Illustrators, books, and children: an illustrator’s viewpoint

In recent years, there has been a revival of the debate among literary critics and children’s book reviewers on the central issue of how to define and evaluate children’s literature. The argument has produced some splendid controversy (see Signal No’s. 14, 15 and 16; and Children’s Literature in Education 14 for example). One crucial strand in the debate has been the relevance or otherwise to the reviewer of children’s possible responses. This article is not the place for an account of the historical background, but certainly the argument has rumbled on intermittently ever since Arthur Ransome declared in 1937, “You write not for children but for yourself.”

The controversy provoked by this artist-centred approach has encompassed the genre of children’s picture books, and some illustrators have become frequent targets for criticism, especially from educationists. Brian Alderson also has concerned himself with “the irrelevance of children to the children’s book reviewer”—see his article of that title and his famous catalogue for the 1973 National Book League exhibition, Looking at Picture Books. I want to look at this debate from an illustrator’s point of view.

It is rare for an individual writer or illustrator to reply to criticism. Charles Keeping is an interesting exception. His discussion of his own work is very different from that of, for example, Trevor Stubley. The difference stems partly from the fact that Stubley illustrates other people’s texts exclusively, whereas Keeping writes his own picture books, as well as illustrating those of other writers. When an illustrator writes his or her own words, the mental approach to the task of illustrating is subtly different: one assumes the author’s stance of addressing oneself to an audience, as well as being involved in the construction of the book, trimming the plot to fit into 32 pages, and
so on. The illustrator has total control over the creation of the book, and total responsibility too.

To consider the role of the picture book illustrator in relation to children, I’d like to sidetrack for a moment, turn to educational psychology, and consider by way of analogy Arthur Applebee’s model for relationships between writer and reader. In his doctoral thesis, drawing upon the theory of spectator role in children’s developing knowledge of the conventions of stories which James Britton had outlined, Applebee suggested a three-part model consisting of: the author or speaker; the discourse or story itself; and the audience or responder. This gives us three relationships: author-discourse; author-responder and responder-discourse. Each of the three elements generates its own conventions or “systems of constructs”; hence, evaluations depend on whose perspective is adopted. This last point is significant. Traditionally, literary criticism has consisted mainly of values, ideologies, and concepts thought to pertain solely to the book itself—or discourse— as if it existed in isolation. In fact the reviewer or critic is in the position of the third relationship: responder-discourse.

I think Applebee’s model can be adapted to study the position of the illustrator. When he/she is illuminating someone else’s words, the illustrator feels wholly absorbed in the first relationship—in this case, illustrator-discourse. The task is to find images for the words, and the most appropriate medium and technique to realise these images. But if the illustrator is making the whole of a book, words and all, he or she is in an equivalent position to an author engaged in the first and second relationships simultaneously. An author may well be writing for himself, but presumably he’s not talking to himself. The end product is intended to be read by someone else eventually, and this is so for illustrators too. It means that an illustrator must be accommodating his/her graphic execution to the child viewer in some way, whether consciously or not. Why else should there be a distinctly different style of illustration in children’s books? Compare the graphic styles in comics for teenagers with those in comics for five-year-olds; the adaptations by the artists are clearly visible.

"An artist, like a writer, is, of course, always entitled to say that he does the work he has it in him to do, and what becomes of it afterwards is not his business,’ wrote John Rowe Townsend. But he went on to say that it is not possible, nevertheless, for anyone whose work appears on a children’s list to work without “a special sense of audience.” Yet many picture book illustrators hotly dispute that they do this.

It is at art school that many would-be illustrators first absorb the professional values and attitudes that will colour their subsequent working life.