everyone else to cause an argument they are being controversial.

Edward admitted he was unsure what the word meant and that he needed to look it up, "I've just looked it up in the dictionary and a controversial book is a book dealing with shocking issues such as the death penalty that not everyone has the same opinion of."

What are challenging picturebooks?

Emily felt that, "a challenging picturebook is a book that invites discussion and scrutiny so you can understand it". Molly intriguingly noted, "a challenging picturebook is a book that you have to think about "out-of-the-box" as well as "in-the-box".

Who are these picturebooks for?

The children had previously been exposed to picturebooks that provoked strong, in-depth discussion and therefore had firm views to offer in relation to this question. Edward remarked, "I think that challenging picturebooks are for children aged 9 -14. Too young and they wouldn't understand but too old and they wouldn't be challenging enough." Patrick expanded on Edward's point stating, "I think challenging picturebooks are for young adults and older people such as 10-16 and 50-60 year olds because of the in-depth situations they involve." Molly agreed with both viewpoints when she commented, "I would aim a challenging picturebook for an 11 year old or for people at high school or over because they are something that younger children won't understand because they're beyond their knowledge and experiences."

Sorting and classifying a selection of picturebooks

After defining the terms they were shown a selection of 25 books. By looking at just the titles and book cover images they were asked to sort and classify the books according to if they thought they would be "challenging", "not challenging" or "not sure". The reasoning behind this activity was to see if title and cover features could make a picturebook seem challenging and controversial before it is read. The children focused on features such as book titles and subtitles, style of illustrations, text type, font and use of colour, size of book, authors and illustrators they already knew, and links with previous books they had read. As they shared their thoughts and reasonings with the other children they referred to the books they had sorted:

One of my first thoughts about what makes a picturebook challenging or not is how complicated the illustration is on the front cover of the book. If the illustration is complicated like *The Rabbits* (Marsden and Tan, 1998) I think it will be more challenging compared to a book with a less complicated illustration like *Selma* (Bauer 2003) (Charlotte)

If the title is just one or two words like *The Island* (Greder 2007) it doesn't give much away so it makes me think it will be more challenging than a longer title that gives more away. (Molly)

If the title uses complex vocabulary that might make it challenging, for example, *The Cultivated Wolf* (Bloom and Biet 1998). (Molly)

The subtitle of the book affects your opinion of the book, because even though *Underground* (Evans 2011) is hand drawn and cartoon-like, the subtitle writing at the bottom, *Finding the Light to Freedom*, makes it sound much more mature and interesting. (Emily)

If the colour is dark, like the dark red and black in *Woolvs in the Sitee* (Wild and Spudvilas 2007), I think it will be challenging, whereas if it is light, like the yellow and white book, *Selma* (Bauer 2003) I think it will be less challenging because it doesn't look hidden away and mysterious. (Patrick)

One reason for a picturebook being challenging could be the size of the book, making the reader conscious of how long the book is, for example *Die Schöpfung (The Creation)*, Waechter 2002) is a really big book and I know that is challenging. (Megan)

If the picture is cartoon like, for example *Duck! Rabbit!* (Rosenthal and Lichtenheld 2009) it makes me think it will be less challenging because a cartoon book is normally easier and less challenging than a book with no pictures or one with proper paintings. (Edward)

If the picture is something unusual that you wouldn't normally see, like a tree in a suit of clothes as on *Smoke* (Fortes and Concejo 2008), it makes me think that it has been done deliberately so it is more challenging than a book with a picture of something that isn't unusual like a woman with a cat as with *Lola and the Rent a Cat* (Josephus Jitta 2007). (Charlotte)

If you know the author and illustrator then you can tell if the book may be simple or not like with Roald Dahl books. (Edward)

After looking at, sorting and categorising the 25 picturebooks the children each chose one to read and respond to in detail (see Appendix). They shared their thoughts about what the challenge of their chosen book might be before reading it, summarising it in their own words and writing a short caption to go with their illustration of the front cover. Moving on, they made a whole group decision to focus in detail on just one book.

***Smoke* by Antón Fortes and Joanna Concejo**

Some books evidently looked even more challenging than others and although it was Molly who initially chose *Smoke* to focus on, the other group members were puzzled by the intriguing title and cover illustration of this 2009 White Raven selected picturebook and they unanimously chose it as the book to respond to (cf. Figure 7).

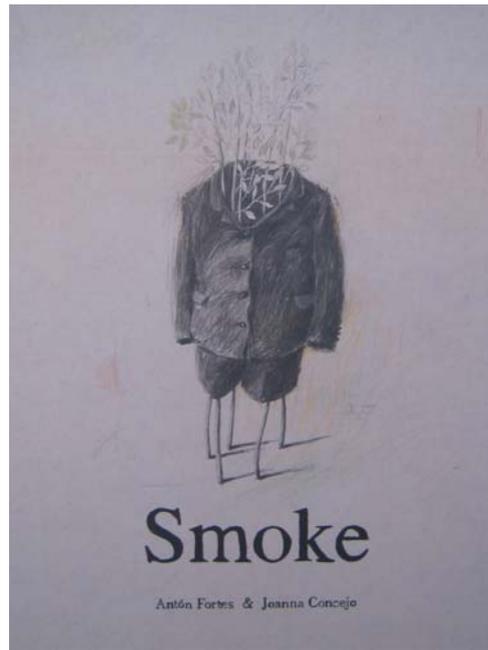


Fig. 7: Fortes, Antón / Concejo, Joanna (2008): *Smoke*. Pontevedra, Spain: OQO Books, Cover.

A harrowing yet poignant picturebook, *Smoke* describes the holocaust using a powerful blend of words and pictures. The reader sees how the little boy protagonist survives in the concentration camp initially with his mother, (his father having gone in a different line), and other prisoners, then alone with his only friend, Pali. Fortes' descriptive and haunting words are partnered by Concejo's equally graphic and emotive images drawn in pale, muted colours to evoke the transience of a previously short but sweet life. The reader is never sure if the boy knows where he is or what will happen to him but his innocence is never in question and although many readers know what will finally happen, the end is still shocking.

Responding to *Smoke*

Some picturebook creators may avoid addressing such issues because of their upsetting subject matter,¹⁵ however, the children in this study showed great maturity of thought in responding to *Smoke*. They commented that the reason they felt so at ease in responding was because they had been used to reading and talking about picturebooks like this for many years and they knew there was no right or wrong answer.¹⁶ As Edward commented: "Over the years [...] we have built up expectations of how hard and challenging picturebooks can be and our expectations have risen so that we now expect the picturebooks we read to be very challenging and demanding in terms of their content."

¹⁵ Kokkola 2003.

¹⁶ Evans 2009.

Pre-reading predictions

The children knew it was going to be challenging but didn't know why, their pre-reading predictions focused on the book cover image and reflected their uncertainty about the book's content:

Before I read *Smoke* I thought it was about a man that died in a fire in his house and then reincarnated into a bamboo tree. (Molly)

I think *Smoke* is about a war and lots of people die. The only person left put some clothes on the plants to symbolize the death of many people. Instead of a war it could be a fire. (Patrick)

I think *Smoke* is about a big fire where everything is wiped out and there's only one tree left. (Emily)

Pre-reading group discussion

After sharing predictions of what the book might be about the children spontaneously began to discuss the book. Their discussion was wide-ranging and profound and showed their willingness to reflect on their peers' comments.

Patrick: I bet *Smoke* is about war and lots of people die. I also think the cover symbolises something strange.

Janet: One thing is for sure, the book cover *is* very symbolic.

Molly: What does symbolic mean?

Patrick: I think symbolic means to represent something.

Edward: Symbolic means it's a symbol of something, for example, if a bamboo farmer wrote this book maybe the cover is the bamboo farmer's symbol or logo for his farm.

Patrick: We could draw a picture to symbolise the meaning of the book. We haven't actually written down or talked about what the front cover of *Smoke* could symbolise.

Megan: I think *Smoke* will be very challenging.

Molly: I think it is about some kind of religion; it's trying to say that people regenerate when they die.

Edward: A bit like reincarnation?

Megan: So how does the title, *Smoke*, come into it?

Molly: Well, when people die some of them are cremated and that makes smoke.

Emily: I think *Smoke* is about some people who have lost their family in a fire and then there are some trees left and because there is only one person left he is lonely so he puts the burnt people's clothes on a tree to show respect for them.

Edward: I've just thought of what *Smoke* could be about. The person who survives the fire dresses up the bamboo plants so that he has someone to talk to like in the film *I Am Legend* where Will Smith talks to mannequins in shops. Also in the film *Cast Away* where Tom Hanks draws a face on a football to have someone to talk to.

At this point they were asked, if some of their predictions were right, did they expect a picturebook to be dealing with this kind of subject?

- Emily: No, because I would expect it to be in an autobiography about someone who has been through this kind of trauma but escaped, as opposed to someone who hasn't experienced this kind of thing.
- Molly: Most people expect picturebooks to be for babies.
- Patrick: People would expect subjects like this, to do with war, and concentration camps and stuff, to be in hard books.
- Janet: So what do you mean by "hard books"?
- Patrick: Books without pictures.
- Edward: Thicker books that are harder.
- Janet: Are picturebooks not hard?
- Edward: Yes they are hard but I know that some thick books without pictures can be harder.
- Molly: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a hard subject but from a different point of view. This one, *Smoke* is deeper in thoughts than *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.
- Edward: If you hadn't been in this group for a while you would not expect picturebooks to be hard, you would expect them to be for babies.
- Janet: Do you think picturebooks are challenging because of your personal expectations?
- Patrick: Yes, we have built up a knowledge of picturebooks and what to expect. If we hadn't previously read picturebooks like these we would expect simple subjects and even after seeing the covers we would still expect them to be easy [...] but then after reading the pictures, we would think like, WOW!
- Edward: I've just thought of something. Do you think authors just randomly choose to draw a book cover image in any way? Do they choose images that are not relevant to the story at all?
- Janet: What do you think? You said the cover of *Smoke* was very symbolic so why do you think that image was chosen?
- Emily: Maybe they made a tree and put clothes on the tree to pretend it's a dad.

Molly had previously read *Smoke* as it was her original book of choice. At this point in the discussion she shared some of the story, briefly summarizing what she thought it was about. Her information affected the rest of the discussion.

- Molly: I think the suit in the image represents the people who have lost their lives because they got gassed in the concentration camps and the tree represents new life and new hope because it is growing new shoots and leaves.
- Patrick: They put this on the cover to sway us in one way and then when we read the book it has a totally different impact on us. The cover makes us think one thing but the book itself is completely different.
- Edward: You would think the authors would put something on the cover that actually shows that it is going to be about, for example, a concentration camp. If you were one of those people who were actually in a concentration camp and then escaped, you might want to read the book, but you wouldn't know that it's about a concentration camp from the cover image.
- Emily: Maybe people are attracted to it because it is so unusual.
- Edward: I think it should have a label saying World War II, so people would know if they would want to read it.

At this point the children were ready to read the book. Their discussion had already showed great maturity of thought. They were more than capable of precocious responses and in relation to challenging and controversial picturebooks they showed: a willingness to be open minded; an awareness of deep, profound issues; and a level of maturity beyond their years which at times was quite disconcerting. They were enthusiastic and willing to offer points of view and to learn from each other in this “community of learners” environment.

Post reading responses

Immediately after the reading Emily referred to the page with the green dragon (cf. Figure 8): “They are gassing people’s memories. It shows on the page about the green dragon.”

Patrick responded immediately:

The green bit represents the grass and the house represents the smoke house where they go to get gassed and the dragon represents the people trying to get them into the smoke house to gas them. I think the person who is dreaming about the dragon dreams that the dragon is inside the chimney breathing gas to kill the people.

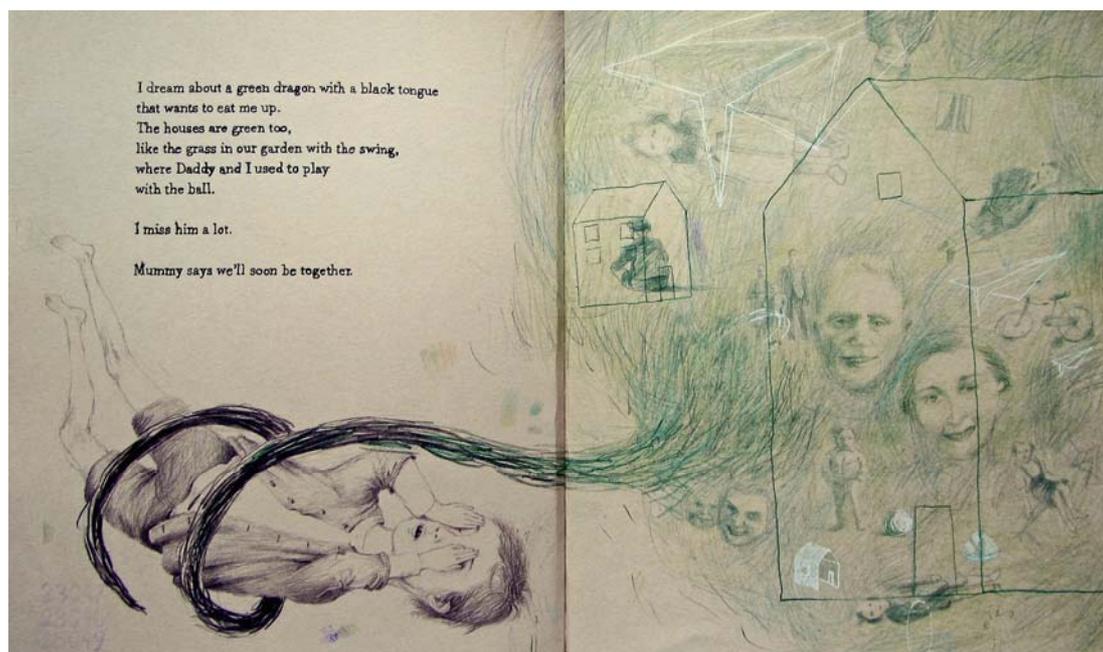


Fig. 8: The green dragon with a black tongue. – Fortes, Antón / Concejo, Joanna (2008): *Smoke*. Pontevedra, Spain: OQO Books, non paginated.

Emily continued,

I now think *Smoke* is about a concentration camp in the World War and the girl’s dad is a soldier because it said mum saw him outside the wire. *Smoke* was not what I expected it to be, also, after reading the story I still don’t understand why they put that illustration on the front cover because no one in this generation could empathise about going to a concentration camp because it hasn’t happened to anyone. The hardest part in the book is the

end with the showers, because most people reading this book know what's going to happen. Also, the back page illustration, I think, represents the smokehouse where they burn the people when they have been gassed. This book disturbs me.

Molly, who had previously read *Smoke*, further expressed her thoughts, this time to include her understanding of the text plus her emotional involvement in it.

Now I have read the book again I have a lump in my throat. On the first page of the story I now understand why the soldiers look like ravens because the symbol of death is a raven [cf. Figure 9]. The mums and the children are in different queues to the men because the men have to go for war and the mums and the children go to the concentration camp. When I read books about concentration camps they always make me disturbed. I think it is cruel that the people that manage the concentration camps tell lies about the shower, and then “gas-shower” the people. I cannot empathise with the characters but I do feel really sorry for them. The challenge for me is that they don't tell you much about the story and the cover doesn't link in.

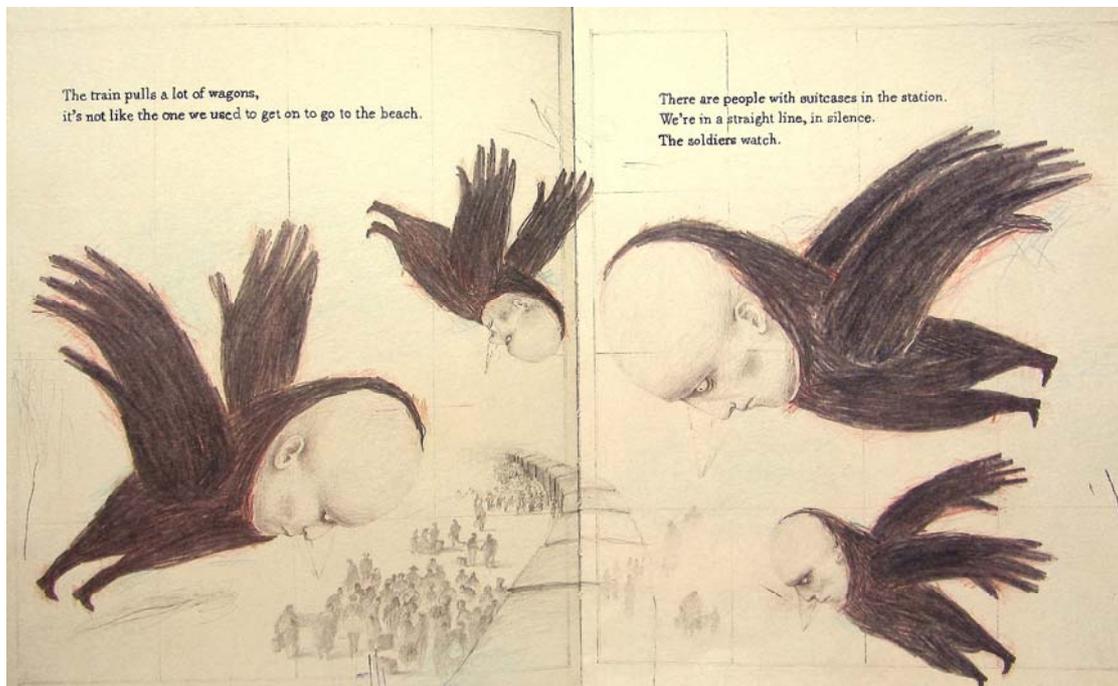


Fig. 9: The soldiers as ravens. – Fortes, Antón / Concejo, Joanna (2008): *Smoke*. Pontevedra, Spain: OQO Books, non paginated.

Molly's understanding of *Smoke* sums up just how challenging and controversial this kind of picturebook can be. After she had read the book she also stated:

Now I have read the book I think *Smoke* is a *very* challenging book. It is challenging because it doesn't tell you anything, it just gives you clues. The children don't know what's happening, but their families suffer a great deal of loss.

Her cover illustration plus accompanying caption show her thoughts in relation to the need for peace and stability in the future (cf. Figure 10):

The suit in the image represent the people who have lost their lives because they got gassed in the concentration camps, and the tree represents new life and new hope because it is growing new shoots and leaves.



Fig. 10: Molly's cover drawing of *Smoke*. – Drawing of 11-year-old Molly; personal archives of the author.

In their study of two picturebooks dealing with death, the holocaust and memory, one of which was *Smoke*, Sikorska and Smyczynska (2016) felt that while some children may find the subject of “ordinary” death somewhat difficult to understand, comprehending Holocaust death may be beyond their intellectual and emotional capacity. This however, was not the case with the 11-year-old children in this study.

They were more than capable of understanding what *Smoke* was about without getting upset. The book was telling the story at one remove; they could be emotionally involved whilst knowing that it wasn't personally happening to them.

A blend of theory and practice: Is this “real” research

In thinking about this kind of qualitative reader response research in relation to picturebooks, Perry Nodelman questioned if it could be classed as “real” research and asked, “what might legitimately be learned [...] from work with a specific child or group of children?”¹⁷ Nodelman felt that this kind of research could be classed as too subjective and idiosyncratic and he alluded to David Lewis's articulation of two routes to picturebook research, one involving, “careful and patient listening to what children say as they read” and the other, “an equally patient, careful description of individual books.”¹⁸ After consideration of both routes Nodelman admitted that there was great value in the former, whereby researchers work with children as they read and respond to picturebooks. He then proceeded to comment on the effectiveness of the researchers in this kind of response work and noted that in their attempt to praise the children for being so capable of precocious responses, “researchers are often so determined to make their point about how clever children can be that they seriously underplay how clever they are themselves.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Nodelman 2010, 10.

¹⁸ Lewis 1996, 113.

¹⁹ Nodelman 2010, 11.

Conclusions

In considering this small piece of qualitative research, it is evident that responding to challenging and controversial picturebooks is not something that children are afraid of. It is more likely to be adults who are unwilling, indeed incapable of making relevant, mature responses. The children's thoughts and responses to *Smoke* show just how willing they are to predict, speculate and tolerate uncertainty in relation to challenging picturebooks; they even commented on how their own willingness and ability to do this had improved over the years. They knew there were no right and wrong answers therefore they took risks and shared their personal, frequently audacious viewpoints, as they knew these would be accepted by the other group members.

Research such as this, blending theory and practice not only showcases particular picturebooks but highlights the views of young readers responding to these picturebooks. There is most certainly a place for more of this kind of research in the field of picturebook studies.

Appendix: The children's choices from the text set of 25 picturebooks

The Island by Armin Greder

The Enemy by David Cali illus. Sergei Bloch

Norton's Hut by John Marsden illus. Peter Gouldthorpe

The Sweetest Fig by Chris Van Allsburg

The Wolves in the Wall by Neil Gaiman illus. Dave McKean

Smoke by Antón Fortes and Joanna Concejo

Primary Literature

Bauer, Jutta (2003): *Selma*. California: Kane / Miller.

Bloom, Becky / Biet, Pascal (1998): *A Cultivated Wolf*. UK: Siphano Books.

Boyne, John (2006): *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Oxford: David Fickling Books.

Cali, Davide / Bloch, Serge (2009): *The Enemy: A Book about Peace*. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books.

Dahle, Gro / Nyhus, Svein (2003): *Sinna Mann*. Oslo: Cappelen.

Dayre, Valerie / Erlbruch, Wolf (1996): *Die Menschenfresserin*. Wuppertal: Hammer.

Erlbruch, Wolf (2008): *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. New Zealand: Gecko Press.

Evans, Shane W. (2011): *Underground: Finding the Light to Freedom*. New York: Roaring Brook Press.

Fortes, Antón / Concejo, Joanna (2008): *Smoke*. Pontevedra, Spain: OQO Books.

Gaiman, Neil / McKean, Dave (2003): *The Wolves in the Wall*. New York: HarperCollins.

Greder, Armin (2007): *The Island*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin.

Gruss, Karin / Krejtschi, Tobias (2014): *Ein roter Schuh*. Australia: Wilkins Farago.

Josephus Jitta, Ceseli (2007): *Lola and the Rent a Cat*. Mechelen, Belgium: Bacckens Books.

- Juan, Ana (2001): *Snowwhite*. Onil: Edicions de Ponent.
- K., O. / Karrebæk, Dorte (2011): *Lejren*. Copenhagen: Rosinante & Co.
- Marsden, John / Gouldthorpe, Peter (1998): *Norton's Hut*. Melbourne: Lothian Books.
- Marsden, John / Tan, Shaun (1998): *The Rabbits*. Melbourne: Lothian Books.
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Figures

- Fig. 1: Dahle, Gro / Nyhus, Svein (2003): Sinna Mann. Oslo: Cappelen, non paginated.
- Fig. 2: Juan, Ana (2001): Snowwhite. Onil: Edicions de Ponent, non paginated.
- Fig. 3: Dayre, Valerie / Erlbruch, Wolf (1996): Die Menschenfresserin. Wuppertal: Hammer, non paginated.
- Fig. 4: Gruss, Karin / Krejtschi, Tobias (2014): Ein roter Schuh. Australia: Wilkins Fargo, Cover.
- Fig. 5 and 6: K., O. / Karrebæk, Dorte (2011): Lejren. Copenhagen: Rosinante & Co, Cover and non paginated.
- Fig. 7 to 9: Fortes, Antón / Concejo, Joanna (2008): Smoke. Pontevedra, Spain: OQO Books, Cover, non paginated.
- Fig. 10: Drawing of 11 year old Molly; personal archives of the author.