



Australian Society of Authors

The 2009 Colin Simpson Lecture

Silent Voices: Illustration and Visual Narrative

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[opening image: The Red Tree, 'self portrait']

It's an honour to be invited by the Australian Society of Authors to present this year's Colin Simpson Lecture, especially as someone who is primarily an illustrator, asked to speak about visual narrative. Of course, the ASA has always done much to champion the rights of its illustrators, that smaller subspecies of the membership with its own unique concerns about working standards, copyright, professional development, and networking opportunities. So I'd like to start by thanking the ASA for their consideration and assistance over the years, as well as commending recent initiatives supporting local creators of picture books, comics and graphic novels.

These come at an interesting time for those of us working with visual narrative, as it's fair to say that illustrated books have undergone something of a renaissance in recent years, both here in Australia and overseas. This is due in part to a good number of new and established artists toiling away in their small studios, consuming ink, grinding pencils and manipulating pixels, paying often obsessive attention to the craft of visual storytelling, and finally succeeding capturing the attention of a growing audience. It seems that picture books have moved a little beyond assumptions of something that is exclusively children's literature, and that graphic novels, or comics with literary pretensions (for want of a better description), are no longer associated only with super-heroics or adolescent power fantasies. Their subjects can be as serious and complex as any other kind of literary form, often with a highly self-reflexive regard for the relation between style and content, and dealing with social, political and historical subjects in an experimental way.

In turn picture books and graphic novels have enjoyed the intellectual support of a serious critical discourse, as evidenced by the many conferences, seminars and book festival discussions around the topic of 'visual literacy'. Teachers and librarians have led much of this interest thanks to an open approach to picture books and their use in primary, secondary and tertiary English literature studies. We are also seeing graphic fiction regularly reviewed in the mainstream press, and nominated for literary awards, side by side with novels and other fiction, and not necessarily with any special concessions being made for their illustrated form.

From a creative point of view, I think those of us who are attracted to illustration, or 'writing with pictures', do so for largely personal reasons which have little to do with a need to break boundaries, articulate visual literacy, win awards or seeking the approval of our literary friends. We may not even be so interested in challenging conventions. I think it's more that case that the kind of stories we want to tell, or are able to tell, end up being realised in an unusual form; they often demand an experimental approach, and the artist has to do what the idea tells him or her to do.

This is certainly true of my own work, where much of my time is spent simply trying to find an adequate voice or an interesting narrative structure using the limited skills that are available to me. And of course trying and make a living out of that where possible, and begging the indulgence of publishers along the way.

[Image: painting of a footpath, Perth]

My background is primarily that of a painter and fine arts student, working with traditional physical materials like paint, charcoal and pencils on canvas and paper: using this malleable stuff to make little maps of experience through a kind of long-exposure act of observation. The results are silent, static, carefully framed impressions; something about a landscape, object or person, or just a certain combination of lines and colours with their own distinctive personality and unspoken 'rightness'.

I've also always been interested in writing, a quite different kind of kinetic, narrative expression, and since childhood mesmerised by the way a well-written story or poem could capture something uniquely evocative – that enchanting thing which attracts all of us to literature. Both art forms, painting and writing, seem ideally suited to different kinds of showing or telling, communicating in quite different languages, but they can also come together in an interesting way, without necessarily compromising each other's strengths.

[Image: The Rabbits, 'They came by water']

I should mention that I didn't grow up with much awareness or special interest in comics or graphic novels, and my reading of picture books generally ended at an early age. It was only when working as a freelance illustrator in my twenties, and asked to illustrate a couple of unusual young adult picture books, or what are sometimes called 'picture books for older readers', that I began to think seriously about the play of word and image. It became apparent that there were certain characteristics unique to this short and unassuming form. In particular, picture books seemed especially good at presenting a reader with complex questions in a concise way, largely through the imaginative play that can exist between words and pictures, outside of any simple or direct visual-verbal relationship.

This can perhaps be best explained when we ignore any straightforward understanding of a word like 'illustration', that is, illustration as a visual clarification of an idea, or a form of literal demonstration. Like writers, illustrators are not really attracted to their chosen language for its descriptive clarity or objectivity, but more for its slipperiness, mystery, ambiguity and accidental poetry. The best illustrated stories make the most of this, often prompting us to think about familiar concepts in an unexpected way, offering up a new and interesting perspective.

[Image from 'When the Wind Blows']

Raymond Briggs' 'When The Wind Blows', published in 1982, is a good example of this. What at first appears to be a light, cheery comic strip full of amusing banter is really quite a harrowing story about a retired couple trying to follow government advice on how to survive

an imminent nuclear attack, and later dying in their home from radiation sickness. There are several emotional channels switched on at once through text, image and layout design, affecting us in a way that is hard to imagine outside of this very modest, disarmingly simple and compacted visual universe. As a very original form of protest, this picture book hit a popular and political nerve, enough to be mentioned in British Parliament as “a powerful contribution to the growing opposition to nuclear armament.”

[Image from 'Maus']

A similarly effective and much celebrated pairing of word and image is Art Spiegelman's 'Maus' (1987), which narrates an interview with the artist's father, a survivor of Auschwitz. Spiegelman uses an expressionist, claustrophobic comic book style in which different nationalities are denoted by animal totems, most notably Jewish mice and Nazi German cats, none of which is mentioned explicitly in the written narrative. The effect is both unsettling and strangely appropriate, and raises all sorts of issues about voice, memory, truth and personal judgment – Spiegelman often represents himself, mouse-headed at the drawing table, grappling with uncertainty about his own choice of word and image. 'Maus' highlights the concern that many graphic story-tellers have of foregrounding their artistic problems of representation, brought on by a desire to give voice to voiceless characters, or tell stories that might otherwise remain hidden.

[Image from 'Epileptic']

The French artist David B.'s 'Epileptic' (2007) is an unflinching autobiographical meditation on a brother's severe illness, where various of thoughts and feelings literally take shape through pen and ink: fear, despair and trauma weave their way into a complex family dynamic as hallucinogenic patterns and monsters, sometimes clear, sometimes inscrutable, outside of any illuminating language.

[Image from 'Persepolis']

In Marjane Satrapi's 'Persepolis' (2001), drawing also functions as alternative to words, adding a very personal layer of expression to a memoir about growing up in Iran under the Islamic Revolution. There is a sense of both comic and tragic memories able to crystallise through an idiosyncratic medium, the graphic form allowing a means to an end, offering it's author a comfortable style and structure, which is also appealing to a broad audience.

[Image from 'Palestine']

Joe Sacco's 'Palestine' (2001) uses a comparable kind of visual narrative to tell the hidden stories of oppressed Palestinians, based on a series of interviews carried out during the author's travels;

[Image from 'Pyongyang']

and a similar approach can be found in Guy Delisle's 'Pyongyang' (2004), which seeks to expose the closed world of North Korea through observational drawings, almost as a kind of subversive act against a regime obsessed with tightly controlled self-representation, and highly resistant to artistic expression. These are all narratives that are in varying ways about voicelessness or blocked communication.

[Image from 'Fox']

Picture book creators are also used to exploring subjects that may be difficult to articulate in a more conventional written or spoken form. 'Fox' by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks (2001), is a story about dark and irrational feelings, particularly fear and envy, and its imagery looks like something from an ancient, preliterate fable, with minimal words in a primitive scrawl, as if written by animals, almost illegible.

[Image from 'The Island']

In Armin Greder's 'The Island' (2007), the prejudices of villagers are awakened by the arrival of a nameless, voiceless man washed up by the sea. For the most part, unspoken

feelings are presented visually, through brooding lines, distorted figures, dark slabs of murky colour and bleak white spaces. Picture books are typically very short, about 32 pages long, but they can make the most of this by giving us images that are not entirely resolved or rounded, that are very emotionally suggestive, and sometimes contradictory, inviting a great deal of speculation over repeated readings.

This quick review of some favourite graphic stories taken from my bookshelf helps me to explain my own fascination with the medium. In particular, I realise that I share with many other illustrators a fundamental interest in ideas of silence and voicelessness.

[Image: 'walled in', a sketch of a rabbit trying to speak to a girl]

This has a lot to do simply with the nature of drawing. The characters and situations that appear in my working sketchbooks exist for the most part outside of a spoken narrative. I do work frequently with words, but feel I am most fluent when drawing, opening up a kind of day-dreaming process in which questions of meaning are constantly delayed in favour of the next line or shape, akin to what the artist Paul Klee describes as 'taking a line for a walk'. The images that result are inherently silent, nameless and usually lacking specific identity or intention. If there are characters, they often don't have a mouth, or are animals or other creatures that can't talk.

[Image: Lost Thing, feeding]

The Lost Thing, for instance, is an awkward, mute creature without any particular purpose or ability, and for this reason it remains largely ignored by a world that lacks the imagination needed to deal with it. Even the narrator of the story, a boy who is concerned enough to befriend this hapless creature, talks about it in an evasive way, without any description, and much less insight. Every illustrated scene frames a question for the reader: how might we deal with things that are outside of language, or lack any clear meaning?

[Image from The Red Tree, 'dawn']

The girl appearing in 'The Red Tree' is another unspeaking, troubled character, a nameless figure composed of simply drawn shapes, with no real identity. In the first image of the book, a megaphone is held up to the place where her mouth should be, and she attempts to say something, but all words have collapsed into letters, and these fall away in a jumbled confusion. This is my 'preface' as a painter, suggesting that written language may not be helpful here, because this is a book about unspoken or hard-to-describe feelings.

[Image from Red Tree, 'darkness overcomes you']

The subsequent images attempt to build on this – we see the same girl walking in the shadow of an immense dead fish, marking time on the back of a snail, trapped in a strange game or stage play, or washed up in a bottle. The minimal text that accompanies each image offers no actual explanation, so the reader has to make sense of things by looking for visual relationships in the details of each painting.

[Image: Red Tree, 'girl in a bottle']

There is a kind of story here, although not entirely a linear one. I could only imagine it as a set of discontinuous images without a conventional structure, something between a story and an exhibition of separate paintings. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this presentation is that adults and children feel compelled to project their own interpretations upon each image, and invent a personal narrative to occupy the unwritten space around them.

[Image, Tales from Outer Suburbia: 'Eric']

In 'Eric' a foreign exchange student comes to live with a suburban family, appearing in a series of illustrations as a small, black, leaf-shaped figure with an unreadable face. After a series of miscommunications, this character is only able to effectively express himself to his hosts through a visual device, a colourful garden planted in a kitchen pantry. It's a kind of sideways comment on the cultural limitations of language.

[Image: The Rabbits, 'Explorers']

In *The Rabbits*, a society of strange beings appear on a shoreline, their mouths hidden behind elaborate clothes and machinery, their speech undisclosed and coded: ‘we couldn’t understand the way they talked’ reads John Marsden’s very spare text, which refrains from much other description, given these characters are, in a sense, beyond words. Everything else about them is weird and unfamiliar. Visual images here become the perfect device for conveying a sense of bewilderment, of not knowing what we are seeing, yet still having a strong intuitive sense of what is going on – a colonial invasion, one has obvious resonance with real historical events.

[Image: ‘The Water Buffalo’]

In another small story, a silent water buffalo lives in a vacant suburban lot and communicates only by pointing into the distance. In some ways this is a metaphor for my approach to story and illustration itself, an act of limited suggestion, heavily dependent on a reader willing to creatively find their own meaning.

There is a dreamlike quality to these kinds of picture-stories that I find endlessly engaging, and I think there are certainly parallels between the way visual stories and dreams might be experienced and interpreted. Certain images, if they are well conceived and crafted, are able to tap into a kind of subconscious emotional intelligence, and I find that the act of drawing allows me to access ideas that are normally elusive to the more conscious, reasoning parts of my brain. When drawing is going well, there is almost a sense of returning to a pre-literate, child-like way of looking and playing, pleasantly disconnected from adult preconceptions about what might be normal, familiar or obvious.

[Image: The Arrival, front cover]

This is perhaps most evident in ‘*The Arrival*’, an immigrant story told through hundreds of carefully pencilled images without any written narrative. There are actually some words present, but they are in a fictional language that is impossible to read, starting with the title page,

[Image: Arrival title page]

so from the outset I again wanted to suggest that a certain amount of incomprehension is crucial to this story, as it is with 'The Red Tree'. In fact, incomprehension is a central theme here, given that the story is about the emotional and intellectual difficulties faced by a person who must learn to live in a strange new country.

[Image: Arrival, preliminary drawing]

The genesis of this book lies in an accumulation of many little sketches, jigsaw-puzzled and composted together over a long period of time, and refined into certain recurring elements: a man with a suitcase, a boat at sea, certain imaginary landscapes, strange animals, figures, machines and odd situations. All of these related in some way to ideas of travel or migration, mainly because I could see such strong parallels between my concerns as a visual artist – of describing subjects outside of a written language – and the problems of literacy and communication faced by many immigrants.

[Image: Arrival, 'the helpful stranger']

I began to research a broad range of immigrant stories to develop this idea further, accumulating a small pile of written notes, originally thinking it might give shape to a fairly conventional 32-page picture book, playing with some unusual relationship between word and image. However, it soon became apparent that a longer, more fragmented visual sequence, something like a graphic novel, would best capture the range of expression and intimate details that made so many immigrant stories interesting; specific problems of buying a bus ticket, or cooking food, or looking for work.

[Image: a reference photo showing a queue of immigrants, early 20th Century]

I was also intrigued by the idea of borrowing the 'language' of old pictorial archives and family photo albums I'd been looking at as part of my research, all these faded, unlabeled

scenes that are at once particular and universal. Photo albums are actually perfect examples of how illustrated narrative works most effectively, their power is not so much in documenting particulars, but triggering memory and imagination, urging us to fill the empty space around frozen snapshots, to build on fragments and constantly revisit our own storyline, a kind of visual literacy we all understand intuitively.

[Image: Arrival, 'marketplace']

The absence of any written description in *The Arrival* seemed to place the reader more firmly in the shoes of an anonymous protagonist. There is no guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, which can be quite a liberating thing. Words have a remarkable gravitational pull on our attention, and how we interpret attendant images, like captions under a press photo. Without words, an image can invite a much more attention from a reader who might otherwise reach for the nearest sentence, and let that rule their imagination.

[Image: Arrival, 'harbour' (statue of fraternity)]

I think the popular success of 'The Arrival' has a lot to do with this quiet openness, a kind of slowness, and how well that works conceptually with the themes of migration and memory. The reader is invited to contemplate each scene at their own pace, and according to their own degree of personal interest. There are many details in the hand-drawn illustrations over 130 pages, but no great insistence that everything to be studied or entirely understood, and the recurring surrealist elements are acceptable equivalents for things that happen in ordinary life, either nonsensical or meaningful, depending on what you expect, or how much you are willing to invest as an observer. The most rewarding feedback for me as a creator has come from those readers who are themselves migrants, commenting on how these strange pencil drawings seem truthful, recalling something of their own personal experiences.

[Image: Arrival, 'the old country' (townscape with serpents)]

I think this invitation to interpretation is the key to the success of any illustrated story, with or without text, and the thing most likely to fire up the critical imagination of both adults and

children, something that should never be underestimated. As artists, writers, editors and publishers, we need to be mindful of this, and avoid thinking of illustration as a gratuitous exercise in style, or a visually attractive way of embellishing a page. It's a unique medium, able to grasp it's own concepts and impressions, illuminate silent voices and consider many alternative ways of reading and understanding.

[Image: Arrival, 'the breakfast table']

On reflection, what inspires me the most as an illustrator is the realisation that I can never entirely know what I'm looking at, what I'm drawing, or what I'm trying to say. By the end of *The Arrival*, an immigrant family has settled comfortably into their new home of peculiar furniture, food and utensils, strange clocks and a house-pet that looks like giant walking tadpole. Do they understand what all these things mean? Not entirely, but perhaps there's an imagined meaning attached to each object and circumstance, an emotional resonance and a sense of belonging here that's more important than an explanation. I hope that any reader examining such a strange scene might realise, as I do at the drawing table, that our everyday world is not really so different from this fictional one, a place of things one-half observed and one-half imagined, simultaneously familiar and mysterious.