

## Picture books and Christian concepts

The workshop related to this paper explores the use of children's picture books as a link into understanding the issues involved in Christian Studies for students who have little or no background in church and bible.

The workshop time limitations militate against delving deeply into the long history of children's picture books. The history is, indeed, long, with a number of writers tracing it in great detail, most notably John Rowe Townsend, himself a well known writer for young readers.

Townsend's work (1990) outlines the development of English-language children's literature from the *lesson* books of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, giving advice in rhyming couplets for easy remembering by their target audience, to the revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the Victorian *toy books*, such as the pop-ups and cut-outs of what he calls the *paper engineers*. (326)

The impetus to write books for children has at times been a commercial one, at others a moral one with the aim of educating or improving children. Lamme and Krogh (1992) called their book *Literature-based moral education: children's books and activities for teaching values, responsibility, and good judgment in the elementary school*, while Jackson's earlier (1989) title was *Engines of instruction, mischief, and magic: children's literature in England from its beginnings to 1839*. Sometimes the two driving forces combined. Jackson writes:

*In the early decades of their history, juvenile books were thoroughly controlled by trade or business interests ... Most books had no pretension to literary excellence. Being wares in every sense, they usually hewed to prevailing tastes and values ... parents wanted their offspring to be taught, albeit entertainingly, the skills, habits, virtues, and graces the children likely needed to gain success in a world newly perceived to contain opportunities for advancement. (3)*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century John Newberry saw the marketing potential for children's books and Newberry's name is perpetuated in the annual medal awarded by the American Library Association, *for it was his children's books which were imitated and pirated in this country, and which gave the first genuine impetus to the development of books written for the young as distinct from books written for grown-ups and considered suitable for children.* (Townsend, 19)

The commercial interest continued after Newberry's death alongside the moral improvement aim. Gradually sheer fun and adventure, along with fantasy and

mystery, became the fare of children's literature, to counteract the *stereotyped and priggish heroes* for boys and the *circumscribed life of the virtuous girl*.

(Townsend, 54) Townsend's account is fascinating, as he traces the growth of children's story books through, for example, school stories and animal stories and combinations of reality and fantasy across the genres.

And almost always illustration has been a must for a children's tale, even as early as Caxton's woodcuts for his edition of *Aesop's Fables* and the hand-drawn picture-books of the Middle Ages. Townsend spends a good number of pages on the growth of the picture book, in England and America, but gives particular attention to the lead Australia has given in the production of children's literature and of picture books of impressive quality. The authors and illustrators he lists would be familiar to any teacher of children's literature in this country today.

In Australia, according to Saxby (1971), *the picture book developed slowly*, not really making an appearance until the 1930s, despite the late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century work of Beatrix Potter. Saxby credits the coinciding of lithographic printing techniques with the development of pre-schools and *increased interest in the needs of small children*, as well as the later establishment of the ABC's Kindergarten of the Air, for the growth in production of picture books for quite young children. (Saxby, 225-226) With the subsequent development of the picture book came more and more subtle fusion of the two communication methods, word and visual image, so that today we expect a good picture book to be more than just a story with illustrations. Both the words, fewer and fewer of them, in fact, and the images and design tell the story, and parent or teacher and child find much to talk about in the combination.

Lonsdale (1993) draws attention to the postmodern elements evident in more recent children's picture books; and Tucker's (1976) comment about children's fiction is equally true, but in reverse, of the modern picture book:

*books for older readers may of ten blur many of the distinctions [between these and writing for a younger audience]... making it really impossible to say whether one is talking about recognizably children's books or not. (25)*

It was from a recognition of such a blurring, in fact, that my own use of picture books in the classroom from Year 8 to Year 12 arose. Initially, I used picture books in film study with students in secondary school, even at Year 12 level. Each page can be seen as a film 'still', so that issues of framing, lighting, symbolism and so on can be discussed. Obviously, there are barriers to be surmounted in using 'kids' books with sophisticated senior students! One of my strategies was to satirise the classroom context, bringing the students to the 'story mat' at the front of the

room and holding the books so they could read with me. By acknowledging the junior nature of the texts and adopting the seniors' attitude, I could then talk about the relevant issues through the visuals.

Subsequently, I saw the applicability of picture books with their simple and direct text to the teaching and learning of some of the basic Christian concepts. Since these are not the usual bible story picture books, their content is accessible at a first level of understanding for readers unfamiliar with church and scripture, after which further readings may open up discussion of key Christian concepts.

A recent article (Avery & Avery, 2001) is described in the ERIC listing in the following way:

*[The article] notes that more secondary teachers are discovering the therapeutic and instructional value of children's literature and are steadily increasing their use of quality picture books to introduce a theme, begin a discussion on a social issue, trigger a round of creative writing or strengthen an appreciation for poetry. [It] encourages young adults to critically evaluate children's books and create their own.*

Along these lines, too, one of the Australian private health funds has published a list of *Books that help children*, in which a large number of stories for 6 - 12 year olds, including picture books, are discussed in terms of their appropriateness for assisting children to *find a point of contact and discover that they weren't the only person in the world with that special problem.* (2)

The specific books referred to in the workshop are drawn from the following list, which is by no means exhaustive but merely contains texts that I have used in varying Christian education contexts:

- *Crusher is coming*, Bob Graham
- *Felix and Alexander*, Terry Denton
- *Gemma's Christmas eve*, Colin Thiele/Robert Roennfeldt
- *Greetings from Sandy Beach*, Bob Graham
- *Harriet, you'll drive me wild!*, Mem Fox/Marla Frazee
- *Jesse*, Tim Winton/Maureen Prichard
- *Koala Lou*, Mem Fox/Pamela Lofts
- *Magic Beach*, Alison Lester
- *Parrot fashion*, Eleanor Nilsson/Craig Smith
- *Something horrid*, Knarelle Beard
- *Song at the gate*, Judith Crabtree
- *The sparrow's story at the king's command*, Judith Crabtree

- *What happened when Grandma died*, Peggy Barker/Patricia Mattozzi
- *With love, at Christmas*, Mem Fox/Fay Plamka
- *Wonderful earth!* Nick Butterworth/Mick Inkpen

As can be seen from the list these are not traditional 'religious' or Bible picture books. That is not to say that there are not excellent works of that kind available for parents and teachers to read with children, as well as a wealth of children's Bibles for particular age groups. My interest has been in meeting the children within their culture and relating that experience to the formation of significant Christian concepts. My professional reading indicates that this is, in effect, current best practice in religious education, posited in the work of educators such as Gabriel Moran, Thomas Groome, Marissa Crawford and Graham Rossiter.

As an example of a specific picture book, let's now consider Mem Fox's and Pamela Lofts' touching and profound animal tale, *Koala Lou*. The baby koala of the title was a much loved little creature and especially by her mother who told her so over and over again. As the family increased and the mother became busier and busier, Koala Lou did not hear the reassuring words of love as often and began to doubt her mother's love. So, she decided she would train to take part in the gum-tree-climbing event of the Bush Olympics, which she would win and so gain her mother's approval and love. Despite her rigorous training schedule and great effort on the day, the young koala came second and fled from sight and cried and cried. Eventually she went home in the dark, to find her mother waiting for her with open arms and words of love for her child, no matter what.

From the first time of hearing this story, read aloud by the author herself in her inimitable style, I have been impressed by its clear 'gospel' message. The child thinks and feels that she has to earn or win again the love of her parent, but learns about the unconditional love available to her in a final scene reminiscent of the return of the prodigal son to his home. Discussion of this fundamental truth of Christianity with readers of this book would easily move from the familiarity of the family setting to biblical statements of the Christian concept.

It is not surprising that Lamme and Krogh (1992) include this book in the 29 listed and briefly reviewed at the end of their chapter entitled *Unconditional Love*. (Chapter 12) They provide a more detailed appraisal of the Robert Munsch/Shiela McGraw book, *Love you forever*, in that chapter, and their discussion of unconditional love focuses more on classroom behaviours and care for others. While I'm sure such books can serve multiple functions, it is their presentation of Christian concepts through experience immediately accessible for any reader that I am highlighting here. Of course, there are cultural issues—baby koalas may have more meaning for Australian readers, perhaps—but there are other such books

around if one is looking out for them. Even at the price of a well produced picture book these days, I can't resist buying one in which I can see ways to make those clear links, and fortunately a number are being released more cheaply in soft cover.

There are time and space here only to mention some of the Christian concepts I find exemplified in the other books on my list; readers are encouraged to explore them for themselves and no doubt find other ideas and insights within them—and then there are the many, many more such books for the readers' delight and that of those with whom they share them!

The books—alphabetical by titles:

*Crusher is coming*, Bob Graham—preparations are made for the coming of someone who turns out to be very different from the one expected—a way of discussing advent and the nature of Christ.

*Felix and Alexander*, Terry Denton—the search for someone lost involves personal suffering.

*Gemma's Christmas Eve*, Colin Thiele/Robert Roennfeldt—overtly Christian, but a well presented linking of gifts and the gift of Christ to us.

*Greetings from Sandy Beach*, Bob Graham—the camping holiday with its mixture of people, young and old, and its suggestion of the variety of inhabitants of—well, maybe a congregation? Or heaven? After all, Sandy Beach is a brief glimpse *as through a glass darkly* of a magical, perfect place to look forward to.

*Harriet, you'll drive me wild*, Mem Fox/Marla Frazee—another mother and daughter story of love and, particularly, repentance and forgiveness.

*Jesse*, Tim Winton/Maureen Prichard—a beautiful book about being lost and found, and I like the way the 'guardian angel'—in this case a cow!—is there in the illustration before Jesse encounters her.

*Magic Beach*, Alison Lester—another touch of heavenly perfection, perhaps.

*Parrot fashion*, Eleanor Nilsson/Craig Smith—ideas of acceptance of others' difference in the variety of creation, with a sense of awe in the children's view of the birds in the aviary at the beginning and end of the story.

*Something horrid*, Knarelle Beard—written for 8-12-year-olds, this one has much more text and tackles the concepts of sin and guilt and the need for someone to deal with them for us.

*Song at the gate*, Judith Crabtree—one for the older students, with its potential linkage to the concept of finding *the one thing needful*, meaning and purpose in life.

*The sparrow's story at the king's command*, Judith Crabtree—similarly for the not so young, with its tale of sacrificial death and its message of the true meaning of success and failure.

*What happened when Grandma died*, Peggy Barker/Patricia Mattozzi—more overtly Christian in its concluding pages, but a reassuring look at a topic which is of relevance to children.

*With love, at Christmas*, Mem Fox/Fay Plamka—a mystical story about sacrificial giving in the service of others.

*Wonderful earth!* Nick Butterworth/Mick Inkpen—one of the pop-ups with a strong ecological message related to the creation story.

Let me now add to this paper the list of further texts gathered at the ACLE 2 workshop as the participants suggested them:

Title	Author	Christian Concepts
The joy of reading	?Stiller	Anthology of books that can be used, sorted by concepts
Pocket dogs		Lost sheep
The skunks	Thiele	Caring for the planet
The smartest giant in town		Helping others
Horton hatches the egg	Dr Seuss	faithfulness
McGelligots pool		Run the steady race
Franklin Books		relationships
Fox (upper primary)	Margaret Wild	Friendship and support, temptation, forgiveness
	Max Lucado books	
Daddy, why do you love me? Mummy, why do you love me?	Marma Josse	Love
The very worried sparrow	Meryl Doney	Trust and your father will provide
Are you my mother?		Lost - but gets found
Norma Nofriend Esmeraldo		Friendship
Possum magic	Mem Fox	Appreciating who God has made us
Badger's parting gift	Varley	Grief and loss
Old pig	Margaret Wild	
The smallest turtle	Lynley Dodd	Temptations through life
Where the wild things are	Maurice Sendak	Rescue
Guess how much I love you	Sam McBratney	Jesus' love
The lost thing	Shaun Tan	Rescue
The red tree		Hope, joy

Cheer up, chicken	Bob Hartman	Kindness
Lester and Clyde		Tolerance, love, gifts of the Spirit
Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge	Mem Fox	Tolerance of others' differences
Don't be afraid, Granddad		We look after each other
Cat and fish		Diversity—God loves us all
Rainbow fish	Marcus Pfister	Giftedness, sharing, creation, uniqueness, acceptance and accepting
The selfish giant The happy prince	Oscar Wilde	Gospel Self sacrifice
The giving tree	Shel Silverstein	Sacrifice, unconditional love
The garden of the world		Creation
Rose meets Mr Wintergarden		Acceptance, love
Arthur	Amanda Graham	Being unique, happy with the way God created us
Arnold and the prickly teddy	?	
The hungry caterpillar	Eric Carle	New life, resurrection
Jenny's angel		Death and dying (grief)
Mr God, this is Anna (senior level)	Fynne	Looking at the world in a different way

*Thank you to the workshop participants for these additions.*

## References

- Avery, Charles W., & Avery, Kay Beth. 2001, 'Kids teaching kids', *Journal of adolescent and adult literacy*, 44/5, 434-35
- Crawford, M., & Rossiter, G. 1985, *Teaching religion in the secondary school: theory and practice*, Strathfield: Christian Brothers resource Group
- Groome, T. 1984, *Christian religious education: sharing our story and vision*, Harper, San Francisco
- Jackson, Mary V. 1989, *Engines of instruction, mischief, and magic: Children's literature in England from its beginnings to 1839*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln
- Fox, Jan. 1995, *Books that help children*, Medical benefits Fund, Australia
- Lamme, Linda Leonard and Krogh, Suzanne Lowell with Yachmetz, Kathy A. 1992, *Literature-based moral education: children's books and activities for teaching*

*values, responsibility, and good judgment in the elementary school*, Oryx Press, Phoenix, Arizona

Lonsdale, Michele. 1993, 'Postmodernism and the picture book', *English in Australia*, 103, 25-35

Moran, G. 2002, *Both sides: the story of revelation*, Paulist Press, New York

Saxby, H. M. 1971, *A history of Australian children's literature*, Wentworth Books, Sydney

Townsend, John Rowe. 1990, *Written for children: an outline of English-language children's literature*, The Bodley Head, London

Tucker, Nicholas (ed). 1976, *Suitable for children?: controversies in children's literature*, Sussex University Press, London

### **Picture books used in the workshop—alphabetical by authors**

Peggy **Barker**/Patricia Mattozzi, *What happened when Grandma died*

Knarelle **Beard**, *Something horrid*

Nick **Butterworth**/Mick Inkpen, *Wonderful earth!*

Judith **Crabtree**, *Song at the gate* and *The sparrow's story at the king's command*

Terry **Denton**, *Felix and Alexander*

Mem **Fox**/Marla Frazee, *Harriet, you'll drive me wild!*

Mem Fox/Pamela Lofts, *Koala Lou*

Mem Fox/Fay Plamka, *With love, at Christmas*

Bob **Graham**, *Crusher is coming* and *Greetings from Sandy Beach*

Alison **Lester**, *Magic Beach*

Eleanor **Nilsson**/Craig Smith, *Parrot fashion*

Colin **Thiele**/Robert Roennfeldt, *Gemma's Christmas Eve*

Tim **Winton**/Maureen Prichard, *Jesse*

### **Workshop handouts—listed and annotated**

Bradford, Clare. 1990, 'The changing picture book', *Magpies*, 5, 5-8: the writer details the changes that occurred in picture books over the 1970s and 80s, including *use of multiple narratives and different points of view, the appropriation of narrative devices associated with film, the involvement of the reader as an active participant in making meaning ... a blurring of distinctions between various literary forms.*

Hendrickson, Mary Lynn. 2001, 'Oh, the places you'll go!' *U.S. Catholic*, 66/4, 30-33: the writer *reports on books recommended for teaching children about spirituality.*

Jenkins, Cathy. 2004, 'resources for religious education', *Echoing the Word*, 3/1: the writer reviews *three very different picture books that could be used as a*

*starting point for units of work in RE across a range of age groups and for a variety of themes.*

Kettelhut, Helene. 2003, 'Only the names have changed', *Church educator*, October, 5: the writer links biblical and secular narratives in this very short article.

Martin, James. 2000, 'Of many things', *America*, 183/5, 2: the writer *discusses how he's rediscovered the magic of children's books through his 18-month-old nephew.*

Ward, Elaine M. 2003, 'The value of story telling', *Church educator*, October, 3-4: the writer explores some of the purposes for story telling, story giving.

Worsley, Howard. 2004, 'Popularized atonement theory reflected in children's literature', *The expository times*, 115/5, 149-156: the writer has specific comments throughout about a theological reading of four children's books as models of the doctrine of atonement.