

## **“Once Upon a Time He Lived Happily Ever After, But Not Any Longer”**

### **Or: The Creation of Picture Books for Children**

A lecture by  
Don Freeman

On the subject of creation it has been said, “In the beginning was the Word”. However in my limited creative experience The Picture and The Word has always come first, which I hope doesn't suggest that I intend to rewrite the Bible!

Of course there is also the matter of The Idea to consider before discussing either the Word or the Picture. To me the idea for a story is very important. Still just having an idea is hardly enough.

Many emerging writers in this field of children's literature seem to assume that coming up with a bright new idea is all there is to putting together a story - the next problem being finding - a susceptible publisher. The fact is that a picture book has to be carefully worked out with or without the help of an illustrator. What I wish to dwell on today is my experience as an author and artist of picture books in hopes that I may be able to assist some of you in your writing endeavors. I like to think I might inspire and encourage you and also if needs be, to gently discourage you.

Writing for children isn't the easiest line of work. As a matter of fact nothing is easy if you are creating something entirely original. This is not to say there isn't a good deal of enjoyment as well as great satisfaction involved.

My first editor at Viking Press, May Masee, the undisputed dean of children's book editors, once said that you should be able to hold a good story in the palm of your hand. By which she implied that a writer should be able to write a story so simple as to allow the reader to carry it in his or her mind in order to savor the meaning along with the characters and the plot.

I've tried to learn from this wise statement of May's. Not only do I tell myself this over and over again, I ask everyone I know who is in the throes of composing a story. “Is it simple enough to hold in the palm of your hand?” If not, you may be sure you are struggling with something much too complicated.

Simplicity then, is the essence of children's book stories, not simple mindedness. I believe children deserve the best we as writers can offer them and ourselves.

For those of you who aren't too familiar with the picture book format, perhaps I should mention a few technical points and restrictions before getting to the more important matter of content. A picture book is generally larger in size and shape than adult novels. Also there are considerably fewer pages, actually only thirty-two or forty-eight pages, which is a limitation set by the size of the sheet of paper on which the book is printed. Since picture books are directed towards the younger child, the text is kept to the minimum length. In other words, the pictures take up most of the space on the page leaving room for two or three lines of text; many authors have used sometimes only one line of text.

Now to the content. Here the sky is the limit. Choose your theme and fly! The wide range of subject material remains entirely up to the author. And through the years we have seen picture books small and large that transport young readers on a magic carpet across an endless landscape of the imagination through the use of simple text and pictures. We need only to look at the magical works of Beatrix Potter to know why her delightful stories have become a valuable and permanent part of millions of children's lives, and I include adults in this vast lasting audience.

Regrettably, there exist a narrow-minded school of thought that believes picture books should incorporate or use a strictly limited vocabulary in the telling of a story. However, Beatrix Potter has proven once and for all that no matter how long or elaborate a word is, if it fits the story children learn to accept the meaning, thus allowing their word world to expand. In one of my favorite lines of hers she writes in *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, "But Nutkin was excessively impertinent in his manners. He bobbed up and down like a little red cherry." And then a few lines later she adds, "He shut his eyes obstinately and went to sleep."

There are no tricks up Ms. Potter's sleeve. She always tells her story straight, though there is a twinkle in her eye. She never hedges. Take for example in her story *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, on page ten she sets the scene rather realistically by saying, "Now, my dears," said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, "you may go into the fields or down the lane but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden: your father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor."

I could give example after example showing how various authors have explored and mastered the picture book form all in their own personal imaginative style, making it very clear that there are no set, rigid rules. I confess I feel very privileged working in this field because I am permitted to express myself freely.

I realize I am most fortunate in being able to illustrate as well as write my own stories, which is not to say this is the best or only way picture books are done. If you are interested in creating a picture book story you certainly do not need to be an illustrator. Many of the best picture books have been written by authors who have not even known the illustrator. What the publisher or editors are looking for is a solid imaginative story. Yes, I have found that people in publishing are indeed eager to find that special story that is so good it can stand alone without pictures. To them the most exciting creative chore they have is to select the right illustrator once the story has been accepted.

But now, back to my ruts... !

Speaking of ideas, I would like to say that in my experience, ideas seem mainly to come from things I observed, overheard, or that actually happened to me. In many cases, I have translated these ideas into a world of my own invention, usually using animals as protagonists. They seem to keep me from being too personal or specific. Children (I count myself as one) tend to relate easily to animal characters, or so I have been told. Often I visualize a character first then I find a story that fits his or her qualifications or limitations. I have also created a few books where I have not used one single animal. Not that I wish to appear discriminatory, it was just that the story did not call for animals.

Again, let me emphasize the fact that having an idea isn't enough. It's just the start of a fascinating problem. Working out the plot and making exciting sense is to me the most rewarding part of the creative experience. I have discovered that one has to be logical even when dealing with fantasy. However, the essential ingredient or consideration has to do with the story's believability. First, you as the author must be able to believe completely in your story. I have found that I lose myself in the world I am creating and yet if perchance I use the wrong word or wrong situation I utterly destroy the believability.

Another element in writing a story that I suspect is of the utmost

importance is the use of suspense. Every page should contribute to the building up of suspense. Enticing the reader to turn the to next page is what I feel structuring a book is all about. Perhaps, I was unusually fortunate in that I spent many years of my life as an artist reporting the New York theatre for the local newspapers. I saw just about every show that came to Broadway for fifteen or twenty years and from this experience I learned a great deal, not only about life (as expressed by playwrights), but also by seeing how scenes were put together. Three acts is the usual limitation of playwrights and sometimes during the matter of two and a half hours these writers were able to take the audience through a lifetime, or even several lifetimes in one evening.

I hope I learned from my love and study of the theatre a few things about story form and just possibly I have employed my observations when it comes to creating a thirty-two-page picture book for children. Almost every form of art, literature or whatever demands certain uses of limitations, which I find all to the good. Within the bounds of these thirty-two pages, the author must have an intriguing beginning, a middle or climax, and a satisfying ending. You might say three acts.

Speaking of satisfying, I should mention that while working in the field of children's books I have found genuine fulfillment. Since I never write a story concocted for young tots, I have the satisfaction of trying to please myself first and foremost. This is the crux of the whole message I wish to leave. The writer should, according to the way I feel at least, endeavor to please him or herself. Hopefully, you as the writer, ought to be extremely tough to please!

The children's book field is a marvelous area in which to work since no one tells you what or how to write. Looking over the seasonal outcropping of books one sees evidence of author's unstinted imaginations being expressed. It is truly glorious. I relish the experience of picking up and reading the variety of ideas in children's books. I am constantly amazed and stimulated by the wide range of styles of the illustrators. There is, happily, no one way stories should be illuminated or designed and the artists have taken advantage of this fact. A word must be said about editors at this point. I find them to be open-minded and totally dedicated to encouraging artists and writers to express themselves.

Freedom isn't always easy to grapple with because to make full use of freedom of expression one has to work all the harder to examine what it is you truly wish to say. In essence, creating your own story is hard work and I urge anyone of you entering this field to realize the dedication and labor it

takes.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I told you not to be anxious about sending off a story immediately after you think you are finished. My advice would be to let it linger a little longer in your hands, or even to put it away for a week or so. You just might be surprised when you pick it up later how you could better the story. I have learned the lesson of being impatient and then receiving a negative reply after waiting for three or more months. I have found it wise to hold on to a story, read it out loud, and read it again. In other words, I recommend that you give yourself a chance to reflect on the merits of your manuscript, and to gain a new perspective. You may just decide to reject your own work, thus depriving an editor of the opportunity to do so.

I hope this does not sound too cynical. From my long association with editors and publishers I find them to be quite human and easy to deal with. Some of you might have the mistaken notion that they are ferocious folk who enjoy sending out rejection slips when actually know for a fact that they are as eager to get your story as you are from them to see it. The only trouble is that publishing firms simply cannot publish as many books as they wish due to the skyrocketing manufacturing costs of paper, printing, and binding. So they scan the submissions very carefully giving every manuscript that comes in through the transom a thorough reading. Actually some editors are frightened out of their sense lest they let a gem slip out of their hands and be taken by another publishing house. So you see – we have them there!

After having said all this, I suddenly realize I have not opened up the door to my world wide enough. For instance, I have not revealed anything about why I write these books for children... Maybe I have resisted speaking of the reason simply because I am not sure why except that it seems impossible for me to draw the line between so-called reality and fantasy. Even if I could draw the line I would not want to.

I have never sat down in front of my drawing board and wondered what story I should do next. Stories come chasing after me from out of the blue, you might say. I am patient to the point of permitting a story to take its time in forming in my mind then whichever characters takes my fancy first, I grab hold and follow where it leads me. Hardly ever do I start out with a moral, but sometimes after the book is printed and is out, I discover to my amazement that a moral has somehow sneaked in!

Being able to travel around the country from time to time when I am invited to attend book festivals and such and visiting children in their classrooms

and libraries, I have had the thrill of my life discovering that many children know my books. Once you see the looks on the faces of the boys and girls who are acquainted with your books and hear them talk of the characters as if they were close friends, nothing could persuade you to cease creating still another book. At least, that is the case with me. I should be embarrassed to admit this, but indulging in such experiences I cannot help feeling that the picture book is indeed one of the most rewarding forms an artist or writer could possibly wish for.

And so, to all of you, I say “Good luck and come along!”