

Lessons Learned: On Educational Picture Books

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Volume 25, numéro 2, fall 2010

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25_2re02

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Dixon, N. (2010). Lessons Learned:: On Educational Picture Books. *Newfoundland Studies*, 25(2), 261–268.

Lessons Learned: On Educational Picture Books

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Lori Lane and Kathy Winsor. *Poppy and Allie Go Green*. St. John's: Tuckamore Books, 2009, ISBN 978-1-897174-22-7

Susan Chalker Browne. *Hey Freddy, It's Canada's Birthday*. St. John's: Tuckamore Books, 2009, ISBN 978-1-897174-39-5

Caroline Stellings. *The Dot Com Leprechaun*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2010, ISBN 978-1-550813-28-9

AS ANY TEACHER will corroborate, subjects covered in an elementary school classroom are never limited to those mandated by provincial curricula. Teaching is serendipitous: a geometry lesson can encourage a discussion about architecture, fossils make children aware of their own skeletons and reading William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" can lead to talk of free-range chickens and organic farming. Thus a teacher must be prepared to answer an infinite number of questions and be willing to defer to outside sources when she does not readily know the answers. As well, a good teacher will become aware of the current concerns of her students and incorporate those concerns into curricular and non-curricular lessons. At home, in the schoolyard, online or watching TV, children are constantly exposed to new ideas and concepts. To answer the questions raised by these new ideas, teachers may draw from their own knowledge first and the Internet second. Additionally, teachers often turn to picture books not only to provide answers but also to generate thorough discussions. Picture books are excellent educational tools precisely because they do more than just simply answer questions. More than most media, good picture books expose children to other worlds and other ways of think-

ing through language and images that are child-centric; thus, new ideas can be more easily digested and new concepts are more readily shared.

Parents and teachers, increasingly aware of how expensive oil and climate change will radically transform our future, can help prepare children with the help of environmentally-themed picture books. As a recent *Globe and Mail* survey claims, three-quarters of Canadians are frustrated by how little the country has reduced greenhouse gas emissions (Mittelstaedt). That our actions can have a negative impact on our present and future environment is what Allie realizes in the picture book, *Poppy and Allie Go Green*, by Lori Lane and Kathy Winsor. Understandably, educating children about potential environmental degradation that they and their parents may cause can be overwhelming and frightening. Kriesberg, as quoted in Zynda, states that children can be intimidated by the seriousness of environmental concerns: "Focusing on environmental tragedies can scare children, giving them a sense of powerlessness and cutting them off from the natural world." Zynda continues, "Teachers need to find a way to express the seriousness of environmental concerns without scaring the children" (6). A well-crafted picture book can make environmental information and lessons much more palatable. Such a book cannot sugar-coat reality but rather "can produce thoughtful, responsible young people" (8) like Allie, the heroine of Lane and Winsor's story. During a trip to the dump with her grandfather and aunt, Allie sees first-hand just how many things humans discard: a chair, a TV without a remote and a half-finished hooked rug. These are things, like her Nana's old sewing machine, that should be repaired and/or recycled and not clog up the landfill. Her aunt's rationale for throwing out the sewing machine accurately reflects our consumerist culture, which continues to favour and promote new products despite the monetary and environmental costs: "'It's no good, Allie,' Auntie insisted. 'Nana got a new one and it's a hundred times better than that old thing'" (5). The trip to the dump opens Allie's eyes up to the multitude of ways her family, friends and community members disrespect their planet. At school, a fellow student refuses to recycle his juice boxes; on a class trip to Cape Spear, Allie stumbles across litter and, spying a container ship in the harbour, learns that "many things we buy come from other countries ... [such as] food, clothes, furniture, toys — even cars" (13). Allie's environmental lessons are multiple: she learns about ocean litter called plastic soup, methane gas, the depleting ozone layer, using cloth bags instead of plastic, and how important it is not to idle one's car. Halfway through the book, Allie, like her readers, begins to feel overwhelmed. "I wasn't going to be able to save the world," Allie thinks, "but I had to do something!"

Doing something now about our impact on the environment is extremely important, and teaching children about the environment through the eyes and voice of Allie is an effective first step. However, Lane and Winsor cover so many green topics that both adults *and* children will find the examples difficult to process. As well, though the text is written in first-person, the didactic asides from Allie's

grandfather Poppy, for example, are much too verbose for the intended audience. Note Poppy's unnatural dialogue: "The picture on the [hooked] rug would show the beauty of nature that we must protect" (22). The problem with didactic children's literature, according to Creany (as quoted in Zynda) is it:

does not allow children to have an individualistic response to what they are reading; the texts, in other words, expect a certain response and do not welcome any other. Since children absorb literature more fully when they feel connected to it, this didacticism may not teach environmental education as much as the author intended it to. (9)

Indeed Lane and Winsor's awkward prose, which either tells when it should show (and therefore doesn't allow the pictures to help tell the story) or is unnecessarily repetitive (e.g., "I quickly pinched my nose. The smell was rotten. 'Phew!' I felt like throwing up" (5)) does not allow the reader to become absorbed in this important story. Instead, the prose, like lecturing Allie, sounds bossy, self-important and teacherly. In fact, the book contains six pages of green tips and projects obviously in place to guide parents, teachers and students (though they are set in between pages of the story and therefore confusingly interrupt the plot). Convincing citizens, including children, that their day-to-day actions have to be changed for the greater good of society is extremely difficult, since people are often set in their ways and may refuse to change. Had Lane and Winsor narrowed their focus to one or two green initiatives and written in a more conversational tone; or had they, as Creany says, "focus[ed] more on being well-written than informative" (10), then perhaps the story could better convince children to go green.

Like Susan Chalker Browne and Caroline Stellings, the authors of the other books being reviewed here, Lane and Winsor do successfully render their local settings so vividly that Newfoundland children will more easily connect to some of the lessons and ideas presented in their books. A mantra of the environmental movement is to think globally but act locally. Kriesberg as quoted in Zynda, says, "The problem is that a great deal of the environmental education being done in our schools is not helping children connect to the place where they live" (6). In other words, if one child is taught to notice the litter on Cape Spear, he or she may better and more directly learn that our actions can negatively impact our own backyards. Though rainforest depletion and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico are serious issues, a child cannot necessarily comprehend the severity of such actions when he or she may not be able to locate Brazil or the Gulf of Mexico on a map. But most St. John's children know Cape Spear and can tell stories of seeing litter in the gutter on their way to school. Thus, *Poppy and Allie Go Green* embodies the think globally, act locally ideal: that being sustainable in our own community benefits the entire planet.

Authors of educational books should be consistently aware of not only the explicit lessons conveyed through their stories, but also of the implicit lessons subtly

revealed through each picture book's words and images. Proponents of the "Whole Book Approach" (WBA) understand that "readers look at a picture book for everything it is communicating: its text, certainly, but also its art, design, and production elements.... [T]hese elements work together to tell a story or convey information" (Lukehart 20). Thus, for an educational picture book to truly succeed, its components must complement the overarching goal. The choice to use photography, as opposed to hand-drawn or computer-generated images to illustrate *Poppy and Allie Go Green*, creates an immediacy that may not come from other media. However, those same photographs also more clearly reveal unsustainable details: note, for example, the manicured fingernails on the teacher's hands on page ten. Nail polish is a proven carcinogen; salon products are notoriously unsustainable (E Magazine). And though the book is printed on acid-free paper, it is notably not printed on post-consumer or recycled paper. Further, Allie's teacher's (Mrs. Kolonel) comment to Allie's grandfather, "I think we have a little environmentalist on our hands" (14) is condescending and belittles not only Allie's important feelings but the entire green message of the book. Lessons about reducing, reusing and recycling are diluted when the illustrations, book and characters' words are not sustainable. This contradiction is the same as a parent eating a bag of chips while telling his or her child that chips are unhealthy.

Though the focus of *Hey Freddy, It's Canada's Birthday* differs, like *Poppy and Allie Go Green*, *Hey Freddy* is also bogged down by too many topics which unnecessarily complicate its storyline. Freddy and his family's trip to Signal Hill to watch the sunrise on Canada Day involves a baby sister who won't stop crying, flustered parents, chasing after a runaway souvenir flag, and several lessons about the Mounties (RCMP), especially their horseback musical ride. The story suffers from "social studies overload" and what results is a book that doesn't know if it is a story or a history lesson or both or neither. At the bottom of each page of text is a teachable, historical aside about one of the aforementioned topics, many of which, at best, vaguely connect to the overall narrative. The following aside, "Signal Hill is located at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean" (14), appears on the same page in which Freddy's friend William's flag is suddenly swept up and away by the wind, a wind certainly caused by Signal Hill's proximity to the ocean. Yet the illustration does not show the ocean and the aside interrupts the narrative just as a new dramatic conflict is introduced. Browne needs to better blend the history lessons into the story itself, HildaRose could show such ideas in her illustrations, or, better yet, the story and historical snippets should be completely separated (perhaps the snippets could be placed at the back of the book). As Manifold states, "images in picture books allow the sustained viewing time necessary for developing critical viewing skills through exploration, critique and reflection" (2000, 2). However, Browne's insertion of historical facts throughout the book interrupts the narrative flow of the story and thus does not allow for such sustained viewing. By bombarding children with too many storylines and facts, young readers will become distracted and the oppor-

tunity for the sustained viewing required to allow children to think critically — to transform new information into knowledge — is lost.

Hey Freddy's patriotic and historical lessons are also undermined by its tacit, negative messages. Though the story champions public transit by having Freddy's family travel to Signal Hill on the bus, "The Metrobus chugged and puffed its way up Signal Hill," the very next sentence, "People chattered and laughed and drank Tim Horton's coffee" (8), implicitly shows negative behaviour alongside explicit positive actions. Tim Horton's non-recyclable/non-compostable coffee cups account for "22 per cent of identifiable trash [in Nova Scotia]. McDonald's, at 10 per cent, [is] a distant second." As conservationist Mark Dittrick, the Halifax-based spokesman for the Sierra Club's Atlantic chapter, notes, "The Tim Hortons cup is easily the No. 1 recognizable item of litter in the country" (Hawaleshka). Idling cars in Tim Horton's drive-thru degrade air quality and Tim Horton's donuts, iced caps, and double doubles do nothing to assuage the obesity epidemic plaguing Canada, and Newfoundland and Labrador, which, in 2007, had more obese or overweight citizens than any other province (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009). In a book clearly aimed to promote Canadian pride, Browne's "CanCon" Tim Horton's reference is not just a misstep, it's irresponsible; like the many additives in fast food, Tim Horton's does more harm to Canada than good.

The Dot Com Leprechaun has a more structured and focused narrative. However, it too, like the other books reviewed here, suffers from topical overload, which distracts from the educational goals of the text. Out-migration, recession, the history of John Cabot, root cellars, and leprechauns are all topics Caroline Stellings crams into the book's thirty-two pages. Stellings, who also illustrated the book, moves the setting of the story away from the St. John's of *Poppy and Allie Go Green* and *Hey Freddy* to Elliston, on the Bonavista Peninsula. There we meet Lucy, whose family has been "hard hit" by the tough economy and, "[un]able to make the payments on their home ... [have] to leave by the end of the summer" (6). Lucy's situation is obviously not uncommon: children all over Newfoundland and Labrador, indeed across the country, have been negatively affected by the recent economic downturn. Stellings not only clearly introduces a legitimate and dramatic conflict on the second page, it is a conflict that many children can relate to, and thus she immediately draws her audience into the story.

Her audience, however, will quickly find the rest of the story confusing. Though Lucy's quest and goal is straightforward, too many random asides muddy the plot. Lucy turns to her computer for distraction only to discover a leprechaun named Caboto trapped within. He solicits Lucy's help. Elfrida the witch has "ensorcelled" him, sending him to the Internet. Lucy must enter his root cellar home and get the witch to wear his silver shoes to break the spell so Caboto will be set free. Lucy overcomes her fear of the root cellar, gets the witch to wear the shoes, receives a gift from Caboto that will save her family home, and, randomly, learns

about John Cabot, Caboto's ancestor, in the process (though why or how an Irish leprechaun is the relation of an Italian explorer is never explained).

Though "the power of a single picture book to create interest in a topic is immense" (Pearson 30), the authors of all three of the books reviewed here seem reluctant to limit their stories to one or two topics. Instead, their books are more like websites, filled with textual hyperlinks and footnotes which encourage readers not to become absorbed in a story but to jump about from topic to topic as though they were surfing the web. Children now are extremely tech-savvy; the temptation for a children's author to compete with the web is immense. But a book is so clearly a different medium than a website that attempting to compete with technology undermines the importance of books and reading and does children a disservice. Adults and children now have fewer and fewer opportunities to be quietly contemplative and to focus on one topic for a sustained period. As a result, we are losing our ability to concentrate and, to echo Manifold, are not allowing children to develop the critical viewing skills needed to comprehend new topics or understand new answers to questions. In an interview on CBC's *Spark*, Nicholas Carr states that because of the prevalence of the Internet, humans are losing our ability to "pay attention to one thing for an extended period of time" (Carr). Sitting down to read, Carr noticed his brain "wanted to continue to behave the way it behaves when I'm at a computer, or when I'm online, it wanted to jump around, from bit of information to bit of information and click links and do a lot of Googling" (Carr). He began to realize computers and the web are changing the human brain, which "adapts to the habits of thinking, the habits of mind that we exercise and it gets better at those ... but the brain circuits that support modes of thought that we don't exercise and that we don't practice begin to weaken" (Carr). Carr believes that reading books exercises the brain's ability to concentrate and filter out distractions. And the more we can concentrate, the more we learn and absorb. If children's book authors want to continue to write educational picture books and want children to read and learn from those books, then they must ensure that narratives and topics do not jump around but remain focused and uniform.

One redeeming quality each of the books shares is that, unlike their narratives, their illustrations do not try to emulate the bright and flashy images typically found online. Though their narratives may be so overwhelmed with facts that they resemble hyperlinked web text, the illustrations are subtle, and, especially in the case of *The Dot Com Leprechaun*, favour analog illustration methods over digital. Stelling's choice to use watercolours in *Leprechaun* gives the book an overall whimsical feeling which better matches the more fantastical elements of the story (the leprechaun, witches, fairies, elves, pixies and gnomes) and is, as well, an homage to the book's beautiful setting. In a book that references technology in its title, Stelling's watercolours are a needed antidote to our technology-rich world. Jim Costello's photography in *Poppy and Allie Go Green* seems digital (despite photography once being an analog medium), but the collage-like layout promotes the

idea of “reusing” (one of the Three Rs) and the clear images realistically document our environmental missteps and therefore reinforce the need to act now in order to make our planet better. Finally, though it seems HildaRose’s illustrations for *Hey Freddy* have been digitally enhanced or modified, their overall style is sketchy and cartoonish and therefore heighten the story’s playful quality, which is almost lost by Browne’s continuous, footnoted facts. Had the authors, in their writing, followed the uncomplicated style their illustrators adopt in the artwork, then these books could have more successfully communicated the social and historical lessons the authors so clearly want to convey.

A picture book has the potential to thoroughly teach children about any number of topics and augment a variety of lessons, from social studies to math to history and beyond. As well, a picture book, unlike the Internet, encourages the sustained reading and viewing time needed for children to absorb new ideas. The goals of the authors of the books reviewed here are educational; however, to better serve those educational goals, these same authors (and other picture book writers) need to keep the focus of their books narrow and be aware of not only the explicit but also the implicit lessons each book contains. All children are eager to learn and are therefore capable of absorbing a number of intended and unintentional lessons. The most successful picture books adopt a Whole Book Approach — each component contributes to the overall theme. In this way, books will remain a fixture in the classrooms of the near and distant future, precisely because they have and will offer an alternative to the classroom computer(s).

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