

## Picturebooks: what are they?

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A picturebook, in ELT sometimes referred to as a "real picturebook" (Dunn 1998) or "storybook" (Ellis & Brewster, 2002), is not easy to define. The British Council Encompass website considers picturebooks as one of several in the category of 'Young People's Illustrated literature'.

- Picturebooks
- Graphic Novels
- Illustrated Novels
- Illustrated Classics
- Manga (some of these titles will be translations)
- Early Readers
- Reluctant Readers

But, how does a picturebook differ from other illustrated literature? The criteria for an annual American award for picturebooks, the Caldecott Award, defines a picturebook thus: "A picturebook for children as distinguished from other books with illustrations, is one that essentially provides the child with a visual experience. A picturebook has a collective unity of storyline, theme, or concept, developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised." Further, a definition by Bader gives us the very clear impression that a picturebook is an object not to be taken lightly, "A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page." (Bader, 1978: 1)

Pictures and words are partners in picturebooks: I like to think of them both as texts. A visual text and a verbal text that are both read. And what is so exciting about these two texts is that they do not always tell the same story. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Pictures and words work together in different ways to create the narrative. Metaphors for how they interanimate abound. They have been called a theatrical double act (Grey, 2006), a musical duet, or a tango. They have been compared to textiles, interweaving to create the perfect cloth (Ramos, 2008), or by both influencing, and being influenced, by one another they have been referred to as an ecosystem (Lewis, 2001). Finally, the visual and the verbal texts in picture books are thought to work together in synergy text and picture together produce a whole that is greater together than the sum of the individual parts (Sipe, 1998).

Picturebooks are diverse in form and format – they include books in prose and books in verse, fiction and non fiction, big books and little books, ABC books and counting books, board books and cloth books, pop up books, and books with moving parts. There are picturebooks with words and picture books without words. There are picturebooks for babies, children, teenagers and adults. They are so diverse that it has made the search for an overarching definition almost impossible. But most importantly, for those of us who use picturebooks in English classes, they provide our students with authentic multimodal content to motivate them to understand and use English.

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