

PICTURE BOOKS: Who Are They For?

By Shaun Tan

One of the questions I am most frequently asked as a maker of picture books is this: 'Who do you write and illustrate for?' It's a little difficult to answer, as it's not something I think about much when I'm working alone in a small studio, quite removed from any audience at all. In fact, few things could be more distracting in trying to express an idea well enough to myself than having to consider how readers might react!

In any case, I suspect that much art in any medium is produced without a primary concern for how it will be received, or by whom. It often doesn't set out to appeal to a predefined audience but rather build one for itself. The artists' responsibility lies first and foremost with the work itself, trusting that it will invite the attention of others by the force of its conviction. So it's really quite unusual to ask "who do you do it for?" Yet it is a question inevitably put to my work in picture books such as *The Rabbits*, *The Lost Thing* and *The Red Tree*, which deal with subjects such as colonisation, bureaucracy, whimsy, depression and loneliness, typically in a strange or unusual manner.

The reason of course is quite obvious. The idea of a picture book, as a literary art form, carries a number of tacit assumptions: picture books are quite large, colourful, easy to read and very simple in their storyline and structure, not very long and (most significantly) produced exclusively for a certain audience, namely children, especially of the younger variety. Picture books are generally put on the shelves of bookstores, libraries, lounge rooms and bedrooms for young children, where they apparently belong. Picture books are synonymous with Children's Literature. But is this a necessary condition of the art form itself? Or is it just a cultural convention, more to do with existing expectations, marketing prejudices and literary discourse?

The simplicity of a picture book in terms of narrative structure, visual appeal and often fable-like brevity might seem to suggest that it is indeed ideally suited to a juvenile readership. It's about showing and telling, a window for learning to 'read' in a broad sense, exploring relationships between words, pictures and the world we experience every day. But is this an activity that ends with childhood, when at some

point we are sufficiently qualified to graduate from one medium to another?

Simplicity certainly does not exclude sophistication or complexity; we inherently know that the truth is otherwise. “Art,” as Einstein reminds us, “is the expression of the most profound thoughts in the simplest way.”

And it’s clear that older readers, including you and me, remain interested in the imaginative play of drawings and paintings, telling stories, and learning how to look at things in new ways. There is no reason why a 32-page illustrated story can’t have equal appeal for teenagers or adults as they do for children. After all, other visual media such as film, television, painting or sculpture do not suffer from narrow preconceptions of audience. Why should picture books? It is interesting that observe that when I paint pictures for gallery exhibitions, I am never asked who I am painting for.

Rather than talk about the differences between older and younger readers, however, I would prefer to consider what they might actually have in common. In particular, we are all interested in playing. We like to look at things from unusual angles, attempt to seek some child-like revelation in the ordinary, and bring our imagination to the task of questioning everyday experience. Why are things the way they are? How might they be different? As an artist, these ‘childish’ activities are the things that preoccupy me when I draw pictures and make up stories, and they don’t necessitate a consideration for any particular audience. What matters are ideas, feelings and the pictures and words that build them. How can they be playful and subvert our usual expectations? What are the ways that something can be represented to most effectively invite us to think and ask questions about the world we live in?

This is perhaps the key question for me as an artist as well as a (mostly) functional person, and the one I ask myself often; not quite aware of a fixed answer. Writing and painting is very much about trying different things based on hunches and intuition, often in a silly and playful way, and then looking at them critically to see if they make any kind of sense when cast against the backdrop of lived experience. Do imaginary objects stand up as meaningful metaphors? Do they ‘make sense’ on their own, without being pushed. Being an artist is not about manipulating objects or an audience so much as constantly assessing a series of often accidental and mysterious ideas.

My picture book *The Lost Thing*, published in 2000, began as a small unimportant doodle in a sketchbook, and for me many stories begin this way, quite unexpectedly

and without a serious attempt. (Serious attempts of 'I'm going to write a good story' all too often end up as miserable failures! Otherwise there would be a lot more of them.) The doodle was of a man apparently talking to a crab on a beach, which came about from looking at a photo of a little blue pebble crab on a nature magazine cover and simply imagining it was enormous, rather than tiny (so the guy was just there to show scale). I do hundreds of little sketches every year, most which I don't have much response towards, but this one raised many questions. Where did this creature come from, and more importantly, why is the guy talking to it rather than running away... what would I do if I was that guy?

A year and many drafts, notes, drawings, paintings and designs later, *The Lost Thing* ended up being a very different story to the one I expected, and significantly works on a number of levels by appealing to the reader's critical imagination, by asking many more open questions, regardless of whether that imagination belongs to a child or adult. It is both simple and complex - depending upon how the reader chooses to understand it (as with any interesting tale, including those of life in general).

Everybody would be familiar with the story; a boy discovers a lost animal one day, one that is tame and friendly, and tries to find out who owns it or where it belongs. The text alone offers little else in the way of insight; the animal in question is described only as a "lost thing", and little is said of where this story is set, or who might be telling it. Yet there is enough there that we recognise what is going on. After a number of failed attempts, the boy finally discovers a what appears to be an appropriate home for the lost thing. The story ends, although no particular conclusion is put forward.

It is within this simple narrative shell that our recognition is played with and our comprehension challenged. For a start the 'lost pet' is unlike anything we might normally expect. It is a huge tentacled monster, not quite animal or machine, with no particular function or origin. Whimsical, purposeless and estranged from everything around it, it is out of place in a much deeper sense than just being 'lost'. The environment described by the illustrations also resists any simple reading: a treeless industrial metropolis full of excessive plumbing, mysterious and dehumanising architecture, green skies and cheerless citizens. Furthermore, nobody pays any attention to the lost creature, despite its disruptive presence as a conspicuous

absurdity. What's going on? A passage between familiarity and strangeness is opened, and the reader cannot help but ask questions in the absence of any explanation.

The first person narrative is deliberately deadpan; inconclusive to the point of casual dismissal. "That's the story," the boy tells us at the end. "Not especially profound, I know, but I never said that it was. And don't ask me what the moral is." Even the blurb on the back of the book says nothing about it; there is no insistence that anything be 'correctly interpreted'.

Any real meaning is left to the reader to find for themselves, rather than overtly stated or implied, with an encouragement towards a close visual reading against quite minimalist text. Why are the colours limited to industrial greys and browns? Why are there pieces of physics, algebra and calculus text-books framing every scene, and text written by hand on scraps of lined paper? Why do all the houses look the same, why is everything draped in shadow, what are those images of clouds about? What is that strange place glimpsed through a doorway at the end of an anonymous alley? What is the lost thing?

It's not as if the book is a puzzle punctuated by clues, that needs to be solved. Unlike a riddle, there is no clear answer to these questions, which remain open. I myself continue to find new meanings in the words and pictures as I did when producing the story over the course of a year. It could be read as a critique of economic rationalism, for instance, or the transition from childhood to adulthood; about the value of whimsy, our obsession with categories and bureaucracy, about alienation, claustrophobia, altruism, disability, entropy and the possibility of joy in places where this has been extinguished.

In asking questions of the book, the reader is inevitably asking questions about their own experience in seeking individual closure. What aspects of it are familiar, and why? What does it remind you of, or make you think about? This is a picture book that works through such resonance rather than recognition, or any didactic imperative; ideas and feelings are evoked rather than explained.

For the moment, one possible reading of *The Lost Thing* that I'd like to suggest has to do with the theme of reading itself. It's actually a very self-reflexive book in that it is about 'visual literacy', and the importance of having a critical imagination, and of

playing. There are two oppositional ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing the world that are presented by the story.

The first type of visual literacy is one restricted to the recognition of familiar things. This is a literacy based on fixed definitions, control, order and efficiency, the kind of 'reading' that takes place when we observe street signs, look at maps or watch the nightly news. This action is something we do all the time, a passive decoding that allows us to manage our day to day lives, particularly as responsible adults, to recognise relationships between things and events as efficiently as possible. However, this kind of 'closed reading' can go too far to the extent that it makes alternatives invisible, and anything unfamiliar is dismissed as foreign, useless and unwelcome. Thus we have the "Federal Department of Odds and Ends", a concrete building without windows into which anything strange, miscellaneous or otherwise challenging - outside the familiar prescriptions of recognition - is conveniently "swept under the carpet" once the correct forms have been filled in. Meaning is a function of bureaucracy, and literacy is there to measure prescribed value; does this ring any bells in our own social and political universe?

The other kind of visual literacy, as represented by the disruptive presence of the lost thing within this closed system, is one that works through playful questioning, enigma and absurdity. The lost thing resists classification and passive recognition, to the extent that it moves through the city unnoticed, unable to be 'read' by those with "more important things to do". The counterpoint to the morgue-like Department of Odds and Ends is a bizarre landscape of happy freaks, fleetingly glimpsed through a back-alley doorway. This can be read as the world of imagination and open-ended meaning: playful, chaotic, purposeless, and with much greater promise of aesthetic and intellectual freedom. Nothing actually belongs here - or more to the point, the question of belonging is kept open, like a back-alley exit.

The lost creature is provocative rather than explanatory; you can't help but ask questions and consider what kind of metaphor it is. For me, as a creator of picture books, it tends to represent that window of imagination: strange play, disruption and child-like wonderment that is always available, but only if you're willing to look up and notice it.

Returning to that question, “Who do you write and illustrate for?” Perhaps the best answer I can give is this: anyone who reads and looks. That is, anyone who is curious, who enjoys strangeness, mystery and oddity, who likes asking questions and using their imagination, and is prepared to devote time and attention accordingly. “Books are not a way of letting someone else think in our place,” writes Umberto Eco, “on the contrary, they are machines that provoke further thought.” The failure of the narrator in *The Lost Thing* to realise any meaning in his own story, seeing it as pointless, leaves such responsibility in the reader’s hands. For me, a successful picture book is one in which everything is presented to the reader as a speculative proposition, wrapped in invisible quotation marks, as if to say “what do you make of this?”

At the end of the day, any work of art finds its own audience, inviting them to make what they will of this or that idea. This is probably the main reason that *The Lost Thing* has been successful with all kinds of readers, including those who are normally quite reluctant to read picture books. “There are many lessons to be learned from this book, but there is no requirement to learn them,” writes one reviewer. “The reader can get as much or as little as they want.” Another critic comments that “despite the off-handedness, some readers will inevitably seek meaning and indeed the style of the book invites such inquiry.”

My most recently published book is *The Red Tree* (2001). It can to some extent, like *The Lost Thing*, be read as a statement about my approach to illustration itself, and again plays with the relationship between image, text and meaning. As another challenge to the usual picture book conventions, it has no story, almost no text, is quite dark in content, no characters as such, and no immediately clear continuity. There is only a nameless, unhappy girl who wanders through a series of disconnected landscapes.

This originated as an idea for a book of illustrations of different emotional states - joy, fear, confusion and so on - much as a child might paint pictures of rainbows or monsters depending upon their mood, or the way we use colourful word-pictures in everyday language such as ‘snowed under’, ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’, ‘over the moon’, or ‘up the creek’, only taken to a different level to escape the banality of cliché. After playing with this a bit, I found that the darker emotions were more

interesting, both visually and in terms of a coherent theme; so the book ended up being about misery and despair.

I'm sometimes asked why my illustrations often deal with dark subjects - death, disaster, depression, and the like, with plenty of monsters, ominous machines, brooding skies and so on. I do other things as well, of course, but I am attracted to a certain kind of disquiet; not violent or confronting, but just 'not quite right'. Perhaps this is because such things are more thought-provoking than something light or harmonious, in the same way that you can't have drama without conflict of some sort. The Red Tree may have been a celebratory book about positive emotions, but my feeling is that such emotions pretty much take care of themselves; it's the darker, less resolved stuff that seems to demand contemplation, a much more curious problem, as crooked as a question mark.

Many of the ideas for Red Tree paintings were, like the starting point for The Lost Thing, drawn from sketchbooks filled with occasional doodles, notes, interesting cuttings and photos. The large fish floating down a street was 'inspired' by a photo of a groper in a diving magazine, and the section of street by an abandoned building in Fremantle, Perth. The 'deaf machine' on one page is a combination of WW2 fighter planes and Aztec carvings, the tree itself was a tiny doodle of a tree with 'the red tree' scribbled underneath, that somehow seemed significant in a sea of other small drawings. The monster of 'Terrible Fates' emerged from a sketch of a jack-in-a-box dragon, a board game and walking up to the shops from my house and noticing the rooftops and chimneys of my local area.

From these various disparate and essentially unconnected ideas, I developed several sketches, some of which went on to be developed into oil paintings. Along the way I would be trying different combinations of elements and simply asking 'does this suggest a meaning?' and then focusing on those parts which 'made sense' or generated a particularly strong feeling (many sketches don't at first). I was writing the text simultaneously with this in mind, but only finalised the words and their sequence upon completion of the illustrations, which essentially carry the weight of 'meaning'. The text itself is consciously minimal and prosaic so as not to get in the way of the

mysterious invitation offered by each painting to the reader, by not saying too much and certainly not referring to its content in any literal, descriptive way.

What I like about this book in retrospect is that it is not necessarily sequential, and exploits the fact that picture books (unlike film and animation for instance) have no specific duration - you can look at things for as long as you want, and at any point without the pressure of linear narrative. As far as the pictures go, they are as open to personal interpretation as I could get them, largely through a healthy dose of surrealism - the waiting monster in the painting “terrible fates are inevitable” could represent anything from death to having to go to school, hypochondria, drug addiction, a credit card bill or the end of the world. Interestingly, readers appear to have no problem with the weirdness of the paintings, and in fact seem to find that this encourages accessibility, perhaps because it’s obvious from the outset that it doesn’t ‘mean’ anything in particular.

For all it’s contemplation of misery, grief, boredom, fear, loneliness and anxiety, the ‘story’ does end on a positive note (rest assured), which is equally open to interpretation; an unnamed red tree appeared suddenly, without explanation, in the middle of a small bedroom. At every step, my concern is to involve the reader by the use of their own imagination, in trying to make sense of the ‘unfinished’ stories that I’m presenting to them. Illustration is a quite unique form of story-telling expression that is perfect for the task, inviting the reader’s own imagination to draw upon their reactions in making sense, in their own way and at their own pace.

What makes art and literature so interesting is that it presents us with unusual things that encourage us to ask questions about what we already know. It’s about returning us, especially we older readers, to a state of unfamiliarity, offering an opportunity to rediscover some new insight through things we don’t quite recognise (as it was for all of us in the very beginning). This is perhaps what reading and visual literacy are all about - and what picture books are good for - continuing that playful inquiry we began in childhood, of using imagination to find significance and meaning in those ordinary, day-to-day experiences that might otherwise remain unnoticed. The lessons we learn from studying pictures and stories are best applied to a similar study of life in general - people, places, objects, emotions, ideas and the relationships between them all. At it’s most successful, fiction offers us devices for interpreting reality, and

imagining how many such interpretations might be possible. The novelist Milan Kundera has said that we go on being children, regardless of age, because in life we are always encountering new things that challenge us to understand them, instances where a practised imagination is actually more useful than all laboriously acquired knowledge.