What Do You See?
International Perspectives on
Children’s Book Illustration
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INTRODUCTION

PAT PINSENT

I saw a peacock with a fiery tail
I saw a blazing comet drop down hail
I saw a cloud …

(An old nursery rhyme)

We sometimes tend to assume that everyone looking at a scene will see the same thing. However, the familiar puzzle rhyme quoted above reminds us that our perceptions of the world are not always to be relied upon, even though the credibility of the sights described in the verse can be restored by the insertion of a few commas. Artists from different parts of the world will not always choose to represent their surroundings in identical ways, nor will those who look at their work, particularly young children being confronted with pictures that are unfamiliar to them, always interpret them in the same way. Jella Lepman, the founder of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) was very well aware of the function of literature in increasing understanding between nations and particularly the young, as indicated by the title of her book, *Die Kinderbuchbrücke* [A bridge of children’s books].

The fourteenth annual conference held by the British section of IBBY in conjunction with the MA in Children’s Literature programme of the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature (NCRCL) at Roehampton University, posed the question “What do you see?” in order to focus on the diversity of possible perspectives on the illustration of children’s books. A fuller description was given in the conference programme:

This conference will explore the diversity of modern children’s book illustration and consider its potential as a space for cultural dialogue and exchange. It will also look at ways in which illustrations are themselves histories of art and style arising from cultural tradition, and the extent to which they enable us to traverse boundaries and dissolve barriers.

These hopes were amply fulfilled in the variety of papers given, most of which are included in the present volume. Although, inevitably, illustrators from Europe featured most significantly, all the continents were represented, either in the
Perhaps because there is a tendency for those who can read to concentrate on the words rather than “reading” the pictures, adults have sometimes regarded picture books for children as being very simple texts, to be interpreted in only one way. While this may be true of illustrations in alphabet books or reading schemes, in most instances the modern picture book is far more complex. There is a variety of possible ways of reading pictures, notable too when there are differences between the cultural background of the artist and the “beholder” (a term often used by theorists about visual texts in order to focus attention on the process involved in reading pictures).

Although children’s book illustrators have often been regarded highly (see Whalley and Chester 1988), it is not until fairly recently that academic literary criticism has looked in detail at the complex relationship between pictures and words, especially in the books appearing in the second half of the twentieth century. Partly as a result of technological developments, and perhaps spurred on by the innovative work of such illustrators as Maurice Sendak in the United States and Brian Wildsmith, Victor Ambrus, Charles Keeping, Jan Pieńkowski and Anthony Browne in Britain,1 a number of important critical works focusing on the specialist pictorial vocabulary of children’s picture books appeared from the mid-1980s onwards (e.g. Moebius 1990; Nodelman 1988; Doonan 1993; Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). Other important works have focused particularly at the responses of young children to picture books (e.g. Graham 1990; Evans 1998; Lewis 2001; Watson and Styles 1996). However, the question of how far culture is a factor in the “reading” of picture books, an issue which is confronted in several of the papers in the current volume, has not loomed very large until fairly recently – notable among the work of critics who have looked into this subject is Clare Bradford’s study, “Aboriginal visual narratives for children: A politics of place” (2003). It is clearly an increasingly important subject in a world of shifting populations, where children from a variety of backgrounds may be present in a single classroom.2 There is however no excuse for ignorance about illustrated texts in the non-Anglo-Saxon world (see, for instance, Watson 2001).

The sections into which the current volume is divided to some extent represent different areas of debate. It seems logical to devote main sections to the work of illustrators from Europe and from the rest of the world, the focus in both these sections being on the pictures and their relationship to the text. In section three, by contrast, attention is mainly given to the response to such books by their primary

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1 We were fortunate enough to have the last two of these major author–illustrators as speakers at the conference.

Introduction

We are addressing the young beholders. Finally, we look at some of the new talent in this area, while not forgetting the use made by other visual media of children’s literature.

It would be impossible for any book to convey the richness of the visual experience of the conference, but perhaps the illustrations may go some way towards recreating it for those who were not there.  

Bibliography


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3 Although we are unable to give a report here on Anthony Browne’s conference presentation, Walker Books have very kindly given us permission to reproduce one of his illustrations on the cover of this book. For details see the acknowledgement overleaf.
Acknowledgement

PART I:

EUROPE
INTRODUCTION TO PART I: EUROPE

PAT PINSENT

Various reasons have been adduced for the reluctance of English speakers to read books in translation, a reluctance that has extended through all areas of literature but is perhaps especially marked in the field of texts for children. While this situation appears to be slightly improving, notably because of the institution of the biennial Marsh Award for what is judged to be the best translated children’s book, we in the Anglo-Saxon countries still have a long way to go before matching the situation on the European continent, where even the smallest bookshops generally carry a wide range of children’s books translated from many languages, especially English.

While blame is often laid on the publishers for their reluctance to risk producing books by unfamiliar authors, as well as on bookshops for not stocking products that they suspect will not sell so readily as the “native” ones, there is no doubt that many commercial interests are now actively involved in fostering books from abroad and drawing them to the attention of potential customers. It is to be hoped that the common heritage of so much European literature, especially in the area of stories whose primary audience is young children, will serve as a positive factor in this respect.

The current reluctance of English speakers to engage with texts produced in other languages is a feature that has developed only in the last four hundred years or so. During the Renaissance period, which saw the flourishing of English poetry and drama with the work of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and many others, English writers were generally very familiar with the work of authors from Italy, France and Spain, and made lavish use of this knowledge in their own writing. A very broad generalisation, to which exceptions could undoubtedly be adduced, is that it was only with the rise of the novel, a genre particularly congenial to Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, that English literature really evolved a mode that owed relatively little to continental models. The same period, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which saw the flourishing of the English novel, also witnessed the development of the realist strand of prose writing for children, often highly didactic.

It is probable that hostility to translations of material from southern Europe in particular increased in Britain after the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, during the period of the rise of children’s literature. Largely for political
reasons, a fear and hatred of Roman Catholicism was inculcated in many texts intended for a young audience, such as moralistic texts by John Bunyan and Mary Sherwood, and historical novels by Sir Walter Scott and Charles Kingsley.

The phenomenon of prejudice against continental literature applies on the whole to original works rather than to fairy tales, which were so much common stock as to be in effect exempt. In the context of illustration, it is worth noting that both Aesop’s *Fables* and the fairy tales, as well as such nursery staples as alphabet books, were generally lavishly illustrated in black and white. Another illustrated instructional text, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658) by Comenius, was also well established, perhaps because the original was in Latin and the text was by a Moravian Protestant pastor.

Original prose fantasy, a genre which worldwide owes so much of its development to mid-nineteenth-century English writers such as Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley (*The Water Babies*, 1863) and George MacDonald, seems also to have been felt to be relatively safe, and Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (1883) managed to establish itself as a classic.

In a climate of opinion not looking outside itself for intellectual sustenance, and increasingly, as a result of colonisation, expressing the need to bring Protestant Christianity to benighted “pagan” lands such as India, there was relatively little desire to look to the continent to provide books for English children. In general this seems to have applied to the work of illustrators as well as that of prose authors. The situation in North America, which until the middle decades of the twentieth century was far more of a melting pot of peoples from different European countries than was Britain, was rather different; “an influx of talented Europeans … added vitality to the field” (Watson 2001, 558). In due course, however, Britain did become enriched by immigrant talent, and Victor Ambrus from Hungary and Jan Pienkowski from Poland, some of whose pictures we are fortunate enough to be able to reproduce in this section, were amongst those working in Britain.

Even though the picture book is less obviously subject to problems of translation, the feeling can still exist that we have a very strong tradition of children’s illustration in Britain and are not in need of importing books from the continent. I hope however that some of the articles in this section of the current volume can help to dispel this sentiment. In particular, as indicated by Penni Cotton and Petros Panaou, a good deal of mutual understanding of our different cultures can be disseminated by the interchange of picture books.

The European Picture Book Collection has proved to be a major factor in the process of making accessible to children of one European nation the artistic and cultural traditions of a range of others. It has grown from the creation of a collection of some of the best illustrated texts from a wide range of European countries to a series of linked projects making these texts increasingly accessible to children. Cotton describes and quotes from the range of websites that provide
children and teachers with activities linked to the books, and that also strive to interest them in languages unfamiliar to them. As Cotton notes, the picture book is one of the most accessible means of conveying cultural values; thus it has the potential to be an effective agent in the dissemination of a sense of respect for the attitudes of others.

Petros Panaou focuses on just three of the picture books in this project, showing how in very different ways they display the diversity characteristic of the collection. In particular, his chosen texts reveal that this diversity does not only apply to differences between the European nations, but also to those between country and city, island and mainland. Openness to difference between cultures, together with tolerance and acceptance of others, he sees as the message of these and the other picture books in the project, thus reinforcing the European Union motto, “United in diversity”.

Several of the papers in this section relate to the work of influential individual European illustrators. Lisa Boggis Boyce writes about the Czech artist and paper sculptor Vojtěch Kubašta, demonstrating how he brought into a wider realm some of the central European techniques now popular throughout the industry. Magdalena Sikorska’s paper about the Swedish artist Sven Nordquist not only reveals his use of approaches recalling the medieval world view, but also reminds us how British audiences may be slow to catch on to the importance of artists acknowledged in much of the rest of Europe.

That English children’s literature is still influential throughout the world is demonstrated in Stefania Tondo’s article about two Italian illustrators of Lewis Carroll’s classic. She shows how, in quite different ways, Emanuele Luzzati, from a background involving the Italian marionette tradition, and Lello Esposito, steeped in Neapolitan culture, have brought their insights to their recent editions of Alice in Wonderland.

The fairy tales collected by Charles Perrault and the brothers Grimm are an essential part of common European culture, and none, surely, is better known or more various in its versions than “Little Red Riding Hood”. Ann Lazim and Nikki Gamble discuss a version from Belgium that also has been published in French by a French publisher.

The perspectives on the European picture book provided in these articles, and made visually present in the illustrations provided, reveal just a little about how much in this country we have to learn from the rest of Europe. In spite of all we have in common, there is an amazing richness available to us whenever we look beyond our national boundaries.
Work Cited

CHAPTER ONE

JAN PIEŃKOWSKI

INTERVIEWED BY NICHOLAS TUCKER

When I was about five, during the war, the only books I had access to were the many British books my mother had enjoyed as a child. So very early on I learned to love Hugh Lofting’s strong black-and-white illustrations for his Dr Doolittle stories and also Kipling’s illustrations for The Jungle Book. But what made the biggest impression of all were some lurid and richly coloured illustrations for Charles Kingsley’s The Heroes. I particularly remember a wonderful palace with Perseus going into it, shortly to encounter the head of the Medusa.

Two years later, when I was seven, I started to become involved in getting together the Christmas decorations. These traditionally made use of cut-out figures, and my very arty nanny taught me how to do this. I think this is probably where my interest in silhouettes first started (Figure 1.1).

One year later, in 1944, we moved to Warsaw, where I remember one of the Polish soldiers involved in the uprising coming into a shelter we were using. Although exhausted, he amused the children by showing them how to use scissors to cut out animal figures that could then be made to stand up. Later on I got quite good at doing this myself. As there was very little paper, you had to try to get everything right the first time.

Another massive influence on me took place years later, when I was in Cambridge in 1954. It was there, in a small second-hand bookshop, that I first came across the work of Aubrey Beardsley. He apparently worked only at night by candlelight, using black Indian ink on white paper. I was incredibly impressed with his style, which in many ways was vaguely oriental and taught me a lot about economy of means. It was through Beardsley

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4 See some childhood memories recalled in Lisa Boggiss Boyce’s paper on the work of Vojtěch Kubáňa.
that I learned that the empty spaces in a picture could be quite as important as the filled-in ones. I then started doing posters for college acting groups, always using my new Beardsley style. The most successful of these was for a performance of *The Rake’s Progress*.

Other important influences included Eric Gill, Eric Ravillious, and Ronald Searle’s wonderful cartoons about the St Trinian’s schoolgirls, which first appeared in the magazine *Lilliput*.

My new book for this year (to be published in October 2008) is a gift edition of the Nutcracker story. The text is a new version by David Walser. The illustrations use a technique new to me of laser-cut silhouette (Figure 1.2).
Another of the illustrations has spangles and silver foil (Figure 1.3). Although reproduced in black and white here, only the silhouette cut-outs are completely white. The clock is white on orange, the other objects in the various layers are shades of turquoise – and the owl’s right eye is yellow. The text opposite this illustration and on all the pages of text is in a very clear, very dark silver with a silver foil border. Each border has silhouettes to match the text of that page.

The last illustration cannot really be called an illustration as it is in three dimensions. It illustrates ‘Their wedding carriage, pulled by silver and gold horses …’ (26).

Figure 1.3 From Nut Cracker. Clara receives the Nut Cracker from Dr Drosselmeier. Original in full colour with spangles and silver foil. 17.5 × 22.0 cm.
You may wonder at my headdress – my grey-blue turban (Figure 1.4). I have to confess that I did not wind it myself and it did take half an hour to do. It is to tell you visually about *The Thousand Nights and One Night* which was published last month (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). In it I have tried to bring stories of the East to Western readers. The silhouette art is inspired by my trip from Bukhara across the steppes to Samarkand, which is on the Silk Road between China and the West.

![Author as an Arabian knight, *The Thousand Nights and One Night*.](image1)

Figure 1.4  Author as an Arabian knight, *The Thousand Nights and One Night*.

![“Scheherazade” from *The Thousand Nights and One Night*. 19.3 × 23.6 cm.](image2)

Figure 1.5  “Scheherazade” from *The Thousand Nights and One Night*. 19.3 × 23.6 cm.
Someone asked which of my books is my favourite. It is Sizes and my favourite picture in it (and also on the cover) is of a large lady and a little boy (Figure 1.7). It is one of a series of concept books that I produced in the 1970s and 1980s. The books use bright colours and bold black outlines with only a single word on each page to introduce sizes, shapes, time, weather, animals and colours to preschool children.
Figure 1.7 Cover of Sizes. 8.3 × 8.3 cm.

Works Cited

Acknowledgements
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CHAPTER TWO

VISUALISING EUROPE THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS:
WHERE ARE WE NOW?

PENNI COTTON

When I first appreciated the power of European picture books to help children understand more about other cultures, I had no idea that this field would become so important in the world of children’s literature. Since 1996, when the European Picture Book Collection (EPBC)¹ was conceived, I have been incredibly fortunate to work with talented and dedicated illustrators, writers and educators. For more than a decade, we have tried to gather together the best of children’s visual narratives in order to achieve our goals. These have been many and varied, but the most important aim has been to communicate the similarities and differences between cultures through carefully selected visual narratives from many European countries. Alongside this, we have also tried to develop materials that would help teachers to work with picture books. These materials are part of the European School Education Training Course (ESET),² a training course that focuses on the literary, linguistic and cultural qualities portrayed in the EPBC stories. The present article briefly outlines these two projects, places them within an historical/theoretical context, and shows how they have influenced the development of two others projects in the creation of multicultural internet resources for the twenty-first century.

The EPBC (1996–2000) and ESET (2000–2004) are quite well known now, but the two projects that are offshoots of these have not yet had the opportunity to reach a wider audience. The first, Books and Reading for Intercultural Education (BARFIE) (2001–2004), was created alongside ESET to select books with a multicultural theme from various European countries. It has created a multicultural catalogue of books (Haller et al. 2004), and suggested ways in which these materials could be used interculturally. Also it has developed the BARFIE picture book collection,³ which draws on the pedagogy of the two previous projects.

¹ www.ncrcl.ac.uk/epbc
² www.ncrcl.ac.uk/eset
³ www.ncrcl.ac.uk/epbc/EN/books/httpwww.ncrcl.ac.ukepbcBARFIEbooksbook_images.asp
The second and most recent resource is the Electronic Digital Media Reporter (EDMR) (2005–2008), which focuses on European children’s literature websites. It was felt by the partners in this project that children throughout Europe were not able either to find or to use these sites to their advantage – a belief for which there was very little concrete evidence. In order to substantiate their conviction, the EDMR team devised and carried out a survey in each of the partner countries. The aim was to find out the ways in which the internet was used in schools and libraries both for multicultural education and for children’s literature. In addition, lists of the 20 best children’s literature websites from each country were compiled, and teacher-training materials using these sites were developed.

Now that European children are becoming ever more dependent on the internet, it is clear that we need to try to help them to choose the best children’s literature websites available, and provide ways to facilitate their use. The websites chosen for the EDMR have been selected by a number of educationalists and children’s literature experts. These professionals have been working for several years to help European children to understand more about each others’ cultures and practices – to value the similarities and to celebrate the differences. They have also been concerned with demystifying terminology and finding ways in which both theoretical and practical methodologies can be developed using European children’s literature, particularly picture books, for use with the internet. Through using multicultural children’s literature websites, materials and methodologies, they have devised ways in which it is possible to adapt these multicultural resources for intercultural use, thus providing practical tools for teachers, teacher educators and librarians.

**Interculturality and Diversity**

The term “interculturality” has recently been adopted by educators to provide a more diverse analysis of cultural and educational practices than is often implied by the term “multicultural”. To help explain this, Morgado (2006) suggests that whilst “multicultural” implies the coexistence and preservation of cultural differences within cultures, “interculturality” is applied across cultures in order to enhance and translate cultural identities through the varied cultural forms that coexist, compete and live together. Intercultural perspectives, therefore, attempt to extend a multicultural approach by inviting comparisons, exchanges and cooperation between groups. They also incorporate aspects of identity and disability, in addition to the values of tolerance, respect, and celebration of racial and ethnic differences highlighted within multiculturalism. Cushner (1998, 4) believes that intercultural education aims to teach students not merely to tolerate difference, but to understand and value the diversity of thought, expression, belief and practice of

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4 www.edmreporter.net
those who are different from themselves.

Pioneering theorists working in this field were encouraged, to a large extent, by funding from the European Commission in the 1990s. An important event was the Réseau d’institution de formation (RIF) symposium in 1993 that brought together like-minded people, all of whom were keen to collaborate with partners of different horizons and cultures to introduce a European dimension into education (Janssens and Loly-Smets 1993, 7). This was at a time when the visual power of picture books was beginning to be recognised, and projects such as the EPBC were able to benefit from the initiative. This project, as already mentioned, was designed to help European colleagues to share expertise across nations, to have access to each others’ cultures through reading the visual narratives of picture books from all EU member states and to create ways of developing cultural awareness/understanding (Cotton 2000a, 67). As colleagues worked together, they realised that some form of analysis of the books was necessary in order to help both teachers and children to interpret the visual forms – thus, the semiotic text analysis (STA) was born (Cotton 2000, 51).

The importance of the picture book, as a conveyor of cultural values, is becoming increasingly significant in the lives of young and not-so-young children. Graham (1990, 27) points out that “children ‘read’ illustrations in much the same way as they interpret behaviour in real life” and, as such, these visual narratives can give children small insights into the ways people from different cultures live and interact. Marriott (1991, 36) believes that children’s basic social attitudes begin to take shape in their very early years, so appropriate models of attitude and behaviour should be presented to them in their reading materials. If this happens, and carefully selected books are chosen, children will not only be able to find out about their own cultures but will have the opportunity to learn about their European neighbours too. For, as Carpenter (1996, 4) suggests, “children can be seen to share artefacts, traditions, beliefs and behaviours that effectively constitute a culture”, and because they have more in common with each other than with adults, these can be shared across nations.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that, as Pinsent (2003, 6) believes, the phenomenon of adults enjoying visual texts as much as or more than their children is international. The diversity of picture books allows for the sharing of visual imagery and the presenting to all readers of cultural settings that are credible despite their unfamiliarity. Lewis points out that well-chosen visual images can conjure up thrilling seascapes and make us feel the heat of the tropical sun, as well as the freezing roar of an oceanic storm. Pires (2001, 150), when talking about her own country, Portugal, much of which borders on the sea, is more specific. She suggests that the “wish of the author is to attract our attention through an interplay of colour and movement. Blue is often dominant, and the only other colour which may take up significant space is the dark or light brown of the earth. This can be
symbolised by grains of sand which defend themselves against the invasion of the blue sea by forming dunes.” She adds that movement often appears through curved lines of the setting and the stances of the characters. Ellis (2006) confirms the importance of images such as these. She says that she “looks for stories that take place in settings other than Western and urban and address issues such as citizenship and multicultural education in order to develop intercultural awareness.”

“Intercultural awareness is connected with the awareness of value of diversity and specificity of cultures and viewpoints” (Nalesso 1997, 106) and often children sense this. Laycock (1998, 80) suggests that for all children “there is a place for picture books which introduce aspects of a culture”, particularly in the realms of everyday life, while Bromley (1999, 137) shows us that, in her multicultural classroom, pupils often “instinctively choose linguistic strategies likely to be familiar across all cultures” in order to help friends from other countries. Further cultural perceptions and comparisons have been made by children during the trialling of the EPBC (Cotton 2000, 44). When the Portuguese book *A ovelha negra* [A sheep... black] (Cotton 2000, 100) was used in a Swedish school, the children completely accepted this book from another culture and were instantly ready to resolve any possible conflict (Olofson 2000, 43).

“The development of new technology brings society to a crossroads of information and culture” and we have “a responsibility to enable users to find their way through the complexity of this new information world and support new ways of learning based on new technology” (Stafford 2000, 138). The materials developed during the creation of the EPBC go some way towards achieving this goal, and were adapted for use on the internet once the website was created. Here all the materials can be easily accessed so that children worldwide can learn more about their international neighbours through reading picture-book visuals. The success of this project led to further funding from the European Commission in 2001 for a three-year project to develop ESET. It was created by seven teacher-trainer/children’s literature experts in order to help teachers make better use of the EPBC methodology. This online course, which is completely free, comprises 15 teaching sessions: five language, five literature and five culture. It also includes session outlines, downloadable resources and ideas for cultural reflection. It is a multicultural website that is designed to be used interculturally. Once teachers and librarians are happy using this methodology with the EPBC, they can apply it to any European picture books.

**Transferring Stories between Cultures**

Margaret Meek (2001, 90), who contributed to the EPBC, talks about “the Englishness of English children’s books” and points out some of the cultural problems that are bound to be present for readers who meet them in translation.