**PICTURE BOOKS FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: What Becomes a Classic Book for Young Children?**

**1** title

**2** What makes some picture books special—so special that they continue to be enjoyed generation after generation, sometimes not only in their country of origin but also by readers and listeners in other countries and from other cultures around the world?

**3** The best picture books are often interesting as material objects to be held in hand. Some such books, for example, are designed in an unique trim size or shape, like this one, which is taller and skinnier than the average book . . .

**4 . . .** or this one, which takes the shape of a parallelogram.

**5** In some picture books, the letterforms come to life as characters on the page. The 20th-century German artist Kurt Schwitters was one of the first illustrators to experiment with this idea.

**6** same.

**7** In still other picture books, unexpected materials take the place of paper. Here, the 20th-century Italian artist Bruno Munari tried to imagine the perfect book for a baby. Naturally, such a book would have no words for the baby to read. Instead, Munari made it a colorful book to look at, and a soft book to touch—and perhaps to bite. It is a durable book that can withstand the bites and tugs of small children capable of exploring their world in a purely physical way.

**8** Here is a book from the 1940s that is distinctive in part because its small size. It is the story of a “little” family of furry creatures, so it is logical that the book itself would be much smaller than usual. Logical and also delightful, for here we see that the size as well as the shape of a picture book can reinforce the drama of the storytelling.

*Little Fur Family* is even more notable for the fact that it was bound in real rabbit’s fur. This was a very extravagant thing to do in the 1940s, but the author had a serious purpose in mind from a developmental perspective when she insisted on this unusual arrangement. Margaret Wise Brown knew that children of the ages of 2 to 7 engage in “animistic thinking”—which means that they conceive of everything in their world as having lifelike qualities. Brown wanted her book to seem alive to the children who held it in their hands. At least one young reader of the book must have thought this was the case became he is known to have tried to feed the book his supper.

**9** Each of the elements of a picture book that I’ve just mentioned can be handled in a unique and memorable way. But the element that matters most in making some picture books longer-lasting than others is the story’s central character, whose job is to give emotional focus to the story. It is by establishing an emotional connection with this main character that the child is able to enter into the world of the book and thereby begin to make that world his or her own.

Picture book heroes, like the books themselves, come in many sizes and shapes. Some are animals, like the young puppy in this classic Little Golden Book.

**10** Or like Babar the elephant, who starts out life as a baby elephant and eventually becomes an elephant king. Appropriately, the original edition of this French picture book from the 1930s was exceptionally large in format—a nice touch that, by the way, is inevitably lost when the book is read on an iPad.

**11** The central character or characters of a picture book can simply take the form of abstract shapes—that of a pair of circles or squares--so long as we meet them in the midst of a situation with which a young child can immediately identify.

**12** More often than not, the main character of a picture book is a child of about the same age as the likely reader or listener—a child in human form or, as we’ve already seen, a child in the form of a puppy or bunny or some other small young creature.

Let’s look, for instance, at *The Carrot Seed*, a classic American picture book from the 1940s that is still in print.

**13** A little boy whose name we never learn decides one day to plant a carrot seed.

**14,** **15** In the pages that follow, all of the people he is closest to—his parents and others—come along to warn him that planting the seed is pointless exercise. A carrot plant, they tell him, is unlikely ever to sprout and grow. Still, the boy continues to water the seed and to keep faith in his own idea.

**16** In the end, the boy has the last laugh. But note that he is not actually laughing. The artist, Crockett Johnson, felt it was essential to maintain a serious, confident look on the child’s face from start to finish. The core meaning of the book is that even young children do indeed have ideas of their own and that it is important to encourage their creativity in this regard.

**17** Or, as another example, here is William Steig’s *Brave Irene*, which tells the story of the young daughter of a seamstress who ventures out into a treacherous storm to deliver a dress that his mother has made for royalty. It is a dangerous job, and Irene has to muster all her strength and courage to see the job through. Of course, she reaches her destination, but not without having first weathered a few very scary moments that make this a surprisingly suspenseful and emotionally gripping story for 4 and 5-year-olds.

**18** William Steig was one of the masters of the picture book. He had a great talent for creating characters who do not conform to the reader’s expectations. For instance, the hero of *Doctor De Soto* is a dentist. I don’t know of any other work of literature for adults or children in which a dentist is the hero. My dentist in New York keeps a copy of Steig’s book in his waiting room. It’s true that Doctor De Soto is also a small furry animal—and in that sense a typical choice for a picture book hero. But he is presented not as an animal child—like the Poky Little Puppy or Peter Rabbit—but rather as an adult. This is because Steig understood that while children like stories about characters like themselves they are also deeply interested in knowing about what may lie ahead for them later in life.

**19** Doctor De Soto is put to the test in a very grownup situation when he is forced to decide whether or not to accept an ailing fox—a known predator—as a patient. The child reading this story can identify with Doctor De Soto’s small size and vulnerability while also admiring the maturity and skill with which he manages to successfully navigate a life-and-death challenge.

**20** Well now let’s look at four classic picture books in more detail and see some of the reasons why certain books remain of great value long after their arrival in the world. I’ll start with Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, which was published in England in 1902, was popular with the British public from the very start, and has now been published in many languages around the world.

**21** This illustration from late in the book is a good indication of something that people don’t always notice about Beatrix Potter: the fact that she was a highly skilled and subtle watercolor artist and, even more, that she had a deep knowledge of the natural world. As a young person Potter studied plants and animals as an aspiring natural scientist, and she might have become one herself had not that option been closed to her, as a woman, in Victorian England. While some people casually describe the illustrations in *Peter Rabbit* as “adorable” or “cute,” the truth is that Potter’s art is rooted in close observation of the real world.

**22** Also notable about the book is the care with which Potter introduces us to the world from the young hero Peter’s perspective. We first learn that his loving mother has created a very orderly world for him in which to grow. She takes good care of him and his sisters; in return, she expects him to follow certain basic common-sense rules.

Potter, through Peter’s mother, explains early on why Peter’s father is nowhere to be seen, and the reason is rather startling. “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.”

In other words, Peter’s father had not been quick enough one day to escape with his life. What looks like an adorable story about fluffy bunnies turns out really to be a much tougher tale about survival and the challenge of living by your wits. Children, I think, have long recognized that Beatrix Potter was being honest with them, and that she was telling them something important about life. And I think that is another of the reasons that her book has lasted.

**23** No sooner has Mrs. Rabbit told her children not to go into the garden than Peter does just that. Apparently, he cannot help himself! In this picture, Beatrix Potter lets us look directly into his eyes. We all know there have been times when we have faced similar temptations. Sometimes those impulses may have gotten us into trouble, but other times they have served as the catalysts needed to leave our comfort zone and make needed personal leaps in growth. What is so great about Beatrix Potter is that she recognized both aspects of Peter’s choice as being natural and true to human nature.

**24** Now Peter has made it into the garden and is looking very pleased with himself. He finds himself surrounded by tasty things to eat—so many carrots that he grabs one in each paw or should I say hand and has a feast.

**25** But the celebratory mood proves to be a bit premature because here comes Farmer McGregor waving a rake menacingly. Peter realizes that he had better run for his life if he does not want to end up like his poor father.

**26** We can already see how much drama Potter has packed into her book, which by the way she designed in a very small format based on the principle she formulated as “little books for little hands.” She wanted a child to feel comfortable holding the book open him or herself. And she thought the small format would help the reading or listening child to identify all the more immediately with little Peter.

Here Peter stumbles and gets caught in a gooseberry net as he tries to make his escape. We are made to feel his fear and panic as, in this scene, Peter’s world is literally turned upside down.

**27** Moments later, Peter reaches the absolute emotional low point of his adventure. Unable to find his way out of the garden, he pauses to ask directions from a mouse. Potter writes: “An old mouse was running in and out over the stone doorstep, carrying peas and beans to her family in the wood. Peter asked her the way to the gate, but she had such a large pea in her mouth that she could not answer. She only shook her head at him. Peter began to cry.”

**28** Peter finally does get back home safely of course. But because he ate so much during his spree in the vegetable garden he now has a stomachache and is put to bed with a soothing cup of tea by his knowing mother, while Peter’s sisters dine on delicious blackberries and other delicacies. Beatrix Potter, in other words, makes it clear that Peter has paid a price for his disobedience. Yet he has also had the experience of a lifetime--one that as readers we find ourselves enjoying vicariously as we perhaps also wonder how well we would have done in brave little Peter’s shoes.

**29** Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* was first published in 1963. It too has been translated into a great many languages. As you can see, it won the Caldecott Medal, America’s major prize for a children’s book illustrator, and it did so despite a certain amount of controversy as to whether or not it was good thing to give a small child a picture book featuring monster-characters at bedtime.

Before considering that question, I want to point out how unusual the image on the cover is. Where is the hero of the story, Max? Why is the one character pictured on the cover sleeping? These days, when publishing has become a lot more commercial, I think that the publisher would have rejected this cover image as not exciting enough. But Sendak wanted to begin the story by inviting children simply to wonder what was going on. And in a sense, by not putting Max in the first picture they see, Sendak is allowing children to feel that this wild and mysterious landscape is theirs.

**30** Max makes his first appearance here on the title page. And it’s here that Sendak addresses the question of “scariness” for any reader who is really paying attention. The Wild Things in this illustration are certainly big and have long, sharp horns and claws, but they are also very goofy looking. What is more, Sendak shows us that Max is the one in charge. The message is clear: nothing that is about to happen inside this book is gong to be *too* scary. The truth is that many (although not all) children like to step out into scary, unchartered territory under controlled conditions. This is also why rollercoasters are so popular. A story has the power to put a frame around frightening aspects of life, such as the fear of being abandoned that *Where the Wild Things Are* touches on thematically. In real life, such fears can grow shapeless and totally out of control in a child’s imagination. But a book like Sendak’s makes such universal fears understandable and easier to manage for a child. No wonder that *Where the Wild Things Are* has proven to be memorable for so many children around the world.

**31** Like Crockett Johnson in *The Carrot Seed*, Sendak paid close attention to the expressions on his young hero’s face. In a great many picture books, the child characters are always grinning. But in real life children are not always happy. And often they are happiest when they are being taken seriously by the adult world. Here we can see Max’s determination and his strong desire to take charge of his own situation and not feel helpless.

**32, 33, 24** The illustrations in which Max’s room is transformed into the island where the Wild Things live are among the most magical images in all of children’s literature. In these pictures, we are shown the power of a child’s imagination to recast the world as a more hospitable place where he can begin to master his emotions on his own terms.

**35** Let’s also look a little more closely at Max. Yes, he is a little boy in special fun pajamas, getting ready for bed. But consider those claws. They look very real, as does the long furry tail. Sendak clearly wants us to see Max from more than one angle—not just as a cute kid. Max has strong emotions and a side to his inner makeup that at times must feel out of his own control. He is, in a sense, part Wild Thing himself.

**36** In this regard, Sendak’s depiction calls to mind the no-holds-barred image of Puss in Boots by the 19th-century French illustrator Gustav Doré.

**37** But there is still more to Max that also shapes our impression of him. Max is a dreamer, a poet of sorts. When viewed this way, his white costume with its big white buttons suddenly calls to mind that of Pierrot, the classic lovelorn romantic clown of theater, opera, and ballet.

**38** The third book is Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, published in 1969. It is probably the best-known picture book in the world today. By telling stories about animals rather than human beings, Carle has not needed to specify the race or ethnicity of his characters, and it is partly for this reason that his stories “feel” universal from the start. His choice of collage, an art medium to which children are often introduced at an early age, makes his illustrations feel universal in another way. Carle’s early experience as a poster designer and advertising artist helped him as he has always known how to target an image, leaving out less important details and focusing on the main point about the central character as he moves through a story from page to page.

**39** Carle, like Margaret Wise Brown, is aware that young children learn a great deal from sensory experience. The holes in the pages of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and the different sized pages, invite children to explore the book as a physical environment. Carle blends the concepts of “book” and “toy” to an extent that made some critics, when his books were new, uncomfortable. But in recent times, there has been a general recognition that learning and play go hand in hand, and that books like Eric Carle’s create an ideal atmosphere in which to present children with useful knowledge such as the names of the colors, various food items, and days of the week, and the lifecycle of a caterpillar--

**40** --all subjects that are addressed in this deceptively simple picture book.

**41** The last book I want to talk about now comes from Japan: Mitsumasa Anno’s great *Anno’s Journey*, which was first published in 1977. *Anno’s Journey* has a very different kind of hero from the other books. It is this man, who we see from a great height and distance as he arrives by sea, rides on horseback across a landscape, and departs by sea at the end. We never learn his name, or very much at all about him.

**42** In fact, from our bird’s-eye perspective well above ground level, it would appear that we know a good deal more about what is happening in this man’s world than he does.

This of course is all as Anno has planned it. As readers we become travelers too, free to explore the world laid out before our eyes just as much as our powers of observation allow us to do. The paintings are beautifully rendered in watercolor. Like Beatrix Potter, Anno has a detailed knowledge of the natural world. He is equally interested in the man-made realm of buildings, roads and bridges, tools, and constructed environments, and in the rituals of daily life. Instead of telling one story, *Anno’s Journey* presents us with the raw material for an infinite number of stories. Each reader will make a different choice. The reader who returns to the book will read it differently the next time, and the next. As a result, *Anno’s Journey* is a picture book with which we never feel quite finished. I can think of no better definition of a “classic” than that.

Thank you.

--Leonard S. Marcus