One role of pictures in a picture book is to enhance the meaning of a story by illustrating the words. But good picture book artists go well beyond that by inventing and developing additional story material.
In this regard, a study of picture books should begin with Randolph Caldecott, the illustrator for whom the medal was wisely named. Aside from his robust style and freedom of line, Caldecott's greatest contribution to illustration lay in his ability to enlarge the dimensions of the text and enhance its meaning. He did this in two ways: one, by inventing characters; two, by additions to the plot.

Let us take the well-known nonsense rhyme, "Hey Diddle Diddle." The words are a sequence of non sequiturs. They tell us about a cat and a fiddle, about a cow jumping over the moon, about a dog that laughs, and a dish running off with a spoon. Caldecott manages to extract meaning from these words by joining the non sequiturs together. Giving the fiddle to the cat starts a merry round of strange happenings, the last and most interesting of which is a love story. Caldecott first hints at the romance by having the dish and the spoon sit out a dance; then they elope. "The dish ran away with the spoon" may be the last words of the song, but not of the story. An additional page, with no words at all, shows the irate parents, the knife and fork, dragging their errant daughter, the spoon, away from her love, who lies shattered upon the floor.

"Sing a Song of Sixpence" is a mix of nonsense and plot, in spots almost unintelligible. Once again Caldecott invents meaning. He changes the "of" of the title to "for," making "Sing a Song for Sixpence," and begins to put the puzzle pieces together. A little rich girl, ever so kindly, gives a poor man sixpence for his song. He runs to buy a pocket full of rye, which he scatters around a trap to catch the blackbirds to bake in a pie. As the ragged family, sitting eagerly around the table, cuts open the pie, the birds begin to sing. (As early as 1549, an Italian cookbook speaks of a pie of live birds. The birds are placed in a ten-inch-high, very thick pastry, which is then covered with a lattice crust so the birds can breathe. The pie is then rushed to the table.) "Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king." Dainty meaning delicious? Dainty meaning worthy? Matter for etymologists.

And who are the king and queen? They are the children Caldecott wrote for. He fills their world with their fairy tale characters. The proper
decor for this queen's parlor is Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, and Little Bo-Peep. In the king's room are heroes for boys: Jack, the Giant Killer (the Victorian two-headed variety of giant) and Robinson Crusoe. There is something for the grown-ups, too. The maid has a handsome and affectionate soldier ready to console her—after the loss and return of her nose.

Other additions to the rhymes: A cat in "The Queen of Hearts" tattles on the knave of hearts who stole those tarts. What's more, this all-knowing cat points, with a paw, in the direction of the thief. The daddy "gone a hunting," has a bad day and buys the rabbit skin at a store. Later, a bunch of rabbits stare in utter amazement at the little girl, wrapped in kin skins.

That was a hundred years ago. Today's illustrators are still following in Caldecott's footsteps, inventing characters and stories, while substantially increasing the art and devices of the picture book.

In Charlie Needs a Cloak, the text is actually a "how to" book, with instructions from a narrator who pretends to be as blind as Charlie is himself. But the reader isn't. The pictures reveal two dramatic and parallel stories. One: the sheep eats Charlie's cloak, and Charlie shears the same sheep's wool to make his cloak. Two: the mouse, who is...
Picture Books As Literature

By Sarah Levine

One of the pleasures of picture books is to uncover the meaning of a story by examining the words and illustrations, as well as the additional stories that the pictures and words tell. Consider, for example, the opening page of a story that begins with the words, "Once upon a time in a far-off land, there was a young prince who..."

In this regard, the study of picture books should begin with the art. Consider the illustrations for the story of the three little pigs, a tale widely known and enjoyed by children. What happens to the pigs after they build their houses? Where do they live? What does the wolf do to their houses? The illustrations can tell us much about the nature of the story and the characters involved.

One way to approach the study of picture books is to examine the illustrations more closely. For example, in the story of the three little pigs, the illustrations may show the wolf as a cunning, sly character, or he may be depicted as a harmless, harmless predator. The illustrations can give us insight into the author's perspective on the story and the moral lessons that are intended for the reader.

In conclusion, the study of picture books should focus on the illustrations as well as the text. By examining both, we can gain a deeper understanding of the story and the author's intent.

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