COURSE NOTES 1.0

Julia Donaldson

WRITING CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

BBC MAESTRO

> The world of picture books is a lovely one to be part of. I just couldn't think of a better job.

Hello, I'm Julia Donaldson...

I'm a children's book author, living in the UK with my husband Malcolm. We divide our time between Sussex and Edinburgh. I've written a variety of books for children of all ages in my career. I have written songs, chapter books, a teenage novel, plays, and even a whole phonic reading scheme, but my real love is picture books.

I've written a great many, including **The Gruffalo**, **Stick Man**, **Room on the Broom** and **What the Ladybird Heard**. My books have sold more than 100 million copies worldwide and my work has been translated into 100 languages.

Eight of my books have been turned into award-winning animated films and my work is widely adapted for children's theatre in the UK and abroad. I've created theatrical performances based on my books, which I've performed with music and song in theatres as well as at literary festivals and other events.

In 2011 I was lucky enough to be made the UK's Children's Laureate. During this time I toured the country – from John O'Groats to Land's End – highlighting the state of libraries. I am also honoured to have received an MBE and CBE for my service to literature.

I'm very excited about my latest books, **Cat's Cookbook** (illustrated by Axel Scheffler, published 29 April 2021) and **The Woolly Bear Caterpillar** (illustrated by Yuval Zommer, 29 April 2021). And **Superworm** is making its way to television as part of BBC One's 2021 Christmas scheduling.

I hope my experience can inspire you to create picture books of your own that will go on to delight children across the world!

Photo: Steve Ullathorne

I’m going to take you through the creation of a picture book from the germ of an idea, to publication and beyond.

MY COURSE

In this course, I’ll take you through the process of creating a picture book from beginning to end. I’ll cover my approach to writing, breaking down the process in detail, from characters, plots and themes, to working with an illustrator. I hope I’ll be able to correct a few misconceptions about the pitching and publication process for a picture book.

The great thing about picture books is that there is no ‘blueprint’, but I hope with my advice and guidance you’ll be able to understand what it takes to make a great story and create your own picture book!

BUT ALSO, READ!

See what’s out there. Become a scholar of children’s picture books. There’s a full bibliography of books I’ve mentioned at the end of this workbook. Read, read, read! And take notes. What techniques can you spot? What inspires you?

HOW TO USE MY COURSE NOTES

You can refer to these notes after each lesson or use them on their own. I summarise a lot of the thinking and expand on or illustrate specific points with examples.

At the end of each lesson, you’ll find exercises to help you practise and develop your skills at your own pace. You can do the exercises straight away or come back to them later when you feel better prepared.

It might help to print out this workbook, especially the pages with exercises on.

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

A notebook and pen

Time to read and write

Enthusiasm and imagination

MY COLLABORATORS

THE ILLUSTRATOR

Axel Scheffler – Artist of **The Gruffalo**, **The Snail and the Whale**, **Room on the Broom** and more, talks about putting pictures to Julia's words and shares early sketches.

THE AGENT

Caroline – Julia's literary agent, tells all about what she's looking for in a new client, including how to put together a book proposal.

THE EDITOR

Alison Green – Editor of **The Gruffalo** and more, takes us through the process, from acceptance of the manuscript through to collaboration and publication.

THE PRODUCER

Michael Rose – MD at Magic Light Pictures, reveals how he worked with Julia and Axel to transform **The Gruffalo** into a star-studded, BBC half-hour special.

The Lessons


“Sharing a story with a child is one of the most enjoyable experiences life has to offer.

1. Introduction

THE MAGIC OF PICTURE BOOKS

Picture books are the oldest form of storytelling – just think about cave paintings. They're essentially picture books up on the wall. But in the mid-nineteenth century, Randolph Caldecott and Kate Greenaway started the trend of adding art to storytelling. The early twentieth century saw *Babar* and Beatrix Potter's creations and, now, the market is booming. Globally, children's books outsell adult titles.

'Caldecott's work heralds the beginning of the modern picture book. He devised an ingenious juxtaposition of picture and word, a counter point that never happened before. Words are left out – but the picture says it. Pictures are left out – but the words say it. In short, it is the invention of the picture book.'

– **Maurice Sendak**, author of *Where the Wild Things Are*

As a mother, I've read many picture books to my children, and now to my grandchildren too. I love the way that they're a source of enjoyment, they can educate, and they can make you feel closer to the children you're reading to. Importantly, picture books are also a child's introduction to language and art.

A picture book may seem simple to write but there is complexity in its composition. Like longer books, you need to create structure, plot, characters and endings but as it's a shorter form of book, every single word must count. The language and the pattern are so important. In a way, writing a picture book is more like writing a poem or a piece of music.

> **Picture books can entertain, they can teach, they can bring families closer together.**

Are you ready to take on this exciting challenge…?

The Gruffalo's Child © 2004 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

2. What is a Picture Book:
i) Variety

ENDLESS VARIETY

The whole genre of picture books is incredibly diverse. Some revel in language. Some are philosophical. Some are irreverent. Some invite the parents and children to answer questions. Some are reassuring. Some are challenging. Just as well because, just as adult tastes vary, different children like different stories – so there is something out there for everyone.

Let's delve into the world of picture books and, with that, the different ways to approach writing.

EVERYDAY LIFE

Most picture books tell a story, and many of the most well-loved stories involve the everyday life of children. Simple, everyday occurrences can be turned into a world of enjoyment, wordplay and fun. *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes, is one such story about a little boy who loses his cuddly toy dog. While *So Much* by Trish Cooke, illustrated by the wonderful Helen Oxenbury, is about a mother and a baby on a day where the doorbell keeps ringing and a flurry of relatives come to visit.

Seemingly mundane events can be transformed into quite magical stories full of curiosity and linguistic patterns – so try to draw on these experiences.

> **Picture books are really, really varied – nearly as varied, perhaps, as the children who read them.**

TOUCH AND FEEL

Books for very young children quite often have a tactile element. Children develop skills and habits at different ages and it's worth observing and understanding what these are as helpful prompts for your work.

For example, when my eldest grandchild was almost a year old, I noticed she was beginning to point, clap and wave. I also noticed that she loved anything to do with babies – even the pictures on her nappy packets. And she loved books with flaps. From these realisations I was inspired to write **It's a Little Baby**. It's a book which is all about pointing, clapping and waving and has Rebecca Cobb's beautiful pictures of babies which are revealed behind flaps.

EMOTION

Many books can help older children cope with emotions and life events. There are difficult events and changes that might happen in their lives like, for instance, the death of a grandparent. A picture book can help explain through metaphors and layered meanings.

Some help children cope with their own feelings, as they see emotions and sensitive situations represented through characters and stories – often with humour and levity. Reading books like these together can be a way for children and parents to discuss something which normally they might find too tricky to talk about.

LANGUAGE

Then there are the books that simply relish language. One of my favourites when my children were little was *Mister Magnolia* by Quentin Blake. Every page ends with a word that rhymes with boot because Mister Magnolia has lost one boot. There is little story. At the end he finds his boot and the problem is solved, but really it is just a whimsical celebration of language.

Think about making wordplay and patterned language an integral part of your story. It'll draw your readers in – and they can be great fun to write.

INNOVATIVE FORMATS

Picture books can be anything they want to be, which lends themselves to all sorts of creativity. There are books which really aren't stories at all, and those which stimulate a conversation between the reader and the child. There are books that encourage decision-making in children by offering choices in the storytelling process – so they can make up the story they want to read.

Then there are non-fiction picture books, which are increasingly popular. *Dazzling Diggers*, written by Tony Mitton and illustrated by Ant Parker, is all about different types of diggers but told in rhyme. It's full of great noises and onomatopoeia like 'scoop', 'scrunch', 'glug glug glug', and 'squelch'. These non-fiction non-story books use interesting language and visuals, successfully mixing media.

So, I hope you can see your book doesn't have to be written as a conventional story or in any fixed format. It could be written in comic strip form or even as a play. There are alphabet books, books about colours, there are rhyming books, non-rhyming books... the options are endless.

The Everywhere Bear © 2017 Julia Donaldson and Rebecca Cobb – Macmillan Children's Books

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The variety of picture books is endless, so get creative
- Draw on everyday experiences and observations to inspire your writing – nothing is too mundane
- Colourful language, exciting visuals and clever use of tactile elements can enhance your storytelling
- Don't be afraid to be adventurous and try different formats – you may surprise yourself

EXERCISES

1. Go to the library or a bookshop. Look through the picture books and see if you can find even more variety than I've suggested in this lesson.

2. Go to an online bookseller and see how they categorise children's picture books. The algorithms they use will likely show the most popular categories first.

Text Credits :

Title: Dogger. Author: Shirley Hughes. Illustrator: Shirley Hughes. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: So Much. Author: Trish Cooke. Illustrator: Helen Oxenbury. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: The Smeds and the Smoos. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Alison Green Books, an imprint of Scholastic

Title: It's a Little Baby. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Rebecca Cobb. Publisher: Macmillan Children's Books

Title: The Very Hungry Caterpillar. Author: Eric Carle. Illustrator: Eric Carle. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: The Day War Came. Author: Nicola Davies. Illustrator: Rebecca Cobb. Publisher: Walker Books

Title: Antiracist Baby. Author: Ibram X. Kendi. Illustrator: Ashley Lukashevsky. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Grandad's Island. Author: Benji Davies. Illustrator: Benji Davies. Publisher: Simon & Schuster

Title: Tibble and Grandpa. Author: Wendy Meddou. Illustrator: Daniel Egneus. Publisher: Oxford University Press

Title: My Big Shouting Day. Author: Rebecca Patterson. Illustrator: Rebecca Patterson. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Oi Frog!. Author: Kes Gray. Illustrator: Jim Field. Publisher: Hachette Children's Group

Title: Mister Magnolia. Author: Quentin Blake. Illustrator: Quentin Blake. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Would You Rather. Author: John Burningham. Illustrator: John Burningham. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: You Choose. Author: Pippa Goodhart. Illustrator: Nick Sharratt. Publisher: Penguin Random House

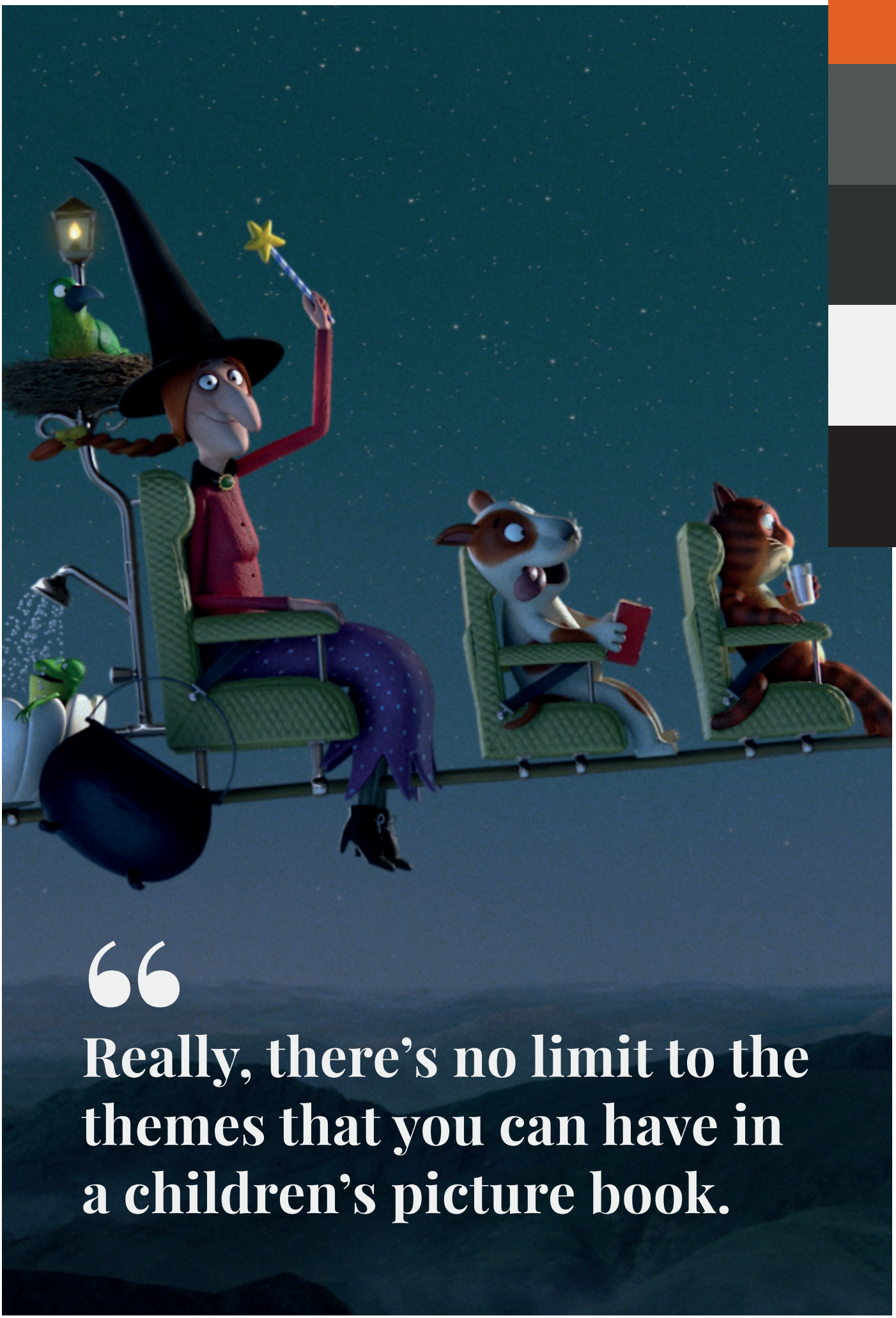
Title: The Man. Author: Raymond Briggs. Illustrator: Raymond Briggs. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Rosie's Walk. Author: Pat Hutchins. Illustrator: Pat Hutchins. Publisher: Random House

Title: Dazzling Diggers. Author: Tony Mitton. Illustrator: Ant Parker. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Big Book of Bugs. Author: Yuval Zommer. Illustrator: Yuval Zommer. Publisher: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

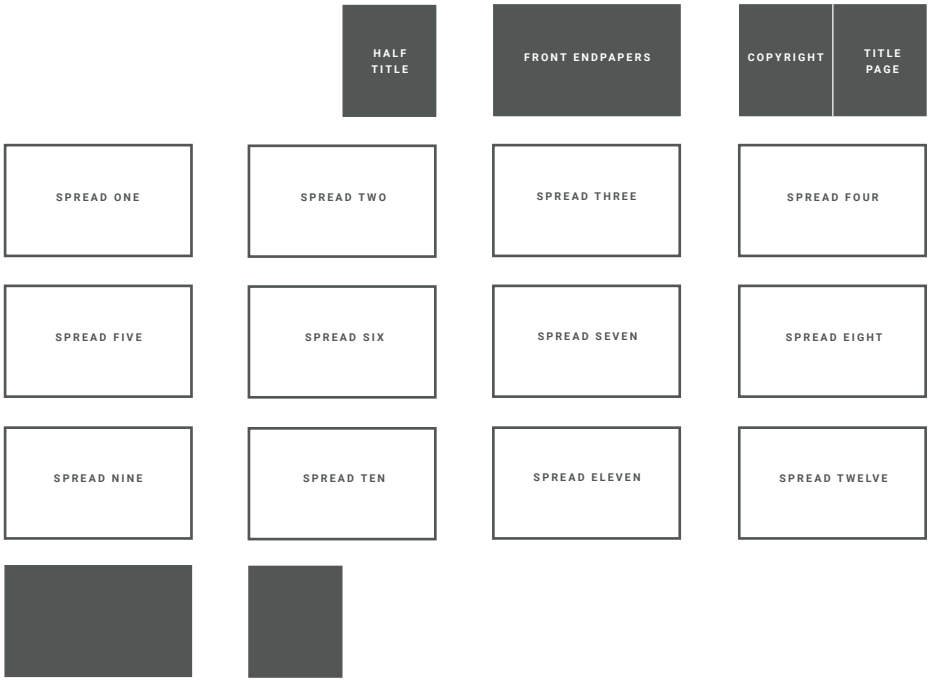
Title: Do the Animal Bop. Author: Jan Ormerod. Illustrator: Lindsey Gardiner. Publisher: Oxford University Press



> **Really, there's no limit to the themes that you can have in a children's picture book.**

3. What is a Picture Book:
ii) Practicalities

Let's talk about what makes a picture book, in practical terms. A picture book is physically made out of one giant sheet of paper folded up to make 32 pages, like in the picture shown here:



> **There are these mini cliff-hangers when you turn the page to the next spread.**

It might be an idea to get an A3 piece of paper to demonstrate the process. Fold it in half once, then again, and again, and then for a final fourth time. When you open it up, you will have 16 pages on one side and another 16 on the other.

You won't be able to use all 32 pages to tell your story though. I'm just going to show you what happens to some of those pages. In the lesson I use my book **The Gruffalo** to demonstrate.

Page one is actually stuck down to the hardback cover. Pages two and three are this lovely woodland scene, which are called end papers. Page four has got the dedication and the copyright details and page five is the title page. We only start the story on page six and the last page is page 29. Pages 30 and 31 are the end papers at the back with the woodland scene again, and page 32 is stuck to the back cover. That leaves 24 pages for the story. In fact, the book contains lots of pictures, so there's probably only about 12 pages for the text of your story.

SPREADS

We don't usually refer to individual pages, instead we talk about double-page spreads. We tend to think of a picture book as having 12 spreads, or 12 double-page spreads. That's quite important because it gives you the opportunity for mini cliff-hangers when you turn the page to the next spread.

If your text has been accepted by a publisher, the first thing they'll want to do is divide it into these 12 spreads. And once you've written a story, it's a good idea to see how it will divide into 12 spreads – or whether it's a bit too long or a bit too short.

STORYBOARDS

With your paper divided into spreads, you can now construct a storyboard.

For simplicity's sake, let's say that each spread has a page of text and a page of illustration. If you write notes for a story on these spreads, matching each note to the corresponding picture, you can divide the plot of a story across those 12 spreads to create a storyboard. That will assist in the writing of your story.

WORD COUNT

Generally, picture books consist of 100-600 words – 1,000 words at the most. There are exceptions to every rule, of course, with some picture books having a longer text or else very few words or even no words at all. But even with wordier picture books, it's a relatively limited length, so every word must count.

TEAMWORK

At the heart of the picture-book process is teamwork. The main four people involved are the author, the illustrator, the editor and the designer. Part of the editor's job is honing the text, dividing it up into spreads and, in conjunction with the designer, deciding the placement of text and illustration on each page. There are a lot of different ways an illustration can work across a spread, so there's a lot of work for the designer and the editor, as well as the author and the illustrator.

The Squash and a Squeeze © 1993, 2003 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A picture book is made from one huge sheet of paper folded up into spreads
- Make every word count: you have so few to play with
- Teamwork is crucial – a picture book takes more than just a writer

EXERCISES

1. Look at the full *Goldilocks* storyboard example on pages 15-18.
2. Print out the empty storyboard layout (pp19-22).
3. Storyboard out a different traditional tale in note form.

Think about the beginning, the middle and the end. Consider using the first two spreads for the beginning and the last two for the ending. Then you'll have eight spreads left to tell the exciting part of your story – the middle (or muddle, as one of my editors likes to call it!).

The Cook and the King © 2018 Julia Donaldson and David Roberts – Macmillan Children's Books

Text Credits :

Title: The Gruffalo. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Macmillan Children's Books

GOLDILOCKS STORYBOARD EXAMPLE

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 1: Pages 6 & 7	
Goldilocks walks in the forest.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 2: Pages 8 & 9	
Goldilocks sees the bears' cottage.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 3: Pages 10 & 11	
Goldilocks enters the bears' cottage.	

GOLDILOCKS STORYBOARD EXAMPLE

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 4: Pages 12 & 13	
Goldilocks tries the bears' porridge.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 5: Pages 14 & 15	
Goldilocks tries the bears' chairs.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 6: Pages 16 & 17	
Goldilocks tries the bears' beds and falls asleep.	

GOLDILOCKS STORYBOARD EXAMPLE

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 7: Pages 18 & 19	
The bears come home to find a mess.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 8: Pages 20 & 21	
Baby Bear finds his porridge all gone.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 9: Pages 22 & 23	
Baby Bear finds his chair broken.	

GOLDILOCKS STORYBOARD EXAMPLE

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 10: Pages 24 & 25	
The three bears go upstairs...	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 11: Pages 26 & 27	
... and find Goldilocks asleep in Baby Bear's bed.	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 12: Pages 28 & 29	
Goldilocks runs away.	

STORYBOARD LAYOUT

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 1: Pages 6 & 7	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 2: Pages 8 & 9	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 3: Pages 10 & 11	

STORYBOARD LAYOUT

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 4: Pages 12 & 13	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 5: Pages 14 & 15	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 6 : Pages 16 & 17	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 7: Pages 18 & 19	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 8: Pages 20 & 21	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 9: Pages 22 & 23	

STORYBOARD LAYOUT

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 10: Pages 24 & 25	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 11: Pages 26 & 27	

DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD 12: Pages 28 & 29	

> “It’s great if you can write something that the reader and the child can act out together.

Photo: Magic Light Pictures

4. The Initial Idea

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?

Ideas can come from anywhere and everywhere. Each book will have a different starting point.

Ideas don't always just come to you; sometimes you have to go out and seek them. Keep your ears and eyes open all the time and the ideas are bound to come – probably when you least expect it. One good way to discover new ideas is by getting out and about, travelling or exploring your local area. This can provide a wealth of new settings, characters and ideas.

Sometimes you see something and think, 'I'd love to write a story about that', but you don't know what the story is going to be. It can be frustrating until you've got the story idea because you can be in the mood for writing, you can feel quite inspired, but you just don't know quite what you're going write about.

My advice for those situations is don't try too hard. Go for a walk. I find the best ideas very often come when I'm moving about or, at the end of the day, having a nice long bath. So, go for a walk, have a bath or find what works for you.

> **I wish there was a cupboard full of ideas and you could just open the door and pick one out, but unfortunately life's not quite like that.**

WRITE NOTES

Notebooks are an essential part of my process. If I get an idea that isn't fully fledged, I try to write it down in my notebook. I've had several over the years and it's where I note down fleeting thoughts and where I can look over ideas I've had in the past. It's also a good idea to have an 'ideas' file on your computer, which you can browse through and add to from time to time.

Sometimes these ideas can sit there for years undeveloped. Over time, though, they can become something. Perhaps when combined with new thoughts or where two old ideas make up one great idea. Make sure you jot your thoughts down and one day they might bear fruit.

The idea isn't by any means the whole story. There's a lot of work to do once you've had your original idea.

START WITH CHARACTER

When you're stuck for an idea, try to think of a character and ask questions about them. Sometimes I dream up a character – not a deep character, just something like a witch, a giant, or a monster – and I ask myself what is going to be different about this character, what problem they could have.

I've always been a cat lover, and actually, I think my editor had said to me "Julia, you know you keep writing books about things like sticks… Can't we have a nice cuddly animal?". So I started trying to think of a cat story. On that occasion, I asked myself who the cat's owner would be. I sat on the train with my notebook and wrote down a whole list of possible owners. I thought maybe the cat's owner could be a burglar and they could go around stealing things. I eventually hit on the idea of a busker. This drew on my own experience of busking, where I met my husband, Malcolm.

START WITH SETTING

Instead of starting with a character, you could think of a setting and think about what's happening there. For example, with my book, **What the Ladybird Heard** (illustrated by Lydia Monks) I started with a farm. There are a lot of books about farms, so I asked myself, what could be different about this one? And from there I thought maybe the animals would be making the wrong noises. So then that begs the question, why are they making the wrong noises? It's from this process of questions and answers that the ideas develop into stories.

The Smartest Giant in Town © 2002 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

ABSTRACT IDEAS

Another great starting point could be something more intangible – an abstract idea. One abstract idea that I'm really keen on is scale difference. When I was a child, I really loved a book called *The Borrowers*, by Mary Norton. They were very small people who lived under the floorboards and would 'borrow' things from the human being's house.

That led to my book called **The Smartest Giant in Town**, illustrated by Axel Scheffler. I wanted to write about a giant, and I like the idea of scale, so again, those two thoughts came together. I thought, what could the giant do, what would his clothes be like for much smaller creatures?

THE THEME OF INTERDEPENDENCE

A good and varied abstract theme is interdependence. You could have all sorts of different characters that are dependent on each other.

As a child, I really liked the Aesop's fable *The Mouse and the Lion*. In that story, the lion spares the mouse's life so, in return, the mouse frees the lion from a net. I wanted to write a similar book where different characters were helping each other. I did some research and found out that a hermit crab can often have a sea anemone riding on its shell and, not only that, but they could have a third character – a bristle worm – that wriggles into the shell and cleans it out. They're all helping each other and that became the central idea of my book, **Sharing a Shell**.

> **You just have to have your ears, and eyes open all the time, and the ideas are going to come, probably when you least expect it.**

LOOK ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE

Many writers use their own childhood experiences as sources of inspiration. I don't often do exactly that myself, but I can admit that I've had many good kernels of ideas offered to me by children. When I first started writing, I did loads of school visits and sometimes, I would get an idea from them.

There are all sorts of ways of getting ideas: the real challenge is developing them. Don't write a story the second you've got a vague idea. Instead, keep your ideas on ice, and you may well find that they will knock sparks off each other.

Freddie and the Fairy © 2010 Julia Donaldson and Karen George – Macmillan Children's Books

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Inspiration can come from anywhere, so use a notebook or computer file to record all your ideas
- Start with a character, setting or abstract idea and ask questions to develop your idea
- Letting ideas sit can sometimes be fruitful and make for better ideas later on

EXERCISES

1. Think of a character. Very broadly, like a witch, a giant, a child, an animal or whatever you like. Think what problem they could have and what makes them distinct.

2. Think of a setting. It could be anywhere – a café, a shop, the seaside – and decide what is going to be different from normal in this setting.

Use the idea generation exercise below to help you :

CHARACTER IDEA

My character is a _____ (giant, witch, teacher, dog, etc.)
But they're no normal _____ (giant, witch, teacher, dog, etc.)
because _____.
People would describe my character as _____
and _____.
Something my character always says is '_____'.

SETTING IDEA

My story takes place in/on a _____.
But it's not what you'd expect because _____.
If you look around you'll see _____, _____ and _____.

Text Credits :

Title: Sugarlump and the Unicorn. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Macmillan Children's Books

Title: Room on the Broom. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Tyrannosaurus Drip. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: David Roberts. Publisher: Macmillan Children's Books

Title: Stick Man. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Alison Green Books, an imprint of Scholastic

Title: Tabby McTat. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Alison Green Books, an imprint of Scholastic

Title: What the Ladybird Heard. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Snail and the Whale. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Monkey Puzzle. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Smartest Giant in Town. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Sharing a Shell. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Rhyming Rabbit. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Everywhere Bear. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Rebecca Cobb. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

5. Traditional Tales as Inspiration

TRADITIONAL TALES

Traditional tales can be a rich source of inspiration for a children's picture book.

The appealing thing about traditional tales is that they often embody some kind of universal truth. They've been passed from generation to generation and across borders from country to country.

When I used to write for educational publishers, for children who were learning to read or improve their reading, I would often be asked to retell a traditional tale in simple language. I did a lot of research so I've got bookshelves full of traditional tales from all over the world.

That was great training, because when I came to write more books, I could draw on my knowledge of traditional tales. In fact my very first book, **A Squash and a Squeeze** (illustrated by Axel Scheffler), is a retelling of a traditional tale.

> **The Gruffalo is based on a traditional tale.**

SONGS AND STORIES

Long before I wrote any books, I used to write songs for children's television, often based on traditional tales. One song in particular was a traditional Jewish story about a little old lady who thought her house was too small. She asked a wise man for help and he told her to put various animals in her house – a hen, a goat, and even a cow.

Each time she added an animal, her house got even more crowded as the animals tried to squash and squeeze in. It's only when she got rid of them all that she suddenly felt her house was big enough.

That story shows that everything is relative – it's your perspective that matters. It also has a circular quality, referring back to the beginning at the end. A lot of traditional tales do that, as do a lot of children's picture book stories.

The Gruffalo's Child © 2004 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Traditional stories are great for inspiration but it's not enough just to retell it. You have to add something. You could think about telling it in patterned language. And you should consider changing the characters and adapting the setting of that story. Or you could turn a traditional tale on its head. I did that with my book **The Troll**, illustrated by David Roberts.

Children love the story of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and the troll under the bridge. In my book, the troll has never actually seen a goat. He keeps saying, "Who's that trip trapping over my bridge?". It's actually a spider or something and the troll says, "Oh bother I thought you were a goat". So that's a story that children are familiar with, and they'll love because you've totally changed it and played on their assumptions of a well-known story.

Traditional tales are a part of our consciousness and collective memory. That's why they can be a great place to start from when thinking about your picture book story as you have space to play within the comforts of a well-loved story – but make sure you make it your own.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

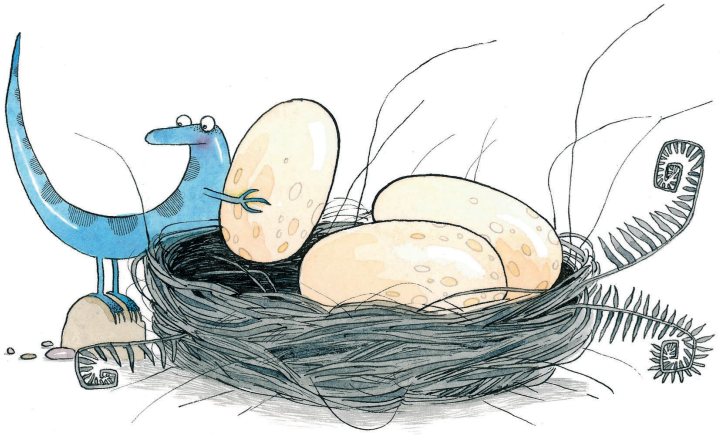
- Research traditional children's tales for ideas
- Add something of your own to make it original
- Think about telling it in patterned language
- Consider changing the characters and setting of the story

EXERCISES

1. Go to your local library or bookshop and choose a traditional tale.

2. Rewrite it by changing the characters in it, or by adding some kind of pattern or chorus to it.

I've provided a list of popular traditional tales on the next page to help you.



Tyrannosaurus Drip © 2007 Julia Donaldson and David Roberts – Macmillan Children's Books

EXAMPLES OF TRADITIONAL TALES

Aladdin

Beauty and the Beast

Brer Rabbit

Chicken Little

Cinderella

Dick Whittington

The Elves and the Shoemaker

The Emperor's New Clothes

The Enormous Turnip

The Frog Prince

Gingerbread Man

Goldilocks and the Three Bears

The Grasshopper and the Ant

Hansel and Gretel

Henny Penny

Jack and the Beanstalk

The Little Mermaid

Little Red Riding Hood

The Little Red Hen

The Lion and the Mouse

The Magic Porridge Pot

The Nutcracker

Peter Pan

The Pied Piper

Pinocchio

The Princess and the Pea

Puss in Boots

Rapunzel

Rumpelstiltskin

The Runaway Pancake

Sleeping Beauty

The Snow Queen

Snow White and the Seven Dwarves

The Three Billy Goats Gruff

The Three Little Pigs

Tom Thumb

The Ugly Duckling

Text Credits :

Title: A Squash and a Squeeze. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

[The Gruffalo]

[Room on the Broom]

Title: The Magic Paintbrush. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Joel Stewart. Publisher: Macmillan Children's Books

Title: Tiddler. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler.
Publisher: Alison Green Books, an imprint of Scholastic

Title: The Troll. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: David Roberts. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Mr Wolf's Pancakes. Author: Jan Fearnley. Illustrator: Jan Fearnley. Publisher: HarperCollins

Title: The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig. Author: Eugene Trivizas. Illustrator: Helen Oxenbury. Publisher: HarperCollins


“
Every word has to count.

6. Characters: Humans, Animals, Fairies – and Pencils!

ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

Characters in children's picture books aren't as in-depth as character in novels. They can't be. A picture book is only a few hundred words long, so you don't have much time or space for character development. In fact, most characters in children's picture books can be summed up in two adjectives.

The Gruffalo is big and stupid. The witch in **Room on the Broom** is kind and scatty. The little snail I created in **The Snail and the Whale** is tiny and wistful. That's really all you need. I don't create any deep, subtle character. They're bold and simple. If they do appear deep and subtle, it's the talent of the illustrator that I have to thank – good illustration can make a character appear more three-dimensional. That's not to say that characters in picture books aren't important. They're very important and I hope I'll be able to explain why.

As in any book, the main character should usually be someone that the reader can identify with. So if your book is for children then the main character is very often a child. But not necessarily an actual child, as I'll explain.

You could have a real-life child for your lead character. There are some lovely books about modern-day children, some quite realistic stories. *Dogger*, for example, is about a little boy who loses his cuddly toy. That's very much an everyday situation any family can identify with.

> **Of course they're not really animals; they are children in disguise.**

ANIMALS

But your central character doesn't have to be a literal child. I often use animals as the main characters in my books. But they're not really animals – they are children in disguise.

In the Aesop fable *The Hare and the Tortoise*, the hare isn't really a hare. It represents a brilliant but impulsive, slapdash type of person. And the tortoise is the not-so-bright but consistent, reliable type.

Animals also make for more interesting illustrations. If **The Snail and the Whale** was just about a little person who saved a big person, there'd just have been a load of people and the settings wouldn't have been so varied and beautiful.

But my snail and whale inspired Axel Scheffler's gorgeous character illustrations and he was able to depict vast seascapes and landscapes. For this reason, an illustrator will often prefer to draw animals rather than people.

Animals can be more universal, too. If your story is about an animal, there's more chance of your publisher selling foreign editions. And it's important they do because picture books are really expensive to print and you want to make your book as attractive to publishers as possible.

Finally, you can give animals much more independence than you could give a child. A lot of parents and publishers don't want stories where children are seen to take risks on their own as there's a fear children will emulate their heroes. But if it's an animal – if it's a mouse or a rabbit or something – that's fine. They can go off and do all these dangerous things.

UNCONVENTIONAL CHARACTERS

Your character doesn't have to be a human or an animal. I've read stories where the central character is a potato, a pea or an exclamation mark. And there's the realm of fantasy – dragons, witches, monsters, giants, and so on. I once wrote a book where the main character was a deaf fairy.

Just make sure you create a character that means something to you. I'm sure there'll be children out there who are a bit like you who'll really enjoy your character.

SILLY NAMES

Finally, think about the names of your characters. Children absolutely love funny and weird names. A funny name is a simple but effective way of making your characters stand out and be memorable. They'll make a better title, too, which is another draw for publishers. It's especially good if it's anything to do with bottoms – something we'll come back to later.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Make your character relatable to children
- Most characters in children's picture books can be summed up in two adjectives
- Animals are universal, can be more adventurous, and make for interesting illustrations
- You can personify anything or choose any unconventional character you like
- Silly names are a good way to make your character memorable

---

EXERCISES

1. Think of three human characteristics.
2. Now think of an animal to represent each one.

On the next pages I've provided you with inspiration to combine animals and characteristics. You can even cut them out, make a pile of animals and a pile of characteristics, and pick one from each pile at random. A lucky dolphin? A clumsy shrew? Now think about what that character might be like. What adventure might they go on?

ANIMAL

ELEPHANT	MOUSE	SLOTH	DOLPHIN	CAT
DOG	ZEBRA	OTTER	SPIDER	HEDGEHOG
WORM	GORILLA	LION	DEER	CROCODILE
EEL	FOX	BUTTERFLY	LIZARD	SWAN
BEAR	SHARK	AARDVARK	RHINO	CRAB
KANGAROO	FROG	OWL	HAMSTER	WOLF
SNAKE	HIPPO	SLUG	GOLDFISH	BAT
MONKEY	MOLE	FERRET	BADGER	WOMBAT

CHARACTERISTICS

JEALOUS	UPPITY	CLUMSY	GRUMPY	IMPATIENT
MESSY	ENERGETIC	LUCKY	LOYAL	BRAVE
GENEROUS	PEACEFUL	DETERMINED	FAIR	ADVENTUROUS
RUDE	GREEDY	HARD WORKING	DAINTY	INDEPENDENT
STUDIOUS	CREATIVE	QUIET	PROUD	HAPPY
KEEN	DARING	SENSITIVE	AMBITIOUS	MISCHIEVOUS
SHY	FUN LOVING	WITTY	LOUD	CURIOUS
DEMANDING	WILD	GENTLE	POPULAR	HUMBLE

Text Credits :

[The Gruffalo]

[Room on the Broom]

[The Snail and the Whale]

[Dogger]

Title: Alfie Gets in First. Author: Shirley Hughes. Illustrator: Shirley Hughes. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Freddie and the Fairy. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Karen George. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Pencil. Author: Allan Ahlberg. Illustrator: Bruce Ingman. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: Exclamation Mark. Author: Amy Krouse Rosenthal. Illustrator: Tom Lichtenheld. Publisher: Scholastic

Title: Hairy Maclary. Author: Lynley Dodd. Illustrator: Lynley Dodd. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: The Go-Away Bird. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Catherine Rayner. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Highway Rat. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Scholastic

The Highway Rat © 2016 Axel Scheffler

7. Baddies

ADD A VILLAIN

Do you need a baddie in your story? If so, how bad do they need to be? I've heard that villains are great fun to act – well, they're great fun to write too.

REFORM AND COMEUPPANCE

Injustice is a strong theme that children are drawn to, as long as the oppressor gets his or her comeuppance. And children tend to hate the villain even more (and maybe like the story even more!) if the villain tells lies and is deceitful. This is because children are always told not to lie.

There are stories where the villain reforms and become good. I've done that on occasion, but overall, that can get a bit sickly, so be careful.

It's important to note that you don't have to kill off your villain. If your book is really successful you might want them to make another appearance. Let's take two of my favourite villains as an example. Hefty Hugh and Lanky Len in **What the Ladybird Heard** fail to steal the prize cow and go to jail, but they're out again in time for the sequel, **What the Ladybird Heard Next**.

> "It's great fun creating baddies."

Your villain doesn't have to be 100% bad, either. Hefty Hugh and Lanky Len are comic baddies and have quite a funny, endearing side to them.

You might even like to write a story in which the villain is also the hero. That's the case in *Burglar Bill* by the incomparable Janet and Allan Ahlberg. Burglar Bill teams up with Burglar Betty – it's a love story too – and they both end up reformed.

But remember, you don't need to have a baddie at all. I tend to alternate. I'll do one story with a baddie, then one without. The problem to overcome doesn't have to be a villain. There are a lot of other situations, which are scary enough as it is. Being lost, arguing with a friend, a natural disaster – these are all upsetting situations that need resolving.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Villains are a great obstacle for you character to overcome
- Children like seeing baddies get their comeuppance – especially when they lie
- A villain can reform and become a goodie – but don't make it too sentimental
- Baddies can be comic or have endearing sides to them
- You might want to keep them alive for possible sequels

EXERCISES

1. Think of a baddie character.

2. What is their specific bad behaviour, or vice?

3. Give them a juicy name.

Use this 'Build A Baddie' exercise to help you :

Example

My baddie is called: **Cruella de Vil**
People describe her as: **cruel, scheming**
She likes: **to turn dog skins into fur coats**
She doesn't like: **dogs or dog-lovers**

Your turn...

My baddie is called: _____ .
People describe him/her as: _____ .
He/she likes: _____ .
He/she doesn't like: _____ .

.

Text Credits :

[The Magic Paintbrush]

Title: The Singing Mermaid. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Scarecrows' Wedding. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Scholastic

[What the Ladybird Heard]

[The Highway Rat]

Title: The Detective Dog. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Sara Ogilvie. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Day Louis Got Eaten. Author: John Fardell. Illustrator: John Fardell. Publisher: Andersen Press Ltd.

Title: One Ted Falls Out of Bed. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Anna Currey. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

[The Snail and the Whale]

Title: Burglar Bill. Author: Allan Ahlberg. Illustrator: Janet Ahlberg. Publisher: Penguin Random House

[The Highway Rat]

8. Storyline

PLOT AND STORY

The plot is your story structure – it's a crucial element to narrative picture books.

Your plot is just as important as your characters. In fact, the two should be inextricably linked. If you think of Jane Austen, people are more often praising her characters and writing style over her plots. But I think her plots are wonderful and are what make her books so readable. They're seamless and that's the beauty – you don't notice a great plot.

In my opinion, creating an intriguing, satisfying, yet unpredictable plot is the most difficult part of writing. It's relatively easy to think of a promising idea but developing its plot is much harder.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PLOT?

It can be helpful to think in terms of a beginning, middle and end. Lay your story out in chunks. If it doesn't flow, it may be that your beginning is too short or ending too long. One of my editors suggests that the beginning in a picture book should take up a quarter of the story and the ending a quarter. So that leaves you half for the middle element where the action takes place.

> **You only really notice a plot if it's really clunky.**

SUSPENSE AND DANGER

Add danger to your story. Make things worse before they get better. An example of that is the very famous book, *The Cat in the Hat*, by Dr. Seuss. This chaotic cat comes to the children's house. The parents are out, as in all good children's stories, and he creates complete mayhem – their toy ship sinks into a cake, the fish lands in the teapot, and so on.

Just when you're hoping things might get better, in come Thing One and Thing Two. They race around creating yet more havoc, their kite getting tangled up in everything. So that's a good example of a middle section where things get worse before they get better.

COMBINING IDEAS

Write down every single idea. Even if it's not fully formed, keep it on ice. One day you may work out what to do with it, and if not, that's okay too.

It's important not to be too precious about your ideas. And to move on from things that aren't working. I've got far more undeveloped ideas than those I have turned into stories.

Don't forget that sometimes two ideas can come together. That might just be the answer.

WHAT ABOUT THE ENDING?

The ending could be the most important of all, so I've devoted a whole lesson to that. But I'll give you one example here. We were talking earlier about *The Cat in the Hat* and how things got increasingly worse before they got better. What's going to happen at the end? The parents are going to come back and are going to find the house utterly destroyed. Right? Not this time. Instead, the cat returns with a wonderful contraption that does all the tidying up in the nick of time. That's a satisfying but unpredictable ending, which is a great payoff.

WORK BACKWARDS

This is a nice trick for devising your plot. I already had a picture in my mind of a mermaid who walked on her hands. So when the illustrator Lydia Monks said she wanted to collaborate on a story about a mermaid, I worked back from there. Why would a mermaid walk on her hands? Maybe to escape from some situation? What could she be escaping from? Maybe a circus with a horrible ringmaster, and so on... I thought of the ending first and then worked backwards. Give it a try.

ORIGINALITY

The most important thing is originality, and I'm afraid here I can't really help you. It's got to be original; it's got to come from you. Aim hard to get something different, fresh and special into your story.

The Singing Mermaid © 2012 Julia Donaldson and Lydia Monks – Macmillan Children's Books

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Plot is crucial to good storytelling
- Divide your book into beginning (¼), middle (½) and end (¼)
- Make things worse before they get better
- Aim for a satisfying, yet unpredictable ending

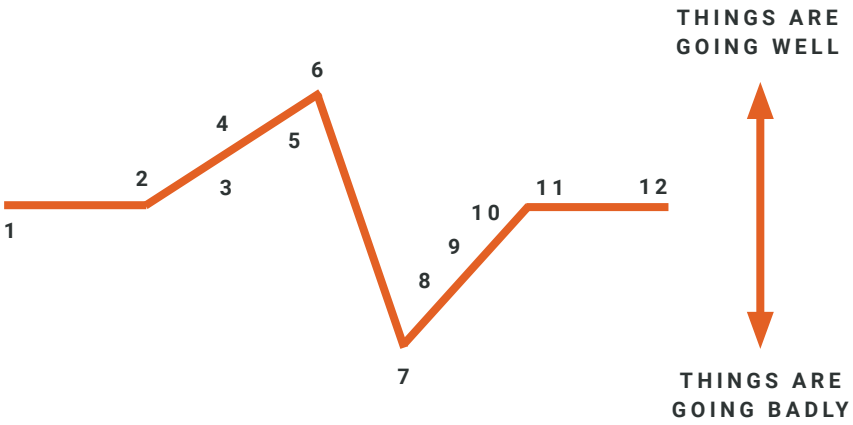
EXERCISES

1. Divide an existing story up into beginning, middle and end.
2. Now try to build your own plot across the spreads, writing in note form.

PLOTTING EXERCISE

Think of the shape of the story a bit like this. They can be all sorts of shapes, but things should move up and down. In this example, point 7 shows where things get worse before they get better.

Here's an example of how those plot points might work for **The Gruffalo**. Each plot point makes up one of the 12 double-page spreads.



1. In the woods, Fox threatens to eat Mouse
2. Mouse tells Fox about made-up Gruffalo and Fox runs away
3. Owl threatens to eat Mouse
4. Mouse tells Owl about made-up Gruffalo and Owl runs away
5. Snake threatens to eat Mouse
6. Mouse tells Snake about made-up Gruffalo and Snake runs away
7. Mouse meets real Gruffalo!
8. Snake is scared off
9. Owl is scared off
10. Fox is scared off
11. Thinking they were scared by Mouse, Gruffalo runs away!
12. Mouse eats nut, happy ever after

Now try plotting your own story idea.

What shape does it make?

Flat lines don't make for a very exciting story!

Charlie Cook's Favourite Book © 2005 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

Text Credits :

[What the Ladybird Heard]

Title: Corduroy. Author: Don Freeman. Illustrator: Don Freeman. Publisher: Penguin Putnam Inc.

Title: Zog and the Flying Doctors. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Scholastic

Title: The Cat in the Hat. Author: Dr. Seuss. Illustrator: Dr. Seuss. Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers

[The Day Louis Got Eaten]

[The Gruffalo]

Title: 100 Dogs. Author: Michael Whaite. Illustrator: Michael Whaite. Publisher: Penguin Random House

9. Journeys and Quests

EVERY STORY IS A JOURNEY

Journeys are always a popular theme in books. Something to consider when formulating your idea is whether or not you are going to send your character somewhere. If so, where and why?

Almost every story is a kind of journey. Whether for adults or children, you take your character out of their comfort zone, maybe away from home, away from people they know, and they have to depend on their inner resources or help from new friends.

In a picture book, a journey can be a very simple affair. And you usually end up at the same place you began, though, probably some change has occurred. That circular quality is a convention that many picture books follow.

Remember that a journey doesn't have to be physical. Very often it can be a story about growing up, about discovering yourself. In my book, **The Snail and the Whale**, the little snail not only travels round the world, but discovers that she's not as helpless as she thought.

> **Deep down, we long for change, we long for adventure.**

LOST AND FOUND STORIES

In the lost and found story, your character can get more and more lost. They might return home to a big change or end up somewhere completely different.

If you're writing a journey story, try to include a theme or dimension that makes it more than a chance journey. I've written a couple of lost and found stories myself. One of them is **Stick Man**, illustrated by Axel Scheffler. The theme of celebrating imagination makes it more than just a string of miscellaneous adventures. This brings more dimension to the character and the story itself.

Lost and found stories lend themselves nicely to twists. *Lost and Found* by Oliver Jeffers is a story about a little boy who finds a lost penguin. They go on a journey to the penguin's home in the south pole and the twist is that the penguin wasn't so much lost, as lonely. After setting off, the little boy realises the penguin is lonely and goes back to find him. It's got a lovely ending where the boy and his penguin friend go home together, "talking of wonderful things all the way".

Quests have always been popular. Think of the King Arthur and the quest for the holy grail or Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. That's a treasure story that ends up in the *Lord of the Rings*, a world-famous questing trilogy.

The Magic Paintbrush © 2003 Julia Donaldson and Joel Stewart – Macmillan Children's Books

RUNAWAYS

My absolute favourite story when I was a child was a runaway story called *Pepito* by Sheila Hawkins. It's about a little Spanish boy who decides to go off with the gypsies. He has all sorts of adventures with the friends he makes before finally making his way home again.

So go ahead and write a story about a journey. It's a wonderful theme and can make for wonderful pictures too. Try and combine it with some other elements so that it has texture and twists along the way.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Journeys and quests are very popular in picture books
- They don't always have to be physical journeys
- Add extra layers of meaning to your journey story
- Consider a circular element, so you end up where you started
- Think about twists and unexpected endings to make the journey less predictable
- Lost and found stories are a nice gateway into writing journey stories

EXERCISE

Dream up a journey and decide why your character is going on this journey. For example:

My character is: a mouse
He/she is going: to the moon
Because: he has heard it is made of cheese and he loves cheese

Your turn…
My character is: _____ .
He/she is going: _____ .
Because: _____ .

Text Credits :

[The Gruffalo]

Title: Mr Gumpy's Outing. Author: John Burningham. Illustrator: John Burningham. Publisher: Penguin Random House

[The Snail and the Whale]

Title: Where The Wild Things Are. Author: Maurice Sendak. Illustrator: Maurice Sendak. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: The Snorgh and the Sailor. Author: Will Buckingham. Illustrator: Thomas Docherty. Publisher: Scholastic

[Tiddler]

[Stick Man]

[The Everywhere Bear]

Title: Lost and Found. Author: Oliver Jeffers. Illustrator: Oliver Jeffers. Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers

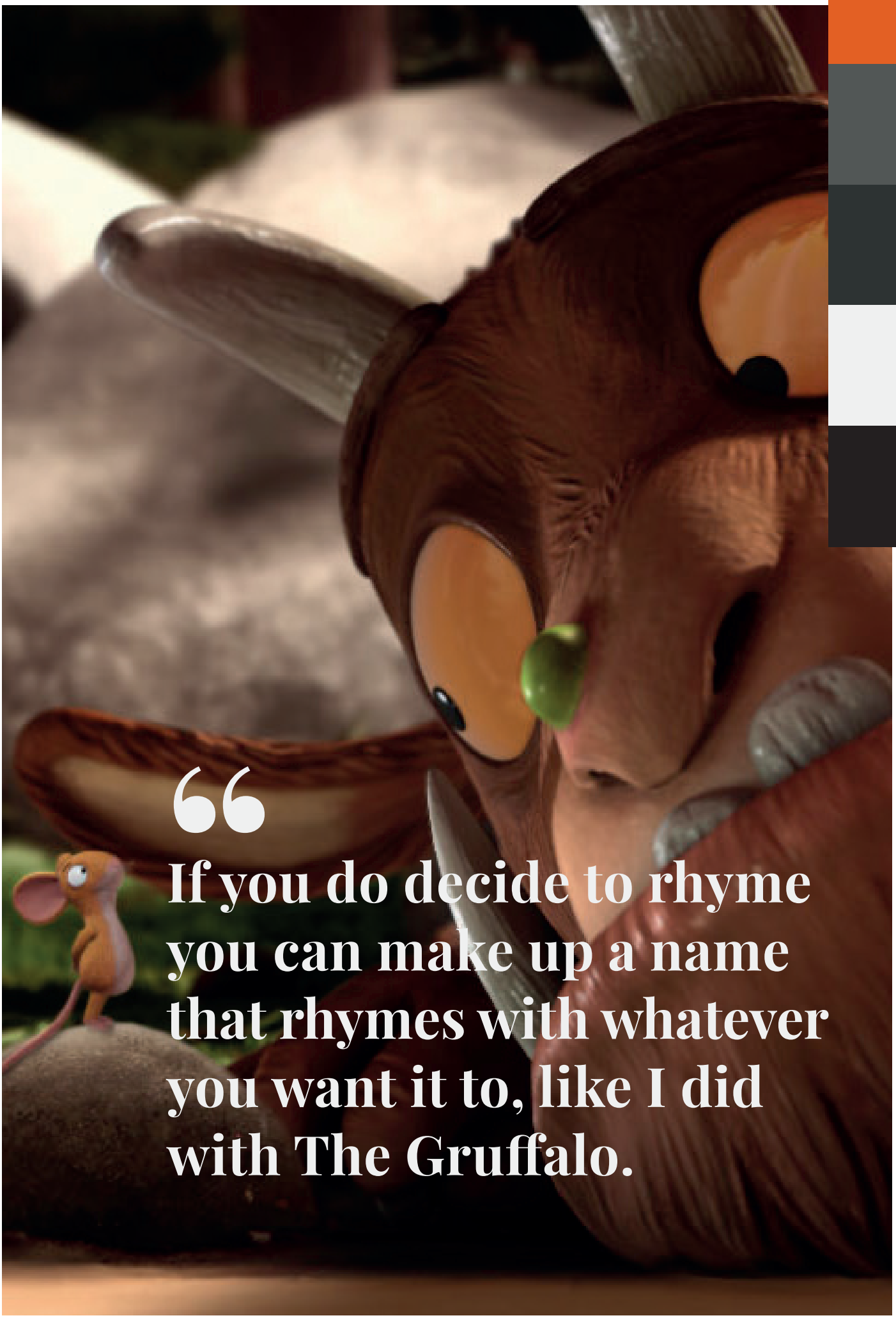
Title: Jack and the Flumflum Tree. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: David Roberts. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Further Adventures of The Owl and the Pussy-Cat. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Charlotte Voake. Publisher: Puffin

Title: Pepito. Author: Sheila Hawkins. Illustrator: Sheila Hawkins. Publisher: Hamish Hamilton

Title: The Runaway Dinner. Author: Allan Ahlberg. Illustrator: Bruce Ingham. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: The Runaway Bunny. Author: Margaret Wise Brown. Illustrator: Clement Hurd. Publisher: Harper Collins Children's Books



“If you do decide to rhyme you can make up a name that rhymes with whatever you want it to, like I did with The Gruffalo.

10. Themes and Messages

FINDING MEANING

In the last lesson we focused on the theme of journeys, whether physical or emotional. Now we're going to explore some other themes.

A picture book can have quite deep, universal themes. More so, perhaps, than a book for slightly older children, which is often more of an adventure story.

I often get told that my books are about something, like being kind and helpful. While it is true that my characters often exhibit these traits, I wasn't specifically setting out to teach children as I don't like being too preachy, didactic or earnest.

The story must come first. I really like *Swimmy*, a fable by Leo Lionni that teaches us we can do together what we can't do on our own. There is that powerful, serious message, but the main thing is that it's a really beautiful book. The beautiful art style is central to the story. It's entertaining. It's fun. You may have something to say but be sure to say it with a light touch.

> **A picture book can actually be more deep, and universal, than a book for slightly older children.**

CHANGES

Picture books can help children going through difficult times in their lives, like the death of a family member or other emotional changes.

My book **The Paper Dolls**, illustrated by Rebecca Cobb, is a book of mine about bereavement, but it can be read on different levels. It's about a little girl who makes paper dolls that keep being threatened by other playthings. But they stick together, chanting, "You can't get us, oh no, no, no. We're holding hands, and we won't let go."

In the end they do get separated, but float into the little girl's memory where they live among other things she's lost or forgotten. The adult reading that story will realise what's going on at a deeper level. Some children may, some may not. It doesn't matter either way because, although it's about loss and bereavement, it's also got a playful and adventurous side to it. You can even include humour in a story which has a serious theme.

EMOTIONS

There are books that help children to cope with their feelings. Perhaps anger, sadness, jealousy, or fear of the dark – but if you are going down this route, try to do so in an entertaining way.

Friendship is a very rich theme, but it's important to be original in such a busy market. One of my favourites is *Fluff and Billy* by Nicola Killen. It's written in such simple language and has gorgeous pictures. It's about two little penguins and Billy keeps repeating what Fluff says – *"I'm splashing'… 'I'm splashing"…* and so on. With this pattern, we can see that it's going to be broken – *"I'm rolling a snowball,"* said Fluff. *"I'm throwing a snowball,"* said Billy. *"Ouch!"* cried Fluff. *"'I'm not talking to you,"* said Fluff. *"I'm not talking to you,'"* said Billy. They quarrel but end up resolving things. This book shows children that it's not the end of the world if you fall out with a friend, you can always make up. This is a life lesson told in an honest and light-hearted way.

SACRIFICE

Self-sacrifice often comes up in children's books. Children can start off in life being self- focused, concerned largely with their wants and needs. But as they grow they learn to think about other people. Picture books can be a helpful way of encouraging that growth.

IT'S OKAY TO BE DIFFERENT

There are some brilliant examples that use the theme of difference. In *The Crocodile Who Didn't Like Water* by Gemma Merino, all the other crocodiles like water. But it turns out that this crocodile isn't a crocodile at all – he's a dragon. In Ed Vere's *How to be a Lion*, the main character is this very gentle, poetic lion who is the unlikely king of the jungle. In presenting this alternative, the book shows it's okay to be different and defy stereotypes. However, there are an awful lot of books on this theme, so if you want to tackle it your story will need to stand out.

ANYTHING

Really, there's no limit to the themes you can have in a children's picture book. Out there you'll find books about the environment, breaking gender stereotypes, and having separated parents. You can make whatever you care about the central theme of a picture book – as long as you make it entertaining enough.

I think that if you write a good story, good values will naturally emerge. You don't need to try too hard to put them in there.

Zog © 2016 Axel Scheffler

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Say it with a light touch
- Be original and put the story first
- Use humour, even with heavy subjects
- Make sure it's still entertaining

EXERCISES

1. Make a list of petty things friends might fall out about.

2. Look at your list and decide which one you think is the most promising for a children's picture book.

Text Credits :

Title: Once There Were Giants. Author: Martin Waddell. Illustrator: Penny Dale. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

[Room on the Broom]

[The Snail and the Whale]

Title: Swimmy. Author: Leo Lionni. Illustrator: Leo Lionni. Publisher: Penguin Random House

[Grandad's Island]

Title: The Paper Dolls. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Rebecca Cobb. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Fluff and Billy. Author: Nicola Killen. Illustrator: Nicola Killen. Publisher: Egmont UK Ltd.

Title: We Found a Hat. Author: Jon Klassen. Illustrator: Jon Klassen. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: The Storm Whale. Author: Benji Davies. Illustrator: Benji Davies. Publisher: Simon & Schuster

Title: The Crocodile Who Didn't Like Water. Author: Gemma Merino. Illustrator: Gemma Merino. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: How to be a Lion. Author: Ed Vere. Illustrator: Ed Vere. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Odd Dog Out. Author: Rob Biddulph. Illustrator: Rob Biddulph. Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers

Title: Chicken Clicking. Author: Jeanne Willis. Illustrator: Tony Ross. Publisher: Andersen Press

Title: Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth. Author: Oliver Jeffers. Illustrator: Oliver Jeffers. Publisher: HarperCollins Children's Books

Title: Three Little Monkeys. Author: Quentin Blake. Illustrator: Emma Chichester Clark. Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers

11. The Sound of the Words

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND

Relish the sound of every word. Your picture book is going to be read aloud, so sound is really important. And because it's so short, every word has to count.

Try to use simple, straightforward language; language that a child can easily understand. You don't want the parent to keep pausing the story to explain words. But feel free to pepper your language with longer, more elaborate words that children can guess from context. As long as the story is told in a simple, spare style then children will easily absorb these new words. After all, that is what children do – they're absorbing and learning new words all the time.

I've done this, even throwing archaic words in there too. In **Zog**, illustrated by Axel Scheffer, I wrote that Madame Dragon ran a school 'many moons ago' because it fitted the scansion and rhythm of my line, but I've heard since that a lot of children enjoy that expression. 'Many moons ago' is more interesting than 'a long time ago'.

> **Your story is designed to be read aloud, so the sound of the words is going to be really important.**

ATTRACTIVE LANGUAGE

Think carefully about the way you describe things. You don't need lots of lengthy descriptions because the pictures do that for you. In *The Star in the Jar* by Sam Hay and Sarah Massini, the words 'tickly', 'glittery' and 'litterbin', are very pleasing because of the similar vowel sound. Remember, you can have enjoyable language in a book without using rhyme.

Picture books are often the first time a child will have come across alliteration and assonance, or examples of metaphor, simile, personification and figurative language. Then there's onomatopoeia, where the words sound like the sounds that they're describing. POP!

MADE-UP WORDS

Made-up words are great fun. As a child I fell in love with Edward Lear, who wrote poems about characters called the Jumblies, the Dong with the luminous nose and the Pobble who has no toes. This nonsense language really influenced my book **The Smeds and the Smoos**, illustrated by Axel Scheffer, I had great fun making up the names of the aliens and planets.

It's curious how certain kinds of sounds really appeal in nonsense language – for example, the 'L' sound at the end of words like Lear's 'pobble' and T.S. Eliot's 'jellicle' cats. Play around with silly word sounds and try them out on children you know. What makes them giggle?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Pepper simple language with flamboyant words
- Be creative– use patterns and attractive words with similar sounds
- Nonsense words can be fun too. Think of Roald Dahl's *The BFG* which uses words like bagglepipes, bogglebox and bugwhiffler.

EXERCISES

I'm going to give you two options for your exercise for this lesson.

Option 1

1. Read Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem, *The Jabberwocky.*
2. Have a go at writing your own nonsense poem or story.

Option 2

1. Think of three foods beginning with the same letter. For instance, you could have potatoes, peas and porridge. Choose a different letter and think of three kinds of food.

2. Now come up with three things you might find in a bin that all have the same vowel sound. It could a bone, a bowl and a broken comb, all with an 'o' sound.

The following pages include some terminology and Lewis Carroll's *The Jabberwocky* for inspiration.

The Paper Dolls © 2012 Julia Donaldson and Rebecca Cobb – Macmillan Children's Books

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE – TERMINOLOGY

Keep on the lookout for examples of these in everyday life.
They're techniques often used in adverts and by TV presenters.

Alliteration – Repetition of consonant sounds, often in the initial position
e.g. The Gruffalo grew grumpier and grumpier

Allusion – Referring to a thing, person, place or event in everyday speech
e.g. She smiles like a Cheshire cat; It's my Achilles' heel

Assonance – Repetition of vowel sounds
e.g. The snail left a trail for the whale

Hyperbole – Over-exaggeration, often for comic affect
e.g. Mile-wide pizzas

Metaphor – Comparing two unlike things, saying one is the other
e.g. Laughter is the best medicine; The black sheep of the family

Metre – The basic rhythmic structure in poetry
e.g. Iambic pentameter uses 10-syllable lines
with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables

Onomatopoeia – Words that imitate the sound associated with the thing itself
e.g. Buzz, hiss, pop, roar

Personification – Giving an object human qualities
e.g. The car huffed and puffed down the road

Rhyme – Words that have similar-sounding final syllables
e.g. Three little kittens have lost their mittens

Simile – Comparing two things, usually using 'like' or 'as'
e.g. Steve slept like a log; Sophie's as happy as a clam

Synecdoche – Referring to a wider thing by a detail within it
e.g. A suit = A businessman

THE JABBERWOCKY by Lewis Carroll

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!'

He took his vorpal sword in hand;
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

'And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!'
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Text Credits :

[The Exclamation Mark]

Title: Zog. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Scholastic

Title: Star in the Jar. Author: Sam Hay. Illustrator: Sarah Massini. Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers

[Swimmy]

[What The Ladybird Heard]

[The Detective Dog]

[The Snail and the Whale]

[The Further Adventures of the Owl and the Pussycat]

Title: Peace at Last. Author: Jill Murphy. Illustrator: Jill Murphy. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

[The Go-Away Bird]

[Jack and the Flumflum Tree]

[The Smeds and the Smoos]

[The Gruffalo]


“Develop a special relationship with your local bookseller, if you are lucky enough to have one.

12. Patterned Language

USING PATTERNS IN YOUR STORY

A lot of parents tell me their child knows one of my stories off by heart. That might be because they tend to rhyme, so the child can predict the next sound. But there's also some kind of pattern and repetition that the child recognises, and loves joining in with.

We're all used to this in stories. Think about the queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* who looks into the mirror and says, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" It's a very effective chorus throughout the book and a technique you might think about including.

In my own story, **Monkey Puzzle**, illustrated by Axel Scheffer, the little monkey is lost and trying to find his mum. A not-so clever butterfly tries to help but every time a wrong animal is produced the text goes, "No, no, no! That's an elephant." or, "No, no, no! That's a snake.", and so on. It's a kind of varied chorus.

> **Children love getting the hang of something, being able to predict the next line.**

CUMULATIVE PATTERNS

This is a very common device in children's stories. *This is the House That Jack Built* is a classic example. In *Mr Gumpy's Outing* by John Burningham, Mr Gumpy takes more and more people and animals on a ride on his boat. This example is actually cumulative in the pictures rather than in the language, as we see the characters growing in number on each page.

BREAKING PATTERNS

The breaking of a pattern is a powerful traditional storytelling device. If you think back to "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?", the answer is usually, "You, oh Queen". So the one time the magic mirror answers back with something different and says, "Snow White is the fairest one of all" is an important moment in the story and the break in the pattern emphasises that.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Use patten and some repetition in the structure of your story
- Cumulative patterns create an enjoyable energy
- Breaking patterns is an effective way to bring attention to a moment

EXERCISE

Rewrite a story you've written, or a traditional tale, and add elements we've learned in this lesson – repetition, cumulative patterns and breaking patterns.

What the Jackdaw Saw © 2015 Julia Donaldson and Nick Sharratt – Macmillan Children's Books

Text Credits :

Title: Farmer Duck. Author: Martin Waddell. Illustrator: Helen Oxenbury. Publisher: Walker Books

[Monkey Puzzle]

Title: Dogs Don't Do Ballet. Author: Anna Kemp. Illustrator: Sara Ogilvie. Publisher: Simon & Schuster

Title: Owl Babies. Author: Martin Waddell. Illustrator: Patrick Benson. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present. Author: Charlotte Zolotow. Illustrator: Maurice Sendak. Publisher: Red Fox Classics

[Mr Gumpy's Outing]

[Room on the Broom]

Title: The Elephant and the Bad Baby. Author: Elfrida Vipont. Illustrator: Raymong Briggs. Publisher: Penguin Random House

[The Gruffalo]

[The Smartest Giant in Town]

13. Rhyme

TO RHYME OR NOT TO RHYME?

To rhyme or not to rhyme, that is the question. I often write in verse but that's probably to do with how I got into writing stories.

Decades before I wrote any books, I wrote songs for children's television. The songs I wrote generally would have verses, a chorus and they would rhyme. Now, I like to think of a rhyming book really as a kind of song. My very first book, **A Squash and a Squeeze**, was originally a song that I'd written for children's television. Years later I got a phone call from a publisher who thought that it would make a good picture book. That's how I got started as an author.

That was back in 1993, when rhyming picture books were quite rare, perhaps because it's difficult to translate rhyme into other languages. Picture books are expensive to produce, so publishers tend to need a few foreign editions to be printed at the same time. So that was a common obstacle for many rhyming books from being published.

That seems to have changed as there seem to be an awful lot of rhyming books around now. But quantity doesn't mean quality and many rhyming books lack structure and don't scan properly. Sometimes the rhymes don't trip off the tongue – and that's vital for a rhyming book. In my opinion, and that of my editor, it's vastly preferable for a story to be in patterned prose than in rambling rhyme. And if you do attempt a rhyming story, try to think of it rather like a song, with verses and a chorus.

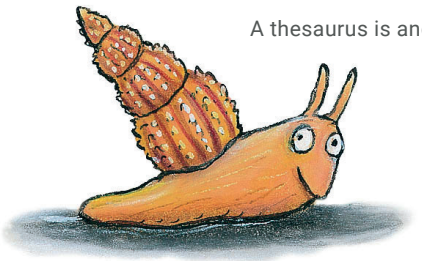
> **I like to think of a rhyming book really as a kind of song.**

FINDING RHYMES

I'm not encouraging you to write in rhyme, but here are a few little tricks about finding rhymes.

At the end of this lesson I've included a list of all the ways you can begin a word, including single-letter consonant sounds and consonant blends (two and three letter sounds). You'll realise that there are a lot of ways of beginning a word and having a document like this is helpful for finding rhyming words.

A thesaurus is another useful way of finding alternative words and synonyms.



The Snail and the Whale © 2003 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

RHYTHM

The rhyme at the end of the line is by no means the only thing and it's not even the most important thing. It's absolutely essential that a rhyming text should scan properly, so that each line has the same rhythm – rather like beats in a bar of music.

BE CONCISE

Ideally verse should make your story *shorter*, more concise, than if you were writing in prose. But unless you are careful you end up with something too long and rambling. This is because it's too easy to say what you want to say in one line and then follow that with a rhyming line which actually doesn't add anything to the story.

THINK LATERALLY

So it's important not to write the first thing that comes into your head and then search for a rhyme. Instead, try to think of several ways of saying something, and see which line-ending rhymes with something relevant.

CUT, CUT, CUT!

Once I've got the plot in my head, I write in a stream of consciousness fashion and then look through my scrawlings for a phrase that jumps out at me to repeat throughout the story. This will mean discarding all sorts of other phrases which might seem like gems but just won't fit the rhythm which the choice phrase has dictated.

Sometimes rhythm might even dictate who characters are. In **Room on the Broom** I wanted to have that chorus element, "I am a dog, as keen as can be. Is there room on the broom for a dog like me?". So then the other characters had to be one-syllable animals so they'd scan well and fit the rhythm of the story.

A SINGLE RHYMING ELEMENT

If you really love rhyme, you could try doing something simpler than writing a whole story in verse. For example, you could sprinkle a prose text with verses of a short rhyming song, the way I do in **The Smartest Giant in Town**.

READ IT ALOUD

Always get someone to read your draft story aloud. In your head you may know how you want it to sound and where the stresses go, but you might find that someone stumbles when they read it aloud. When I've finished writing a story, I always get my husband Malcolm to read it out loud. If he trips over the words and stumbles, I go back to the drawing board and rewrite that little bit.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Patterned prose is preferable to rambling rhyme
- Aim at verses and a chorus rather than doggerel verse
- If you write in rhyme, make sure your lines scan perfectly
- Be concise
- Think about incorporating elements of rhyme into a prose text
- Get someone to read your story aloud to spot any areas that don't work

EXERCISE

Think of as many different ways as you can of saying, 'someone came to the door', each example having a different word at the end.

INITIAL CONSONANT SOUNDS FOR RHYMING

b	pr
bl	qu
br	r s
c (k)	sc
ch	sh
chr	shr
cl	sk
cr	sl
d	sm
dr	sn
f	sp
fl	st
fr	sw
g	spr
gl	str
gr	t
h	th
j	thr
l	tr
m	tw
n	v
p	w (wh)
ph	y
phr	z
pl	

Text Credits :

[A Squash and a Squeeze]

[The Smartest Giant in Town]

[Room on the Brown]

[The Gruffalo]

[The Smeds and the Smoos]

Title: The Teeny Weeny Genie. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Anna Currey. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Monkey and Me. Author: Emily Gravett. Illustrator: Emily Gravett. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Cyril and Pat. Author: Emily Gravett. Illustrator: Emily Gravett. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

14. Dialogue

DIALOGUE

Dialogue isn't always essential but can be a great way to enrich your characters.

My own background is in drama, so it came quite naturally for me to introduce quite a lot of dialogue into my stories. As such, they've been great for school visits and book festivals, because you can get the children to act them out.

There are books which are written entirely in dialogue, like a kind of play. A great favourite of mine is **Whose Mouse are You?** by Robert Kraus and José Aruego. It's a conversation between a character who isn't actually in the book, like a kind of interviewer, and a little mouse. It works because it has simple language and very clear voices. A parent and child can easily switch characters and act out the story.

And there are books in comic strip form – the master of that, I think, is Raymond Briggs.

Even if there's not that much dialogue, like in Briggs' *Father Christmas*, which is told almost entirely in pictures, he's got a very clear voice. "Blast the blooming snow" is like a catchphrase that conjures up his character. Consider doing that for your characters.

> "You can conjure up a character just with a little catchphrase.

PATTERN IN DIALOGUE

Try to incorporate pattern in your dialogue too. I do this in my book **The Cook and the King**, illustrtaed by David Roberts. The king tries out a cook called Wobbly Bob who is terrified by every aspect of the job.
The first time he declines a task, the text reads,
"My knees are knocking," the cook declared.
"I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm terribly scared."
On subsequent occasions this pattern is repeated, except that "My knees are knocking" is replaced by "My palms are sweating", "My heart is thumping", and so on.

There are books where the dialogue is between a character and the reader, a bit like in a pantomime. This is a great way to engage children.

You could use dialogue, not in speech, but in the form of letter writing. In *The Misadventures of Frederick* by Ben Manley and Emma Chichester Clark, there's a feisty little girl outside in the forest, while Frederick is a pampered little boy. The little girl sends a paper dart into his house and the correspondence between the two forms the dialogue of the story.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Dialogue is a great way to enhance a story
- Children will enjoy hearing the different voices
- Think of catchphrases for your characters
- Use patterned language in your dialogue

EXERCISE

Take any well-known story and tell it entirely in dialogue.

The Go-Away Bird © 2019 Julia Donaldson and Catherine Rayner – Macmillan Children's Books

Text Credits :

Title: Peck Peck Peck. Author: Lucy Cousins. Illustrator: Lucy Cousins. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

[The Gruffalo]

Title: Whose Mouse are You?. Author: Robert Kraus. Illustrator: Jose Aruego. Publisher: Simon & Schuster

[The Man]

Title: Father Christmas. Author: Raymond Briggs. Illustrator: Raymond Briggs. Publisher: Penguin Random House

[The Smeds and the Smoos]

[The Highway Rat]

Title: The Cook and the King. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: David Roberts. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: I Am a Bat. Author: Morag Hood. Illustrator: Morag Hood. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!. Author: Mo Willems. Illustrator: Mo Willems. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: There are Cats in This Book. Author: Viviane Schwarz. Illustrator: Viviane Schwarz. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

[Farmer Duck]

Title: The Misadventures of Frederick. Author: Ben Manley. Illustrator: Emma Chichester Clark. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

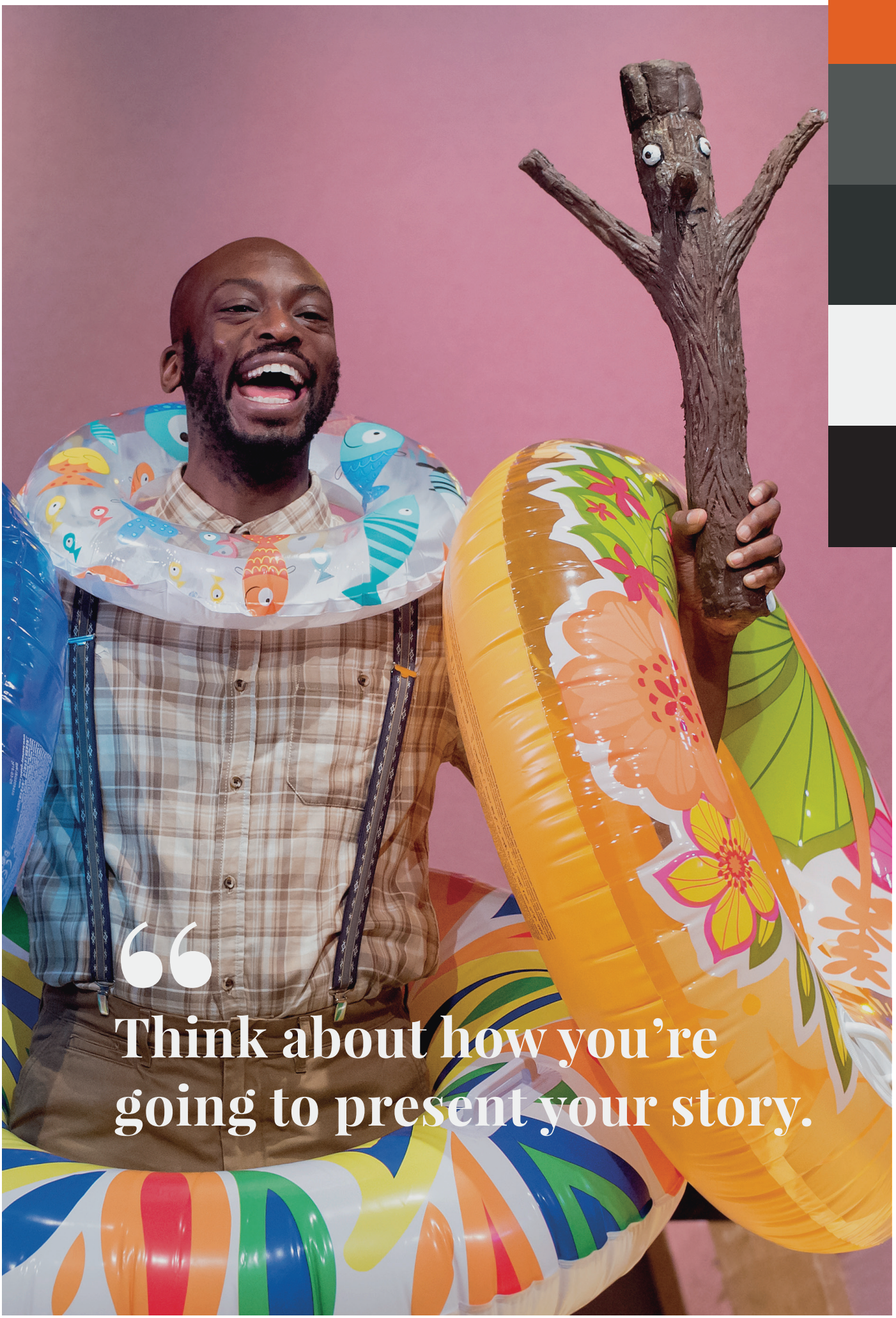


Photo: Magic Light Pictures

15. Humour

LOVE TO LAUGH

Some of the best picture books are funny, and they're some of the most enjoyable ones to read to children. It's great to have a chuckle with your child at bedtime.

Remember that you want to entertain the adult as well. Adults are going to be reading the story aloud, so it's nice to be able to make them laugh. But be careful to avoid innuendo. A good rule to stick to is that you want both adult and children to be laughing at the same thing.

The whole story doesn't have to be funny. You can inject humour into quite serious or scary stories. **The Gruffalo** is quite a scary story, but when the mouse says that the Gruffalo likes eating owl ice cream, or roasted fox – that's going to make children laugh.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Children being children, you can't really go wrong with anything to do with bottoms. They're always incredibly popular with younger people and so there's no end of books full of toilet humour. You might like to add a little to your story.

> **Children love anything to do with bottoms.**

INCONGRUOUS HUMOUR

Sometimes it's the initial concept of a book that's funny in itself – like *Supertato*, by Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet, where there's a potato who's a superhero. It's that idea of incongruity that's funny. And there are some books totally based on incongruity. *You Can't Take an Elephant on the Bus*, by Patricia Cleveland-Peck and David Tazzyman, features all sorts of animals travelling in unlikely forms of transport – a monkey in a shopping trolley, a tiger on a train, a taxi driven by a seal, and so on.

NAUGHTINESS

Children or animals being naughty always go down well.

In *Oh No, George* by Chris Haughton, the dog's owner, Harris, is going out.
"'Will you be good, George?', asks Harris.
'Yes,' says George, 'I'll be very good.'
'I hope I'll be good,' George thinks.
George sees something in the kitchen. It's cake!
'I said I'd be good,' George thinks, 'but I LOVE cake.'
What will George do?"

Of course, any child reading is going to shout, 'Eat the cake!'.

INTERACTIVITY

That brings us on to interaction. Some of the funniest books are ones where the reader knows what's happening, but the poor, innocent character hasn't got a clue. The literary term for this is dramatic irony.

In *Corduroy* by Don Freeman, a little bear who is on sale in a department store goes all over the store in the middle of the night, searching for his missing button. He's never explored the store before and there's a picture where it says, "Suddenly he felt the floor moving under him! Quite by accident he had stepped onto an escalator – and up he went! 'Could this be a mountain?' he wondered. 'I think I've always wanted to climb a mountain.'" So the child can feel quite clever, knowing it's really an escalator, not a mountain.

THE UNEXPECTED

Another humour device is the unexpected twist. One of my favourite ones is the ending of *I'm the Best* by Lucy Cousins. It's about a boastful but likeable dog, who tells all his friends, "I'm Dog, and I'm the best." Towards the end he is sad and ashamed about his boastfulness, and his friends try to cheer him up by telling him he is their best friend. It seem that this will be the – rather sentimental – end, but when they add that he has lovely fluffy ears, he says, "So having fluffy ears is the most important thing – so I *am* the best!"

Another good way to inject humour is to turn a norm on its head. One norm is that cats run away from dogs but in Hairy Maclary from *Donaldson's Dairy* by Lynley Dodd all the dogs run away from the cat, Scarface Claw.

FUNNY NAMES

Something we've already touched on is funny names for characters. Of course, Scarface Claw is a great name, and all the dogs in *Hairy Maclary* have brilliant names like Schnitzel von Krumm and Bitzer Maloney.

So try and think of some funny names for your characters. I sometimes do this – The Gruffalo is quite a good name, and I've got another character called Tabby McTat. One very successful character is Dav Pilkey's Captain Underpants.

We seem to have come full circle back to bottoms again.

Jack and the Flumflum Tree © 2011 Julia Donaldson and David Roberts – Macmillan Children's Books

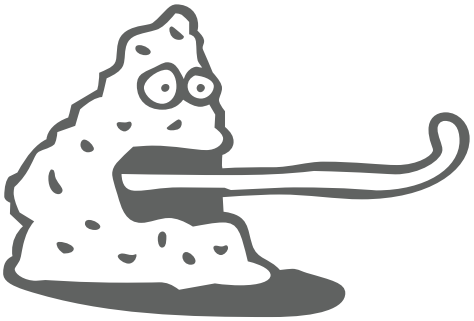
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Some of the best picture books are funny
- Try to entertain both adults and children but avoid innuendo
- Children love toilet humour and anything to do with bottoms
- Oddball and incongruous humour are great devices to include
- Naughty characters excite readers and make for fun plots
- Try to use interaction to enhance humour and fun
- Unexpected twists and turning a norm on its head are great humour devices

HUMOUR EXERCISE

Invent two funny names.
Make up a name for a mouse and then make up a name for a monster.

MY NAME IS...



MY NAME IS...

Text Credits :

[Peck Peck Peck]

[The Gruffalo]

[The Paper Dolls]

Title: Aliens Love Underpants!. Author: Claire Freedman. Illustrator: Ben Cort. Publisher: Simon & Schuster

[Jack and the Flumflum Tree]

[Detective Dog]

Title: Supertato. Author: Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet. Illustrator: Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet. Publisher: Simon & Schuster

Title: Superworm. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Scholastic

Title: You Can't Take An Elephant On the Bus. Author: Patricia Cleveland-Peck. Illustrator: David Tazzyman. Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

Title: Oh No, George!. Author: Chris Haughton. Illustrator: Chris Haughton. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: I Want My Hat Back. Author: Jon Klassen. Illustrator: Jon Klassen. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

[Corduroy]

Title: Handa's Surprise. Author: Eileen Browne. Illustrator: Eileen Browne. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

[The Smartest Giant in Town]

Title: I'm the Best. Author: Lucy Cousins. Illustrator: Lucy Cousins. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

The Hospital Dog © 2020 Julia Donaldson and Sara Ogilvie – Macmillan Children's Books

“Putting on funny voices when you read stories to children is just one of the most fun things for both the adult and the child.

Photo: Magic Light Pictures

16. Endings

ENDINGS

Endings are incredibly important. Consider a joke – you wouldn't start writing a joke without knowing what the punchline was going to be. An ending in a picture book is a bit like a punchline.

Your ending should be satisfying but not too predictable. Of course, you know what the main character wants. You're rooting for them. You want them to get it, so it's satisfying when they get what they want. However, what makes it a good story is that it happens in an unpredictable way.

I really like circular plots in books, so you end back where you started. One of my stories where this happens is **Charlie Cook's Favourite Book**. It starts off,
"Once upon a time there was a boy called Charlie Cook
Who curled up in a cosy chair and read his favourite book"
The story continues with a book within a book within a book and so on, until the end…
(Though if you look carefully at Axel Scheffler's clever pictures, you'll see that Charlie Cook's room has actually been transformed.)

> **An ending in a picture book is a bit like a punchline.**

You might think about setting up a pattern and then breaking it. Think of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* – she goes into the house, sits on the three chairs and breaks the last one. Then she tastes the three bowls of porridge and gobbles the last one up. She tries out the three beds, and sleeps in the last one. There's that pattern repeated each time. But then the bears come back, discover her, and she's chased out of the window and rushes off home. So suddenly there's that whoosh of drama which breaks the pattern.

LAST LINES

I like to think of the last phrase first. I think it's quite important. I don't want to go through all the work of writing the story then get to the end only to struggle with the last phrase. And that's different from knowing what's going to happen. You can know what's going to happen, but knowing how you'll say it is really important.

CYCLES AND CIRCLES

An ending can in fact be a beginning if you have a life cycle theme, where one generation hands on to the next. In my story **The Paper Dolls**, illustrated by Rebecca Cobb, the little girl makes dolls and gives them all names – "Ticky and Tacky and Jackie the Backie and Jim with two noses and Jo with the bow".

At the end of the story, the little girl is now a mother, helping her own little girl make paper dolls called "Poppy and Pinkie and Binky the Blinkie and Fred with one eyebrow and Flo with the bow". So, there's the idea that life repeats itself, but is always a bit different. Nothing ever really quite stays the same.

WHY NOT END WITH A QUESTION?

This is a lovely way to end a story, and something I did in **The Teeny Weeny Genie**, illustrated by Anna Currey. In that story, a genie gets so sick of granting wishes that he just wishes he could get back in his dear old teapot, where he lived for years and years. Luckily, he finds another genie to grant his wish, so they wish for the teapot to grow wings and they fly to a deserted beach where they're very happy. That could be the end, but I've ended it like this instead, "Please don't disturb them, if you ever find that teapot on the beach. Or if you really feel you have to, just make one wish. Think very hard. What will that wish be?".

That suggests that there's another story to come – about the child's wish. You could think of doing that with your book.

One Ted Falls Out of Bed © 2004 Julia Donaldson and Anna Currey – Macmillan Children's Books

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Aim for a satisfying ending that's not too predictable
- Consider circular plots that finish back where you started
- Come up with the last phrase first
- Setting up a pattern and then breaking it is very effective
- You could end your story on a question
- Use the life cycle theme to continue a story across generations

EXERCISE

Take a story you've already written where you're not entirely satisfied with the ending, and have a go at re-writing it. You might like to hark back to the beginning of the story, use some particularly memorable, catchy words, or maybe add a twist.

Text Credits :

[One Ted Falls Out of Bed]

[Where The Wild Things Are]

Title: Charlie Cook's Favourite Book. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

[The Gruffalo]

[A Squash and a Squeeze]

[The Go-Away Bird]

Title: The Hospital Dog. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Sara Ogilvie. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

[Monkey Puzzle]

[100 Dogs]

[The Teeny Weeny Genie]

[Zog]

[Zog and the Flying Doctors]

[The Paper Dolls]

17. Numbers, Letters, Colours

BASIC SKILLS AND CURRICULUM

Parents and teachers alike love books that teach basic skills, such as number, colour, and letter recognition – but sometimes those books can be a bit prosaic. Let's look at some ways you can make them more interesting.

> **There's always a demand for books that teach some basic skills.**

NUMBERS

Think about a book that goes, 'One red apple, two yellow bananas, three green peas'. Well, that would be counting and colours, but it wouldn't be terribly exciting. Instead, I think it's nice to weave counting into a story. I did that in **One Ted Falls out of Bed**, illustrated by Anna Currey. It goes through all the numbers forwards, and then backwards while telling the story of Ted's night-time adventure.

The most famous book that combines counting with story is *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. There we don't just get counting, we have fruit, days of the week, colours and tactility with holes to poke your fingers into.

I've just had a book published called **Counting Creatures** that introduces baby animals by lifting a flap. It's nice to put that novelty element in a counting book for very young children. "This bat has one baby, holding on tight as they fly through the night. Who has more babies than that?" Then we have a sheep who has two lambs, and so on going up through the numbers. And I've tried to introduce some unusual animals, which introduces an extra educational element and also inspired some stunning illustrations by Sharon King-Chai.

Even a simple counting book can have an exciting twist at the end. In **Counting Creatures**, the last animal is a spider with lots of spiderlings and the text reads, "Take a good look. They're all over this book." And then when you look back through the pages, you notice, or maybe an observant child will have noticed already, there are little spiders on almost every page.

LETTERS

The trouble about alphabet books is that they can't normally be translated into other languages as words will begin with different letters (e.g. 'dog' is 'chien' in French and 'Hund' in German). However, there is the occasional exception. My book **Animalphabet** has been translated into other languages, perhaps because of Sharon King-Chai's gorgeous illustrations, and because I've asked a question on every page. It starts with a little ant, and it asks, Who is prettier than an ant? Something beginning with B – a butterfly. Then who has more legs than a butterfly? – a caterpillar. Who's faster than a caterpillar? – a deer, and so on. So the foreign editions are no longer alphabet books but just books about 'amazing animals'.

COLOURS

I love writing books that subtly feature colours – you can always weave colours into a story. Whatever story you're writing, think about giving it an extra colour element. My book **The Girl, the Bear and the Magic Shoes**, illustrated by Lydia Monks, wasn't supposed to be a colour book at all. The story is about magic shoes that keep changing from shoes into boots, and into flippers, and into all sorts of footwear to suit the terrain the little girl is on. But each time I make them change I've chosen a different colour.

You don't necessarily need to go through every colour one by one in a methodical way. You might like to try your hand at doing a book about camouflage or perhaps about different shades of just one colour.

One of my very favourite authors and illustrators, Arnold Lobel, wrote a lovely story called *The Great Blueness and Other Predicaments* which links colours to their associated emotions. The language throughout is great, using repetition and rhythm, "Trees were blue. Bees were blue. Wheels, and evening meals were blue".

In the story, eventually everyone gets fed up with everything being blue, so the wizard mixes up another colour. He creates yellow, and at first everyone loves it, but when everything is just yellow, people get dazzled by the brightness. And so it goes on. In the end, all the paint spills and mixes up, and lots of other colours get created – and the whole world gets painted in all these different colours. That book is a celebration of variety, through colour.

Don't forget about your language, even if you're writing about number or colours. If anything I think it's even more important in this type of book to use alliteration, assonance and words that sound exciting.

Tiddler © 2016 Axel Scheffler

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Weave counting, colours or letters into a story
- Combine these basic skills with other educational elements, such as recognition of animals or plants
- Even counting books can have a twist at the end
- Be sure to still use exciting and enticing language

EXERCISE

Make up your own story about counting or colours.

The Gruffalo's Child © 2004 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

Text Credits :

[One Ted Falls Out of Bed]

Title: One Fox: A Counting Book Thriller. Author: Kate Read. Illustrator: Kate Read. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Dinosaur Dig!. Author: Penny Dale. Illustrator: Penny Dale. Publisher: Nosy Crow

[The Very Hungry Caterpillar]

Title: Counting Creatures. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Sharon King-Chai. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Flyaway Alphabet. Author: Mary Murphy. Illustrator: Mary Murphy. Publisher: Egmont Books Ltd. (part of HarperCollins)

Title: Animalphabet. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Sharon King-Chai. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Girl, the Bear and the Magic Shoes. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Princess and the Wizard. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Lydia Monks. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: The Great Blueness and Other Predicaments. Author: Arnold Lobel. Illustrator: Arnold Lobel. Publisher: HarperCollins Children's Books

Title: Winnie the Witch. Author: Valerie Thomas. Illustrator: Korky Paul. Published: Oxford University Press

18. Inclusivity: Reflecting the World

REFLECTING THE WORLD

Picture books can broaden the mind and be instrumental in making changes against discrimination. They can help children understand themselves and realise that their way of life is not the only way, that other people can have different experiences. A child living in a city centre, for example, can read about a child who lives up a mountain or on a farm.

Recently there's been a lot of concern voiced about the importance of representing people of colour, people of all sexual inclinations, and people with disabilities – either physical or learning disabilities – in picture books as in all areas of life.

> **Picture books can really broaden the mind. They can help children understand themselves and they can also help them realise that their way of life is not the only way.**

REPRESENTATION MATTERS

I wear hearing aids myself, and have worked with a lot of deaf children. I've seen how much they love seeing someone wearing hearing aids in a picture book. Sometimes it might just be someone in a crowd, and perhaps a hearing child might think they were earrings or not notice, but for that child with the hearing problem, it's so lovely to see themselves represented. That's why I was overjoyed the other day when I received a copy of *Can Bears Ski?* by Raymond Antrobus and Polly Dunbar. It's about a little deaf bear and he's got very prominent hearing aids and he's so sweet.

But it's not just children who like to see or read about people like themselves. When I wrote **Tabby McTat**, I had the cat go and live with Prunella and Pat. I seem to remember I was thinking that Pat would be Patrick but Axel Scheffler, the illustrator, went with Patricia and drew a picture of two women welcoming the new cat. It doesn't matter who they are really, they can be sisters, they could be friends, they could be lovers, or whatever. But I've had such a warm response from women in same-sex couples who've been so pleased to see people like themselves represented in a picture book. It's about normalising and including characters who have generally been marginalised.

DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

Of course, stories should be about anything and everything. However, there is a place for stories specifically featuring discrimination and prejudice. There's a book called *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch, about a little girl who wants to play Peter Pan in the school play. At first, she's not allowed to on the grounds that she's a girl, and she's black, but in the end she does get to play Peter Pan.

I've actually written two books about deafness, one about signing and another about lipreading. The latter, **Freddie and the Fairy**, illustrated by Karen George, teaches children that they should face the deaf person, not mumble, speak clearly and not cover up their mouth. I think it's an important lesson that centres around how hearing people can be inclusive to those with hearing issues.

It's actually the only book I've ever written where I had a very specific message, but it's still entertaining and not too preachy. I think it is important that if your story is about discrimination or prejudice, that you should still be entertaining and, if possible, have a light touch.

If you do feel moved to tackle the theme of prejudice, you don't have to set your story in the modern-day world, or even in the human world. **The Smeds and the Smoos** is a book I did with Axel Scheffler about racial prejudice. It's about two enemy families, the Smeds and the Smoos (a bit like in Romeo and Juliet) but they've all got silly, made up names, and it's funny and quite entertaining.

And I've recently discovered a similar book called *Mixed* by Arree Cheung, which describes itself on the front as "An inspiring story about colour." The characters in this book are blobs who start off living in different areas of the city, segregated by their colour. But by the end of the book, there are lots and lots of more blobs of all sorts of colours and they come to realise that "the old neighbourhoods of Redville, Blue Town and Yellow Heights, didn't make sense anymore. Everyone wanted to live together, so they rebuilt the city."

Maybe you're considering writing a book that challenges gender stereotypes. A great example is *This is Ada Twist, Scientist* by Andrea Beatty and David Roberts. It's about a little girl who just can't stop asking questions. She's very scientifically minded and destined for great things.

LAYERED MEANINGS

A book doesn't have to be directly about these issues to be helpful. In *Luna Loves Library Day*, by Joseph Coelho and Fiona Lumbers, a little girl goes to the library with her father, as they both love books. It's subtle but clear that the parents are separated, and that this is her day with her father. And there's a book-within-a-book called *The Troll King and the Mermaid Queen*. In this story the Troll King and the Mermaid Queen just can't make it work. They love each other, but they can't live together, and they love their daughter. So there is a very reassuring message for children whose parents have divorced or separated, though the main story is about a joyful visit to the library.

CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

One of my favourite picture books that celebrates diversity is *The Same, But Different Too* by Karl Newson and Kate Hindley. It reads, "I am me and you are you. We're the same but different too." This is a book celebrating similarities *and* differences, and it features a wonderful array of different animals, adjectives and opposites.

This is a reminder that a picture book doesn't have to tell a story, as such, but instead represent ideas or concepts in a fun and visually exciting way.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Picture books can really broaden the mind
- Writers have an opportunity to make changes against discrimination
- Representation matters. It's important for children to see themselves in books
- Whatever your theme, you should still be entertaining and have a light touch
- Your book doesn't have to be directly about prejudice or difference to be helpful

EXERCISE

Go to your local library or bookshop and browse recent books featuring diversity. See how many you can find and see what they inspire you to write.

Text Credits :

Title: Can Bears Ski?. Author: Raymond Antrobus. Illustrator: Polly Dunbar. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

[Handa's Surprise]

[Tabby McTat]

Title: Amazing Grace. Author: Mary Hoffman. Illustrator: Caroline Binch. Publisher: The Quarto Group

[Freddie and the Fairy]

[The Smeds and the Smoos]

Title: Mixed. Author: Arree Chung. Illustrator: Arree Chung. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Ada Twist, Scientist. Author: Andrea Beaty. Illustrator: David Roberts. Publisher: Abrams Books

Title: Look Up!. Author: Nathan Bryon. Illustrator: Dapo Adeola. Publisher: Penguin Random House

Title: Julian is a Mermaid. Author: Jessica Love. Illustrator: Jessica Love. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: Luna Loves Library Day. Author: Joseph Coelho. Illustrator: Fiona Lumbers. Publisher: Andersen Press Ltd.

Title: The Same But Different Too. Author: Karl Newson. Illustrator: Kate Hindley. Publisher: Nosy Crow Ltd.

19. The Role of the Illustrator

ILLUSTRATION

The illustration process happens after the writing is done unless you're an author illustrator, in which case the editor may help you develop your storyline. Otherwise, the publisher is usually in control of suggesting an appropriate illustrator for your work.

PUBLISHER'S CHOICE

When a publisher teams an author up with an illustrator, they will usually try to match a new illustrator with a more established author, or vice versa, to appeal to more booksellers. Especially if you're a new author, the publisher will probably have more say than you, though you can tell them the sort of illustration style you like. You will then probably be offered a range of illustrators that the publisher might approach.

Good illustrators are usually very busy people and can be booked up for years in advance, so you might have to wait or choose someone else to illustrate your books. If that's the case, do try to be philosophical. Sometimes it can be the start of a new creative partnership.

When **A Squash and a Squeeze** was accepted, the publisher approached two different illustrators. It's a little bit like a children's story in itself: the first one was too busy and the second one wasn't sure that it was their cup of tea. But the third one was just right. And that illustrator was Axel Scheffler with whom I have a wonderful partnership. We've created over twenty books together.

> **Illustrators are really providing a child with their first art gallery.**

THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR PARTNERSHIP

A common misconception is that the author and the illustrator work closely together. It is up to the illustrator to decide what the pictures are going to look like. Descriptions in your text are often adhered to but everything that isn't in the text is a creative choice by the illustrator.

Remember that, in the end, it's the illustrator's call what the characters should look like. That's fair enough, as it is their field of expertise.

That's what sets picture books apart. It is teamwork. You can't have a complete sense of control as an author because fundamental to the process is collaborating with an illustrator, an editor and a designer.

Your text should stand on its own merit and it's up to the illustrator to decide what it's going to look like. There are, of course, exceptions. If it's not obvious from the text what's needed in the pictures you will need to put in a note, but otherwise you should not submit your manuscript with exhaustive illustration notes.

THE PROCESS

Let's look at the whole process from when an illustrator receives a manuscript, through to publication.

INITIAL SKETCHES

The first thing that they'll probably do is some sketches of the main characters to ensure they are the best person for the job. These sketches will be sent to the editor who will share them with the author. Though you can't decide exactly what the characters look like, if you really feel they don't look right at all then you can say so.

LAYOUT

Once everyone's happy with the character sketches, the next thing is to get the layout of the book. This is usually done by the editor and the designer but I sometimes get involved, suggesting where the words and pictures should go.

The illustrator then knows where they're supposed to put the illustrations; some of them will be small vignettes, some will be single page illustrations and some will be big double-page spreads.

ROUGHS

Once the layout is decided, the illustrator gets to work doing what we call the roughs, or rough illustrations. These go to the editor, who will have some comments. The editor will send them to the author, who will probably have additional comments. But these comments won't necessarily be criticisms of that illustration. More often it's what is needed to help with the storytelling. For example, with **The Smeds and the Smoos**, I realised that we'd forgotten to suggest a picture of a rocket.

This feedback goes to the illustrator and they do some revised roughs. And then when everyone's happy with those, the illustrator will steam ahead and produce full colour illustrations.

Tabby McTat © 2016 Axel Scheffler

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The publisher is normally in control of selecting an appropriate illustrator for your work
- Publishers usually team a new illustrator with a more established author or vice versa
- Author and illustrator rarely work closely together
- It is up to the illustrator to decide what the characters are going to look like
- Don't make illustration notes unless essential

EXERCISE

1. Ask a friend or a family member to choose a picture book that you've never read or seen before.

2. Have them to read it aloud to you, and while they read it, do a little sketch of one particular scene or one particular character.

3. Then, and only then, look at the actual book. I'm sure you're going to see that how the illustrator saw that scene or that character will be very different from how you've seen it.

Text Credits :

[A Squash and a Squeeze]

Title: Each Peach Pear Plum. Author: Allan Ahlberg. Illustrator: Janet Ahlberg. Publisher: Penguin Random House

[Room on the Broom]

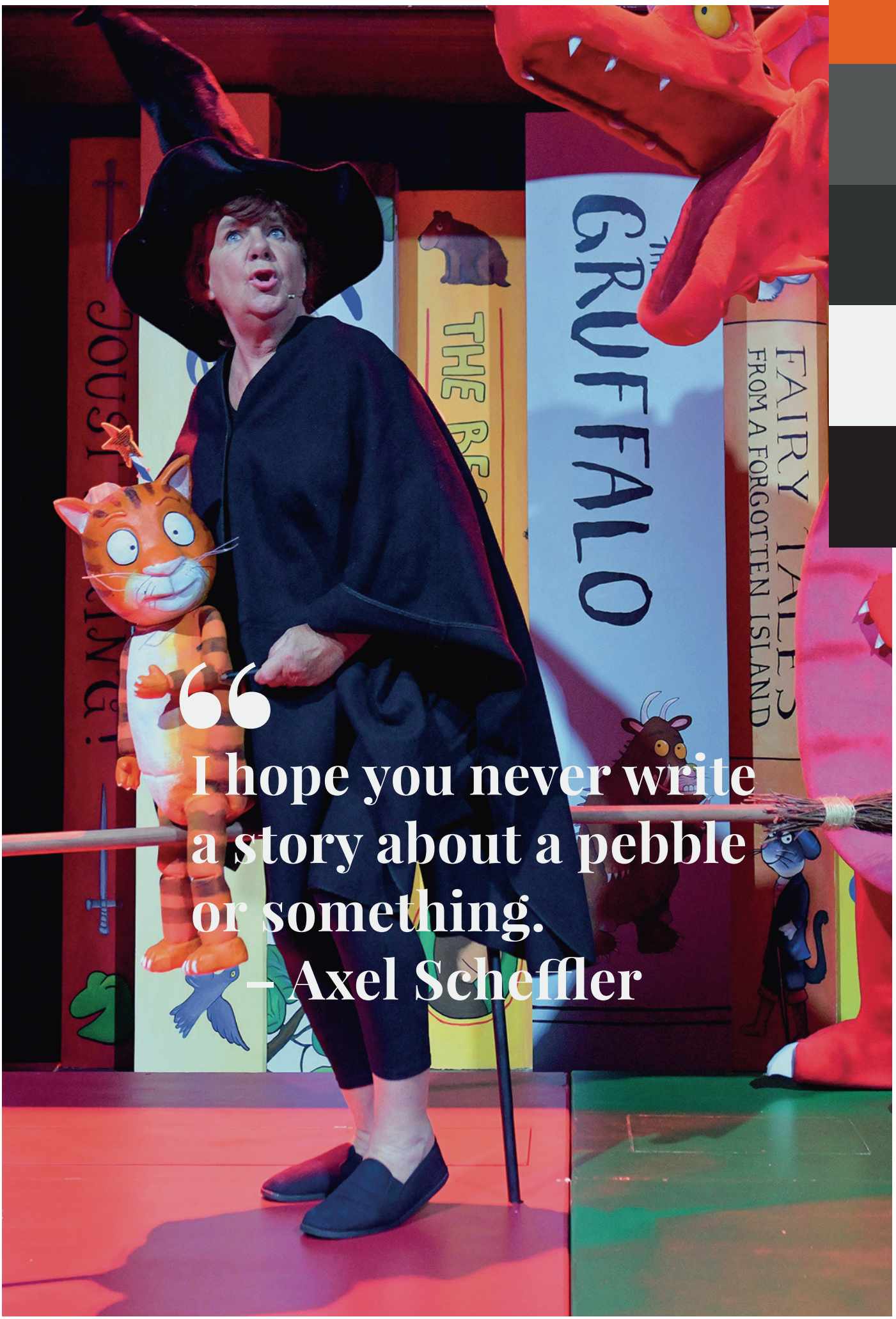
Title: Leon and Bob. Author: Simon James. Illustrator: Simon James. Publisher: Walker Books Ltd.

Title: Man on the Moon: A day in the life of Bob. Author: Simon Bartram. Illustrator: Simon Bartram. Publisher: Templar Publishing

[Handa's Surprise]

[The Troll]

[The Smeds and the Smoos]



> I hope you never write a story about a pebble or something.
>
> – Axel Scheffler

20. Author / Illustrator Partnership
featuring Axel Scheffler

ABOUT AXEL

Axel Scheffler has worked in children's book illustration for over 30 years. He loved drawing as a child and knew he wanted to do something with art. He started studying history of art in Hamburg, but found that academia wasn't for him, so he changed to study visual communications and saw that children's books is a great field to work in as an illustrator. The rest is picture-book history…

HOW WE WORK TOGETHER

Axel Scheffler is the illustrator I've worked with for the longest time and done most books with. What I really love about Axel is that he's very receptive to the story, even though he's got his own wonderful distinctive style. He is very witty, and he'll often add little witty details to the pictures, but I never get the feeling that he's taken over the story. It's such an enjoyable creative partnership.

Despite working with Axel on numerous projects, we actually rarely work together. When we do talk about work it's always via the editor.

Our first book together was **A Squash and a Squeeze**, but our most iconic is probably **The Gruffalo**. Axel is keen on fantastical stories set in an almost fairy tale world so the Gruffalo was a creature he enjoyed drawing.

He told me that the made-up characters are often more interesting for an illustrator because there's more freedom in creating them. However, there are already some attributes in the text, which he had to consider like the Gruffalo's orange eyes and the purple prickles. Axel added the Gruffalo's horns and his tail, and the overall shape of the Gruffalo came down to how Axel chose to draw him.

> **I do everything by hand. And if I don't like something, I start again.** Axel Scheffler

It took several sketches to get to the character everyone knows. I suppose it's a kind of visual brainstorming. The initial Gruffalo sketches looked too scary according to the editor, but eventually, Axel hit the right tone with a monster that didn't feel too frightening.

Once everyone's happy with how the characters look, the designer and editor work out where the pictures will be placed. Axel then receives a layout of the book without any pictures. That way he knows how much space he has to draw and where there will be a full-page illustration or where the vignettes will go.

The next stage is Axel making rough illustrations for the whole book. He works on all the scenes, often small, sometimes bigger, sometimes in black and white, sometimes in colour. There are no strict rules.

Once Axel's laid out the storyboard of the whole story, that gets approved by the editor and author. Then he starts on the sketches for the colour artwork, often producing several versions. Much as a writer does several drafts, an illustrator might carry on sketching scenes and characters, honing the image to perfection.

Axel works using pencil, watercolour and ink to layer the images. His use of colour and characterisation is second to none. I am always excited to see what he produces. Despite the fact that we've done so many books together he always comes up with something different and surprising.

> **I'm lucky to work with such an incredible artist.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Illustrators can take liberties with reality – it doesn't matter if you draw googly eyes on a worm
- Made up characters can be more liberating for an illustrator
- Illustrators will stick to character descriptions in the text itself, but add more ideas and inventions of their own
- Being an illustrator can be very meditative

Text Credits :

[A Squash and a Squeeze]

[The Gruffalo]

[Superworm]

[The Snail and the Whale]

[The Smeds and the Smoos]

[The Highway Rat]

[Stick Man]

21. Which Illustrator?

HOW THE PUBLISHER CHOOSES

A publisher will have worked with lots of illustrators. They are likely to have a better idea than you about which illustrator would suit your style of story, as well as which ones the booksellers are keen on.

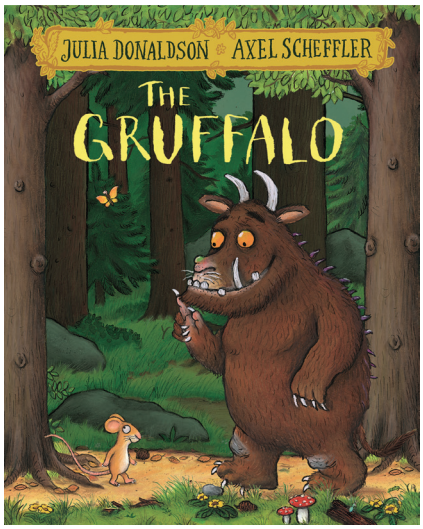
They're also likely to know which illustrators sell well or are popular in other countries. A publisher will want to sell as many foreign rights as they can, and some British illustrators just aren't very popular in America or maybe won't be so popular in European countries. Once again, it's a good idea to rely on your publisher's knowledge and understanding of this commercial element of the process.

THE RIGHT ILLUSTRATOR FOR THE RIGHT BOOK

After Axel, the first illustrator I worked with was Joel Stewart, who illustrated **The Magic Paintbrush**. Out of courtesy, the book was originally offered to Axel, but it wasn't suited to his style and there were no hard feelings there. **The Magic Paintbrush** is set in China, so needed someone who could steep themselves in Oriental art and create pictures and characters that felt authentic and sensitive.

Some illustrators are particularly suitable for books for very young children. One such is Nick Sharratt, with whom I've done several books. He creates line drawings but his colours are very warm and he's got a lovely bold, simple style that's particularly eye catching for infants.

When I wrote **Sharing a Shell**, Axel Scheffler was busy illustrating **The Smartest Giant in Town**, and it didn't feel right for Joel Stewart either. The main character is a hermit crab, a creature who looks rather unappealing out of its shell, so we needed stylised illustrations and a great sense of design. Who could be better than Lydia Monks? She used some wonderful techniques, such as photography cut-outs for the rocks in a rockpool and adding glitter to make the sand and shells shimmer.



The Gruffalo © 1999 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

It's particularly gratifying having these working partnerships, as illustrators like Lydia would often give suggestions for books – perhaps a farmyard, a unicorn, a mermaid – and that would spark off ideas in my mind.

Working with a wide range of illustrators and styles has broadened my taste in illustration. When I started out, good illustrators were the ones my own children liked, and now I'm much more aware of all the wonderful different styles there are, and how different styles suit different stories.

It's lovely to write a story which you're sure will suit an illustrator with whom you already have a successful partnership. But now and then you might write a story that just doesn't feel right for any of them. There can be a very long wait before you find the right illustrator. For **The Paper Dolls**, the publisher asked several illustrators for initial sketches and none of them seemed quite right. It took years to find the right illustrator. But it was worth the wait because Rebecca Cobb brought something that truly conveyed the imagination and emotion of that story.

It's a gratifying process to see these artists who are illustrating my stories providing a child with their first art gallery experience.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

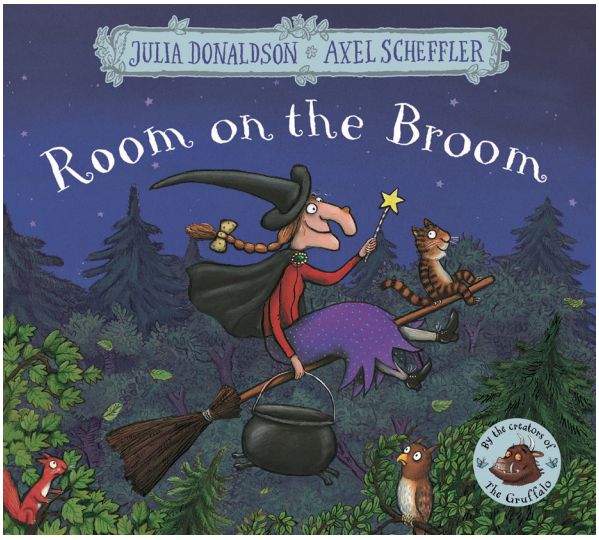
- Trust your publisher to choose the right illustrator for your work
- Understand that there are commercial considerations
- The story influences the style of illustration needed
- Have patience. It can take time, but it is worth the wait

EXERCISES

1. Go to your local library or bookshop and browse through all the picture books there, taking in the different illustrators and their different styles.

2. See if there's an illustrator there that inspires you to write a story.

Throughout this workbook there are some examples from my books of the various illustrators I have worked with throughout the years



Room on the Broom © 2001 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

Text Credits :

[Tabby McTat]

[The Magic Paintbrush]

[The Smartest Giant in Town]

[Sharing a Shell]

[What the Ladybird Heard]

Title: Toddle Waddle. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Nick Sharratt. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

Title: Hippo Has A Hat. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Nick Sharratt. Publisher: Pan Macmillan

[The Further Adventures of the Owl and the Pussycat]

[Room on the Broom]

[The Troll]

[The Paper Dolls]

22. A Case Study : The Snail and the Whale

I'm going to take you through the whole writing and publication process for one particular book, **The Snail and the Whale**.

THE IDEA

Before I was really established as a children's writer, I did a lot of writing for educational publishers. Educational publishers produce books which go straight into the schools, rather than ending up in the bookshops (the latter is referred to as 'trade' publishing).

On one occasion I was contributing to a series of phonic books, where children were being taught all the different vowel sounds.

It's funny how sometimes a sound can inspire a story. I was asked to write a story featuring 'ai' sounds, so I wrote a list of words with 'ai', including snail and trail and paint. I thought up a nice storyline where a snail would crawl through some paint and make a trail, but before I'd even finished devising the story the publishers decided they didn't need this book after all. I never wrote that story for them.

> **I finished writing the story, it got sent to Axel, I crossed my fingers that he'd like it – and I suspect he probably groaned a bit.**

That is the lovely thing about writing. The ideas are still there. Years later, when I was established and I was writing books for Axel Scheffler, I was thinking of a new idea and I wanted to write a book about a reciprocal partnership, where two different animals would help each other. I've always been fascinated by scale, by very large and very small, so I thought it would be nice to write a story about a snail and a whale. And of course, that made me remember this embryonic story about a snail crawling through some paint and leaving a trail. So immediately I thought the snail could write a trail saying 'Save the whale'.

This took place over Christmas. I remember doing Christmas shopping and stopping in a café to write notes. Even over Christmas itself, I kept sneaking back to my study to write a little bit more. That's the thing about writing picture book texts. Once I've got that idea in my head, I can't really let it go. Whereas, when you write something longer, one can have much more of a routine. It's a very different writing process.

BRAINSTORMING

I decided quite early on that I wanted the rhythm to be like the nursery rhyme *This Is the House That Jack Built*. It starts like this…

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the rat,
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

And it grows cumulatively with another character in each verse. I decided I would do that – 'This is the snail, this is the whale' – which is quite suitable for a picture book because you're indicating with pictures. I'd never done that before, and I was quite excited by that idea.

Here's a little excerpt from one of my notebooks with some of my brainstorming :

This is a tale
Of a tiny snail
And a shiny grey enormous whale

The snail lived
In a seaside wall
And he was small
His shell was twirly
His horns stuck out
And on the horns he had two eyes
Two eyes which longed to see the world

To see the sea
'The world is big
The seas are wide
I long to travel'
The seasnail cried

He sat on the wall
And sometimes he'd crawl
To the edge of the wall
Or the tip of the rock
Leaving a trail
A shiny trail
He sat where he could see the sea
And longed to sail
Around the world
Across the sea

'I am a snail
Who longs to sail'

The Gruffalo's Child © 2004 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

This brainstorming went on and on. There's a lot more of it. Eventually, I chose the phrases I liked best and worked with them.

Once I'd decided on the snail and the whale's journey – I knew there was going to be a section about under the water, a section about the sky, and so on – I made notes on what could be in each section. Ninety per cent of this got ditched:

Sky

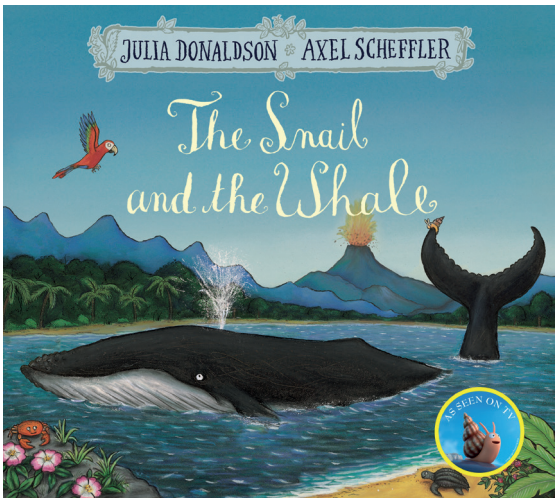
Milky way
Shooting stars
Stars with tails
Sparkling stars, glittering
Starry nights
Millions of miles away
Golden sun, silver stars
Pearly moon
Clouds like mountains, hills
Banks of clouds
Rolling clouds
Lightning flashing
Zigzags of lightning
Sheet of lightning
Crackling forks

Looking back, and remembering that Christmas when I was writing the story, I'm imagining it was all fun. I think writing is like that – in retrospect you think it was fun. But I do have to say, it is a struggle. It is blood, sweat and tears.

I tend to think, 'I just can't do it this time'. But my husband Malcolm reminds me I always feel this way and end up finishing it okay. So if you feel the same way, try not to beat yourself up too much.

RESEARCH

Research is good fun and sometimes sparks off ideas for further stories. I had to look into how the whale would be rescued and what kind of whale it was going to be. Which species would travel around the world and could possibly get beached? I think I settled on the humpback whale because it fitted the metre I was working with.



THE PLOT

The story was influenced by my love of a poem called *The Jumblies* by Edward Lear. As a little treat, you can read it in full here…

I

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!
And when the Sieve turned round and round,
And every one cried, 'You'll all be drowned!'
They called aloud, 'Our Sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button! we don't care a fig!
In a Sieve we'll go to sea!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

II

They sailed away in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they sailed so fast,
With only a beautiful pea-green veil
Tied with a riband by way of a sail,
To a small tobacco-pipe mast;
And every one said, who saw them go,
'O won't they be soon upset, you know!
For the sky is dark, and the voyage is long,
And happen what may, it's extremely wrong
In a Sieve to sail so fast!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

III

The water it soon came in, it did,
The water it soon came in;
So to keep them dry, they wrapped their feet
In a pinky paper all folded neat,
And they fastened it down with a pin.
And they passed the night in a crockery-jar,
And each of them said, 'How wise we are!
Though the sky be dark, and the voyage be long,
Yet we never can think we were rash or wrong,
While round in our Sieve we spin!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

IV

And all night long they sailed away;
And when the sun went down,
They whistled and warbled a moony song
To the echoing sound of a coppery gong,
In the shade of the mountains brown.
'O Timballo! How happy we are,
When we live in a sieve and a crockery-jar,
And all night long in the moonlight pale,
We sail away with a pea-green sail,
In the shade of the mountains brown!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

V

They sailed to the Western Sea, they did,
To a land all covered with trees,
And they bought an Owl, and a useful Cart,
And a pound of Rice, and a Cranberry Tart,
And a hive of silvery Bees.
And they bought a Pig, and some green Jack-daws,
And a lovely Monkey with lollipop paws,
And forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree,
And no end of Stilton Cheese.
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

VI

And in twenty years they all came back,
In twenty years or more,
And every one said, 'How tall they've grown!'
For they've been to the Lakes, and the Torrible Zone,
And the hills of the Chankly Bore;
And they drank their health, and gave them a feast
Of dumplings made of beautiful yeast;
And everyone said, 'If we only live,
We too will go to sea in a Sieve,—
To the hills of the Chankly Bore!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

Wasn't that wonderful? What I loved about *The Jumblies* as a child, and still do, was the idea of a wild adventure. Going to sea in a sieve? Why would anyone do that?! But you do it because you have the urge to do it, despite what all the sensible people say. And, in the poem, the sensible ones are won over by the spirit of adventure in the end.

I don't think I consciously thought of the Jumblies in **The Snail and the Whale**, but it's there. The snail is part of a flock who think it's ridiculous that this snail wants to go for a voyage around the world. But in the end, when the snail and the whale come back, all the other snails crawl onto the tail of the whale and set off for another adventure.

ILLUSTRATING THE STORY

Once I'd written the story and my editor had seen and approved it, she sent it to Axel. I thought he might be worried about the scale because a snail to scale on a full-sized humpback whale would hardly be visible. But he liked the story and agreed to illustrate it.

The first roughs of his I saw were already in colour – really beautiful and in a slightly different style to what he normally did. I wrote various notes on them, important but also sometimes minor things.

When it came to the journey, I felt there were too many small pictures. I really wanted that sense of the wide, wide world and I thought some more double-page illustrations would portray that beautifully. But that meant asking Axel to produce three more illustrations and the publisher making a book with 15 spreads. Luckily, my editor agreed with me so we went ahead with more spreads. I think that made it a more emotional and atmospheric book.

PUBLICATION

Not long before the book was published, I had a lovely time visiting a primary school in Wick, in the north of Scotland. It felt just like the fishing village in the story, so I dedicated the book to them.

Of course, publication isn't the end of the story – it's just the beginning. But I'll go into that in another lesson.

PERFORMANCE

I usually like acting out the stories, sometimes roping in other people to act the different parts. So I went online and bought an inflatable killer whale because I couldn't find any humpback whales. I'd pretend to the children it was a deliberate mistake and ask them to identify the type of whale. I also had some foam snails made and one of them had a bit of chalk stuffed up its bottom and I got that snail to move about on a black slate, writing 'Save the whale' with the hidden stick of chalk.

Who'd have thought that a request for a phonic reading book could take someone on such a journey?

EXERCISES

1. Read **The Snail and the Whale** or watch the animated film on BBC iPlayer (subject to availability).

2. Pick your favourite poem, or choose one from an anthology.
Is there any part of it that inspires you? It could be the rhythm,
the setting or even a feeling it gives you.

3. Look at the phonics table below.
Chose a vowel sound and see if you can write a short story idea based on words with that sound. Like 'snail, whale, trail' for 'ai'.
You can use the examples or think of some of your own words.

SHORT A	APPLE, ASK, CAP
LONG A	ACORN, ALIEN, HAY
SHORT E	EGG, EMPIRE, BET
LONG E	EMAIL, EEL, FEED
SHORT I	IGLOO, IMP, PIG
LONG I	ICE, IRON, TIE
SHORT O	OCTOPUS, OLIVE, TOCK
LONG O	OVER, ORANGE, LOW
SHORT U	UMPIRE, UNDER, CUP
LONG U	UNICORN, USE, FLUTE

Text Credits :

[The Snail and the Whale]

Photo: Magic Light Pictures

23. The Agent

DO YOU NEED AN AGENT?

As an author you don't have to have a literary agent, and in fact, I didn't have one for years. I had seven or eight books published before I ran into a problem and decided it might be a good idea to get an agent to help.

ABOUT CAROLINE

Caroline was my first and only agent. She was shortlisted for the prestigious Literary Agent of the Year Award in 2012. She's passionate about children's books and women's fiction. In children's books, Caroline covers all age ranges and loves to see great plotting, storytelling, humour, exciting worlds and contemporary life.

WHAT AN AGENT IS LOOKING FOR

If you are just sending one story, it might be more appropriate to send it to a publisher. Literary agents aren't looking to represent a story, rather they represent the author's career and manage their business affairs. Literary agents get around 1,000 submissions a month from writers and only two or three a year are taken on by an agent, so it's very competitive.

> **You don't absolutely have to have an agent. In fact, I didn't have one for years.**

It's best to submit your manuscript in spreads, as Caroline demonstrates in the lesson. And it's really important to keep your contact details together with the creative work so always include your name and email. Crucially, only include text in these spreads, as that's your priority as a picture-book writer.

Don't just send your manuscript. Accompany it with a well-written email detailing what you want to do as a writer. It's important to include information about your career and experience. Even if you don't have loads of experience in writing, it's good to spell out what your life has been so far and what your ambitions are as a writer. And it's a good idea to mention some picture books you love to show that you have an understanding of the genre.

When it comes to the story, agents look for originality and a title that stands out. They want a simple story that has a beginning, a middle and an end that resolves the beginning. Caroline says that a picture book story should really be able to be summed up in just a couple of sentences.

A nice example of a book that works well is *Snatchabook* by Helen and Thomas Docherty. It starts with a character called the Snatchabook, who steals books from the children in the village because he hasn't got any books of his own. A young character called Eliza resolves the situation, arranging for the Snatchabook to return the books and instead read a bedtime story to a different child each night. So there is a story that has a problem at the beginning which is tackled during the story and then resolved at the end – and that is a classic picture book story format.

The range of subject matter is enormous and it's good to be different to stand out to an agent. Your book could be about silliness, a celebration of beauty, a story about a fish, about making friends, losing friends, or fear of the dark – anything.

Read your story to some real children before you send your manuscript to an agent. Their feedback is honest and very helpful. Doing research is essential as a picture book writer, so be sure to read a lot of contemporary children's books too. If you know what's out there, you'll know what will stand out and attract an agent.

Finally, it's crucial to show your love of language. Agents want to see a writer who can work with words to make something that's really fun and clever. Your picture book should be a celebration of language, so there's no need to limit the language you use.

> **To be a good picture book writer, you have to be in touch with your own inner child.**
> Caroline, Agent

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books:

Children's Writers and Artists Yearbook (UK)

Children's Writers and Illustrator Market (US)

These include:

- Articles on what are children's publishers are looking for
- New trends in publishing
- A list of all publishers and what they're looking for

Professional organisations:

The Society of Children's Books, Writers, and Illustrators (SCWBI)

SCWBI is based in Los Angeles but works globally to produce conferences, webinars, mentoring, and professional networking. There is a subscription fee, but Caroline recommends it for professional advice and contact with other people doing the same thing as you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Agents don't want one story; they represent an author's whole career
- Send your manuscript formatted in spreads
- Include information about your experience and ambitions as a writer
- Agents are looking for books that are fresh and different
- Show off your voice – joie de vivre in the writing, fun with language
- Keep in touch with what children want to read about
- Use resources to learn more about the industry
- No mainstream agent or publisher will ever ask an author to contribute financially

The Smeds and the Smoos © 2020 Axel Scheffler

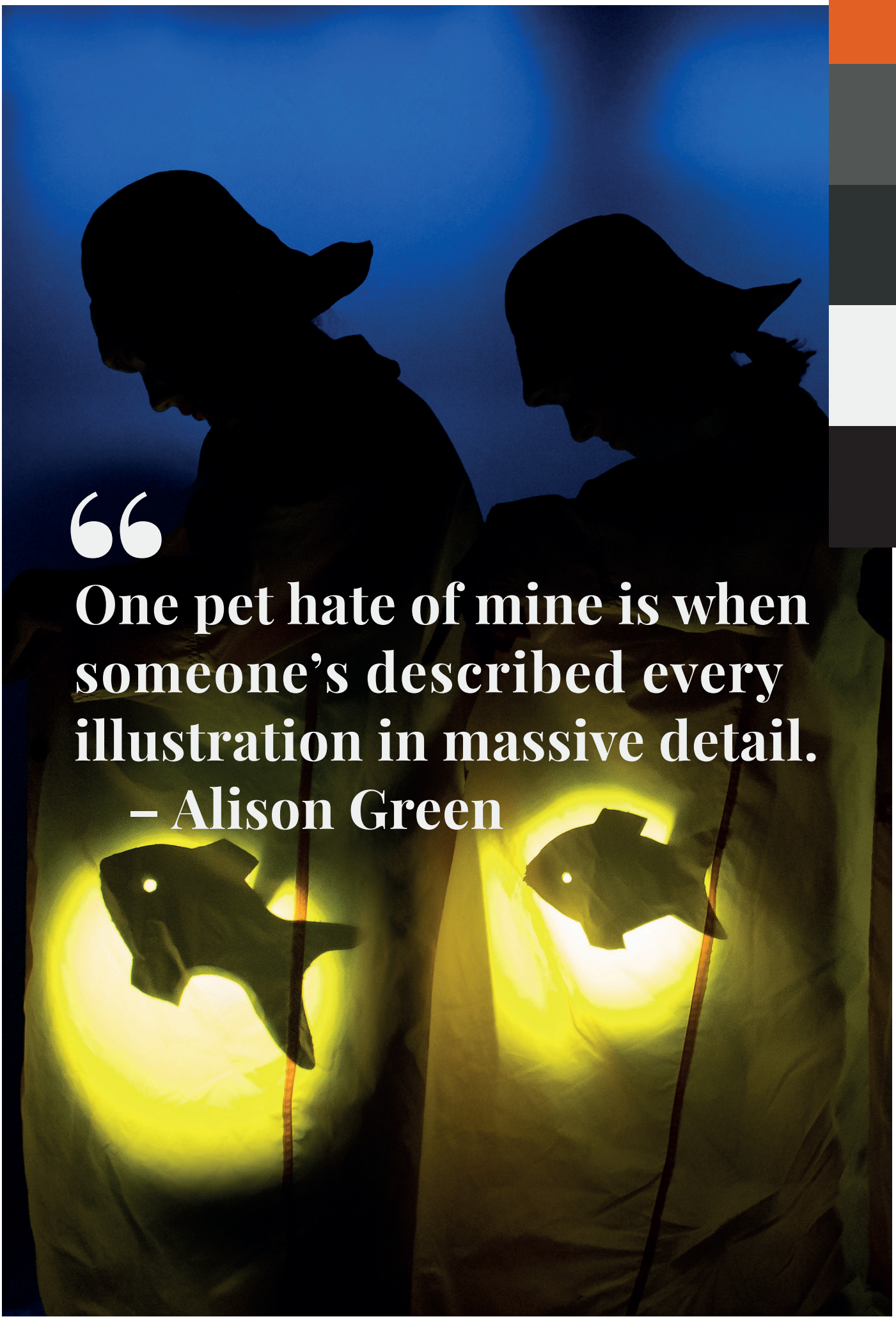
Text Credits :

[Would You Rather]

Title: The Snatchabook. Author: Helen Docherty. Illustrator: Thomas Docherty. Publisher: Scholastic

Title: Naughty Naughty Monster. Author: Kaye Umansky. Illustrator: Greg Abbott. Publisher: Templar Publishing

Title: The Ugly Five. Author: Julia Donaldson. Illustrator: Axel Scheffler. Publisher: Scholastic



> One pet hate of mine is when someone's described every illustration in massive detail.
>
> – Alison Green

Photo: Magic Light Pictures

24. The Editor
featuring Alison Green

ABOUT ALISON

Alison is a freelance editor and the publisher of Alison Green books. We first worked together 25 years ago, when she accepted my manuscript for **The Gruffalo**. She has also written a number of children's picture books herself, including *Kind* and *The Fox in the Dark*.

WHAT AN EDITOR IS LOOKING FOR

The editor is the person at the publishers who will accept or reject your manuscript, so it's important to know what they want. Just like an agent, they want something that stands out, that's original, has a distinct style and that is personal to the writer. Editors often look for a character you can really care about. Whatever the character's concern is, we want to see them resolve it in a satisfying way, for them to achieve their heart's desire.

And while the editor may help with the title, if you've already come up with a striking one, that can be a great way to grab their attention. A title is an incredibly important aspect of a book and is the biggest selling tool the publisher has. It's important to tell people as much as you can simply with the image and the title.

Whatever an editor may want, it's important for you to write in a style you feel comfortable with. A lot of people think they have to write in rhyme, because they see certain rhyming books that are popular. But if that's not your thing, write really great prose. Prose can be rhythmic and patterned and really exciting. Better to write good prose rather than bad rhyme.

> **I've been working with you for 25 years and I didn't know half of this.**
> Julia to Alison

If you're not an illustrator, leave pictures out of it entirely. No recommendations or picture notes. Let your text talk for itself.

The rule of three creates a lovely rhythm within the book. You'll find it in films, comedy and all sorts of media. Say someone was walking down the street and they slip on a banana skin. That's possibly funny, depending on your sense of humour. But say they walk down the street, and they almost slip on the banana skin. They walk down the street a second time, and they almost slip on it again. Then the third time they do and it's very satisfying. It's that one, two, three.

If your picture book isn't a story, make sure it's witty or quirky in some other way to keep things entertaining for the child.

If you're primarily an illustrator who also wants to write, just send samples of your work or, if you do have an idea for a book then send the text plus a few sketches rather than your proposed illustrations for the whole book. Editors are mainly interested in things like good characterisations and wonderful backgrounds.

THE PROCESS

Once an editor gets a story they like, they will work on the text with the author. They might change the pacing, maybe ramp up the drama, or work on the conclusion. An editor might, even before acquiring the book, give the author feedback to make it more likely to be accepted.

And remember, the publisher will find the illustrator. They'll look into what's going to sell best and where – in the supermarket or independent bookshops. They really know their stuff.

Editors work very closely with the designer at every stage; they might come up with six or seven different suggestions for the visuals of the book. The two of them then work incredibly closely with the illustrator to develop things like characterisation and pacing.

Timeframes vary hugely. But generally there will be at least a year or eighteen months between submission and publication. There are things that can delay the process, like finding the right illustrator. Then you have to consider how long it takes the illustrator to illustrate, which again varies, but is usually around three to six months.

Editors then work with the designer to do the layouts, which is a less time-consuming job – let's say a month or so. And then it has to go off to be proofed. It has to go off to the printer. There's a whole load of other stuff that happens which is quite technical and as an author you don't need to worry about.

After publication, a writer is expected to promote their book through social media as well as traditional means. In the digital age anything you can do will help promote your book. Twitter or Instagram are particularly effective for creating a buzz around a publication.

Look up your favourite authors and illustrators on Twitter and Instagram. See how they promote their books. They might engage with other writers or record themselves doing a reading. As a writer it's really important to keep in touch with the publicity person at your publisher, who will help you with this side of things.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Your editor works with you from manuscript to publication and beyond
- Editors look for a relatable characters and excellent writing
- The title is the biggest selling tool the publisher has
- Editors and designer collaborate at every stage on a picture book
- Social media is an essential part of publicising your work
- An editor might pay more notice to something sent through an agent

Text Credits :

[Stick Man]

[Mister Magnolia]

Title: How to Hide a Lion. Author: Helen Stephens. Illustrator: Helen Stephens. Publisher: Scholastic

Title: A Little Bit Brave. Author: Nicola Kinnear. Illustrator: Nicola Kinnear.
Publisher: Scholastic UK, an imprint of Scholastic

[Monkey Puzzle]

Title: The Screen Thief. Author: Helen Docherty. Illustrator: Thomas Docherty.
Publisher: Alison Green Books, an imprint of Scholastic

[Tiddler]

25. Performance and Promotion

PERFORMANCE

Once your book's been published, you'll be expected to help to publicise it. Here are my thoughts on performance and publicity, about the things that you may need to do, or want to do, once your book's out.

SCHOOL VISITS

You may be approached by, or you may like to approach a local school or library to publicise your book. I feel quite strongly that authors should be paid for these visits. And I always insist on being paid so that institutions can't turn around to a new author and say, 'Well, Julia Donaldson didn't need paying!' Many authors starting out rely on these visits while they don't make so much from royalties.

> They love it when you dress the teacher up.

ENGAGING CHILDREN

Your primary audience will likely be young children. So it's a good idea to think about how you're going to present your story – reading aloud isn't enough. If you're an illustrator, or an author illustrator, you can rely on your artistic abilities as children love seeing people drawing on the spot.

I've had to rely on my other abilities, so I look for a chorus in the text that the children can join in with. You might think about bringing simple props and costumes for yourself or the children. Pupils particularly enjoy seeing their teachers dressed up.

Even if you can only strum a few chords, musical talent goes a long way. I used to bring my guitar along and children liked that.

I think variety is really good. If you can mix some acting, a bit of storytelling, some music, and then questions, it can be very successful.

Q&A

Inviting children to ask questions is good because the teachers then feel you are being properly 'educational'! I use a little device called the question chair. I put the question chair next to me and ask a child to come, one at a time, and ask their question in a big, loud voice, so that everyone can hear it. I find that if a child's there, almost like on stage, all the children are much more interested, and the child who's asked the question might even bother to listen to the answer.

I realised very early on that children really love watching other children acting. Sometimes, when you do a library visit, there will be two classes present from two different schools. If the library visit was arranged far enough in advance, I would ask each class to prepare a party piece, perhaps reciting a poem or acting out a picture book, to perform for the other class before I started doing my stuff. And I've found that because the children have put that effort in themselves, they are more interested and engaged.

BOOK FESTIVALS

Presenting your story at a book festival is a little bit different from a school or a library. It's less spontaneous and it's less intimate. However, it can give scope for being more dramatic. You might like to extend your range of props or think about using video or slides. If you're going to do more of a dramatic, staged presentation, then think about who you're going to involve. Most publicists, I've found, are frustrated actors and love getting on stage. A lot of illustrators like it too. And if you're doing a book festival with your illustrator, then, of course, they can do a live drawing show.

If you don't feel that you can just act out a story, you could think of doing it as some kind of puppet show. Or you can act out a short extract from it. I often choose people from the audience to come on stage and act out some of the characters. It's risky, as that can turn out a disaster but your audience tends to warm to you if there are some funny things that go wrong.

BOOK SIGNINGS

A book signing is a great way to meet your readers, but you're unlikely to be packed off on a book-signing tour early in your career, as they are a big expense for the publisher. So if you have a local bookshop, consider approaching them to arrange a signing. My local bookshop will arrange activities for children while I'm busy doing the signing.

See if you can develop a special relationship with your local bookseller if you're lucky enough to have one. With my own I go in there every so often and sign all their stock, so that they can advertise that if someone buys the book online from them, they'll get a signed copy, and that's a nice way of helping them compete with the online giants.

Shuffle and Squelch © 2004, 2015 Julia Donaldson and Nick Sharratt – Macmillan Children's Books

ONLINE STORYTELLING

Online storytelling has become more prominent in response to the coronavirus lockdowns. You're not usually allowed to have all the words of a book online, but those rules were relaxed so I did a whole series of broadcasts called *Julia Donaldson and Friends.* You can find these on juliadonaldson.co.uk/storytelling.

INTERVIEWS

Children's writers rarely get interviewed properly about their latest book. In my case I am always asked about **The Gruffalo**, regardless of what my new book is. And I often get asked why it's important to read to children. The best thing to do is to try and briefly answer their question and then cleverly bring it round to introduce your own book or your own writing. You do have to be careful what you say in interviews, so think about your audience.

FAN MAIL

I get a lot of letters from individual children and schools who are doing projects. It can be difficult to write a long letter answering every single question.

So I've created a sheet with frequently asked questions so I can write a quick reply, for example, 'Dear Dolphin Class, thanks for getting in touch and I love the picture of you all dancing around the maypole'. And then I include the Q&A sheet. Mine is in rhyme to make it more entertaining.

Children like to ask questions nothing to do with your books – what's your favourite colour? Is a popular one – so include some fun facts like that. I've also got postcards and maybe your publisher would produce some of those to send out as well.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- You'll be expected to help publicise your books
- School and library visits are a great way to engage young readers
- Be inventive in the way you present to children – use your creative talents
- Book festivals are bigger so you can be dramatic with your work
- Signings are a great way to support your local bookshop
- Consider a Q&A sheet to easily reply to fan mail

EXERCISE

See if there are any book signings or festivals near you.
You may get ideas from other people.

> “The involvement of the author and the illustrator is really important.
> – Michael Rose

Photo: Magic Light Pictures

26. Adaptation for Stage and Screen
featuring Michael Rose

ABOUT MICHAEL

Michael Rose is joint Managing Director of Magic Light Pictures, an award-winning production company. Their half hour animations include **The Gruffalo**, **The Gruffalo's Child**, **Room on the Broom**, **Stick Man**, **The Highway Rat** and *Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes*. They have received four Oscar nominations, won two Baftas, a European Film Award, an International Emmy, and more.

THEATRE

A theatre company might be interested in dramatising your book, even if it's really new. **The Gruffalo** was produced as a play before it became a well-known book. It's great for the author and publisher because you're getting all that free publicity.

My advice would be to not to get too involved. It's important to be able to hand it over. However, do acquaint yourself with the theatre company by going to one of their productions or watching a video of something they've done.

FILM

Picture books often get remade by filmmakers looking to create an event for the whole family. They often premiere at Christmas, so it has to be something special. The kinds of stories picked up are ones that have rich, varied content, and great characters that can develop dramatically over a half hour or hour-long film.

Once a production company acquires a book, the next step is to write a script. Generally, this is done by professional screenwriters or, if it's an animation, the director might write the script. The process differs with different production companies.

> **It's fantastic on Christmas Day to be sitting there with the family, watching something that's been adapted from my book.**

Producers will consult with the author and illustrator for guidance on how to realise the book in the best possible way. As the author, you know the world you've created inside out, and producers want as much of that knowledge as possible.

The process of adaptation has many challenges. There are specific ways in which characters relate in a book and on screen. For example, at the beginning of **The Highway Rat**, the production team struggled to make the hero rat, or anti-hero rat, really likeable. On the page you can get away with the rat behaving badly, because the playful way it's illustrated takes you into a very warm, inviting world. On screen, if you just show the rat behaving badly, the audience starts to dislike him.

As an author, you will already have made some compromises to your original vision of your story when you handed it over to an illustrator. So when it comes to film adaptation it can be more difficult for the illustrator than for you to hand over to film producers and animators.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Theatre companies like to adapt picture books
- A play is free publicity for your book
- Producers consult the author and the illustrator for creative guidance
- Only work with production companies who are going to respect your book

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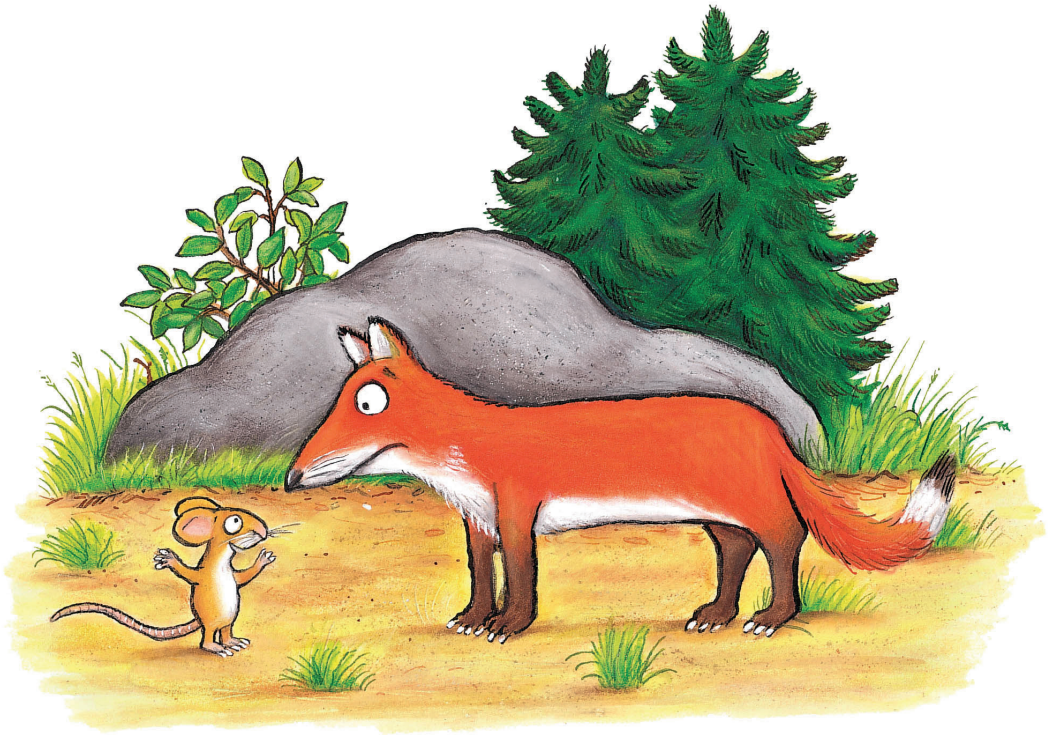
EXERCISE

Grab your copy of **The Gruffalo** and compare it with the film version.
Of course, you can do this with any picture book that's been adapted for screen.
Other examples include, *Where the Wild Things Are, Shrek, The Snowman* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas.*



The Gruffalo © 1999 Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffer – Macmillan Children's Books

27. Conclusion

YOU'RE READY TO WRITE A BOOK AND GET PUBLISHED

So there you are. This course is a groundwork of rules for writing a children's picture book and getting it published.

But now you've learned the rules, you're probably going to have to break some of them – so don't be frightened to be outrageously original.

It's really important to get in touch with your creative self.

> **I'm a big rule breaker myself and it's worked out okay.**

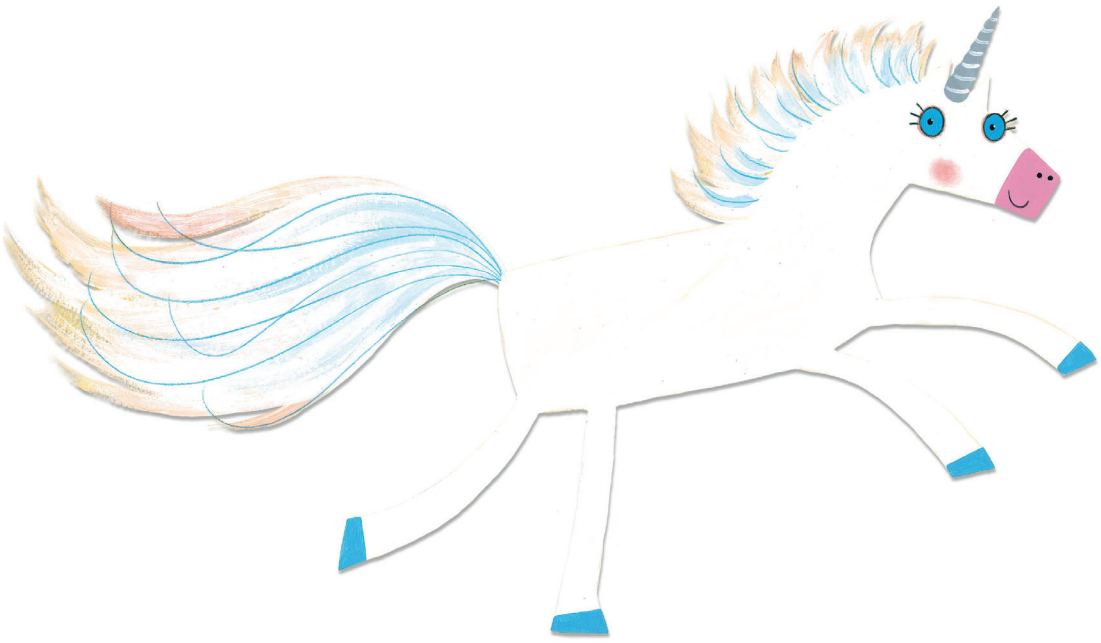
WHAT NEXT?

Read more picture books. Become a subject expert and keep up with the latest releases.

Write, edit and edit some more.

Arm yourself with the *Children's Writers and Artists Yearbook*.

Sign up to The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).



Sugarlump and the Unicorn © 2013 Julia Donaldson and Lydia Monks – Macmillan Children's Books


“
It’s got to be original.
It’s got to come from you.

Further Reading

JULIA'S BOOKS

Animalphabet – illustrated by Sharon King-Chai

Cat's Cookbook – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Charlie Cook's Favourite Book – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

The Cook and the King – illustrated by David Roberts

Counting Creatures – illustrated by Sharon King-Chai

Freddie and the Fairy – illustrated by Karen George

The Girl, the Bear and the Magic Shoes – illustrated by Lydia Monks

The Gruffalo – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

The Gruffalo's Child – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

The Highway Rat – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

It's a Little Baby – illustrated by Rebecca Cobb

The Magic Paintbrush – illustrated by Joel Stewart

Monkey Puzzle – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

One Ted Falls Out of Bed – illustrated by Anna Currey

The Paper Dolls – illustrated by Rebecca Cobb

Room on the Broom – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Sharing a Shell – illustrated by Lydia Monks

The Singing Mermaid – illustrated by Lydia Monks

The Smartest Giant in Town – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

The Smeds and the Smoos – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

The Snail and the Whale – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Stick Man – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

A Squash and a Squeeze – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Superworm – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Tabby McTat – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

The Teeny Weeny Genie – illustrated by Anna Currey

The Troll – illustrated by David Roberts

What the Ladybird Heard – illustrated by Lydia Monks

What the Ladybird Heard Next – illustrated by Lydia Monks

The Woolly Bear Caterpillar – illustrated Yuval Zommer

Zog – illustrated by Axel Scheffler

OTHER PICTURE BOOKS

Ada Twist, Scientist – Andrea Beaty and David Roberts
Amazing Grace – Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch
The Borrowers – Mary Norton
Burglar Bill – Janet and Allan Ahlberg
Can Bears Ski? – Raymond Antrobus and Polly Dunbar
Captain Underpants – Dav Pilkey
The Cat in the Hat – Dr. Seuss
Corduroy – Don Freeman
The Crocodile Who Didn't Like Water – Gemma Merino
Curious George Classic Collection – H.A. Rey
Dazzling Diggers – Tony Mitton and Ant Parker
Dogger – Shirley Hughes
Father Christmas – Raymond Briggs
Fluff and Billy – Nicola Killen
The Fox in the Dark – Alison Green and Deborah Allwright
The Great Blueness and Other Predicaments – Arnold Lobel
Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy – Lynley Dodd
The Hobbit – J.R.R. Tolkien
How the Grinch Stole Christmas – Dr. Seuss
How to be a Lion – Ed Vere
I'm the Best – Lucy Cousins
The Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense – Lewis Carroll
The Jumblies – Edward Lear
Kind – Alison Green and Axel Scheffler
Lost and Found – Oliver Jeffers
Luna Loves Library Day – Joseph Coelho and Fiona Lumbers
The Misadventures of Frederick – Ben Manley and Emma Chichester Clark
Mister Magnolia – Quentin Blake
Mixed – Arree Chung
Mr Gumpy's Outing – John Burningham
Oh No, George! – Chris Haughton
Pepito – Sheila Hawkins
The Same But Different Too – Karl Newson and Kate Hindley
Shrek! – William Steig
Snatchabook – Helen and Thomas Docherty
The Snowman – Raymond Briggs
So Much – Trish Cooke and Helen Oxenbury
The Star in the Jar – Sam Hay and Sarah Massini
The Story of Babar – Jean de Brunhoff
Supertato – Sue Hendra and Paul Linnet
Swimmy – Leo Lionni
The Very Hungry Caterpillar – Eric Carle
Where the Wild Things Are – Maurice Sendak
Whose Mouse Are You? – Robert Kraus and José Aruego
You Can't Take an Elephant on the Bus – Patricia Cleveland-Peck and David Tazzyman

Let The Greatest Be Your Teacher

BBC Maestro is a platform for online courses taught by the most experienced creators in the world.

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