

## Writing Picture Books

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July 22 2006

NSW Writer's Centre

### Writing for Children and Young Adults Festival

“The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind  
And another.  
His mother called him “WILD THING!”  
And Max said: “I’LL EAT YOU UP!”  
So Max was sent to bed without eating anything.  
That very night in Max’s room a forest grew  
And grew –  
And grew until the ceiling hung with vines  
And the walls became the world around him.  
And an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off  
through night and day  
And in and out of weeks  
And almost over a year  
To where the wild things are ...”  
From *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak, 1963

And so began my love affair with the art form that is the picture book ...  
For it was these wondrous words by Maurice Sendak – and others like them –  
and the opportunity as a Primary School Teacher to share picture book stories  
with countless young minds with wide open imaginations that started me on  
my own wondrous and sometime rather wild journey – not that much unlike  
Max’s – to becoming an author of my own picture book stories.

As a teacher, it didn’t take me long to discover the power of the picture book.  
Indeed the picture book became my friend; and like any good friend it rarely let  
me down. Picture books were the centre of nearly every lesson. They opened  
up worlds for my young students, encouraged a love of books and reading and  
fostered positive relationships between teacher and learner. Picture books held  
my students spellbound, eyes wide with wonder; story times being one of the  
few times of the day where I was certain to have the attention of even the

most easily distracted child. And then of course on rainy days when the classroom became our prison, there was nothing like a wild rumpus full of roaring terrible roars and gnashing terrible teeth to burn off restless energy and rid everyone of the wriggle worms and dare I say it, to soothe the savage beast.

But it wasn't until after a number of years teaching when I went back to university to do some further study that my friend the picture book actually opened the door to a whole new world for me. Firstly, a couple of semesters of studying Children's Literature helped me to appreciate the picture book as the special art form that it is. For a good picture book is far more than an illustrated story. In fact I would go as far as to say that it is not an illustrated story at all. Rather, it is a finely crafted narrative where words and pictures work together to tell the story; where one is totally dependent on the other and where the pictures carry part of the narrative, extending or elaborating on the words of the text. I often think of the picture book as an emotive piece of music; the words, of course, being the lyrics; and the pictures, the melody or harmonies, both working closely together to tell the story. At times when I am wrestling with the writing of a picture book text, I often remind myself of the song *Memory* from the musical *Cats*. Now, *Cats* is not my favourite musical by any means, but the song *Memory* never fails to have a powerful impact on me. "Memory. All alone in the moonlight ...". For me, the combination of those beautiful emotive lyrics based on a poem by TS Elliot, and its evocative soaring melody never fails to stir deep emotions. My heart swells every time. In the same way, at its very best, the text and pictures of picture books must work together to stir within the child reader deep emotions: emotions of joy, love, fear, laughter, belonging, anger, security, comfort and so forth.

Even more significantly, it was also during this course of study that I was required to write my first picture book text. And I have to tell you that when I heard that writing children's story was part of the course requirement, the mere thought struck terror in my heart. But I had no choice – if I didn't want to fail the course, that is. So I was forced to seek out a story and midway during a lesson with the kindergarten class I was teaching, I had my first flash of inspiration. An inspiration that involved a singing and dancing hippo and the song *La Cucaracha*. It was an amazing experience. It was as if someone had turned on the switch on the creative side of my brain and the "movie" of my first picture book text played before my eyes. And hence the story *La Cucaracha* was born and my life hasn't been the same since. It seems that once I turned on

that switch, I haven't been able to find the off button. Though, to keep things in perspective, it was twelve years later that my first children's book was published.

Now, on to a little about my own process when writing picture books. Firstly, I've discovered that I can't write picture books on demand. I have tried. I have even had editors ask me to write a picture book about X Y Z, and each and every time I've tried, I've failed. I can write other genres on demand: I was a contract writer for a novelty book publisher for a number of years and churned out texts to their briefs constantly. I've also written extensively to briefs for the education market. But when it comes to picture books, I just can't. And I think the reason for me, is that I need that flash of inspiration. I need something to stir me in some way and as I believe good picture books are about emotions, I need to start with an emotional core.

My picture book *Elephant Dance*, which will be released early next year, is an excellent example of this. My editor at Koala Books was urging me to write her a picture book, and I wasn't happy with anything that I was writing, so I decided to go back to *La Cucaracha* and with all my experience as a professional writer, take what I always thought was a good idea and rewrite it. But it wasn't working. Not at all. The words were wooden on the page, the story lacked depth or spark and I was not happy. Then I remembered *Cats*. What was my emotional core? Answer: Beats me. So I scrapped what I had been writing and started again: from that emotion. And once I had that emotion worked out, the rest flowed without problem.

I have taken this lesson on board, and quite honestly, I *never* attempt to write a picture book text without that emotional core well and truly established and the rhythm and voice of the story firmly in my head. And for me, this means I write fewer texts, but the texts I do write are, in my opinion, much stronger.

I'd like to finish up with my favourite quote about story. It's from *Kate DiCamillo's* beautiful book *The Tale of Despereaux*:

*"Stories are light," Gregory the jailer told Despereaux. "They save you from the darkness."*

May your stories illuminate. Thank you.