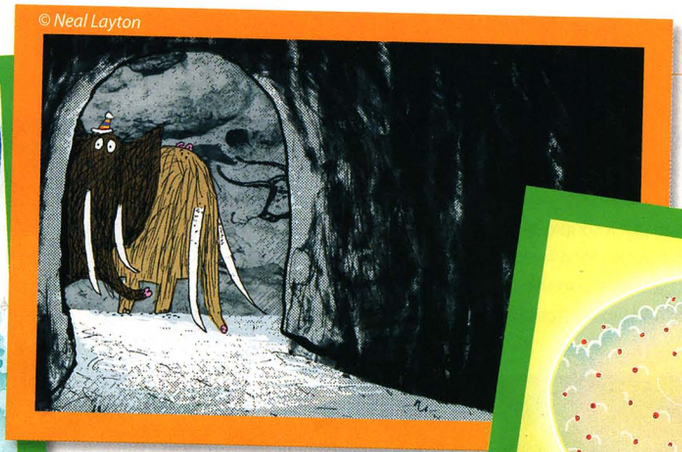
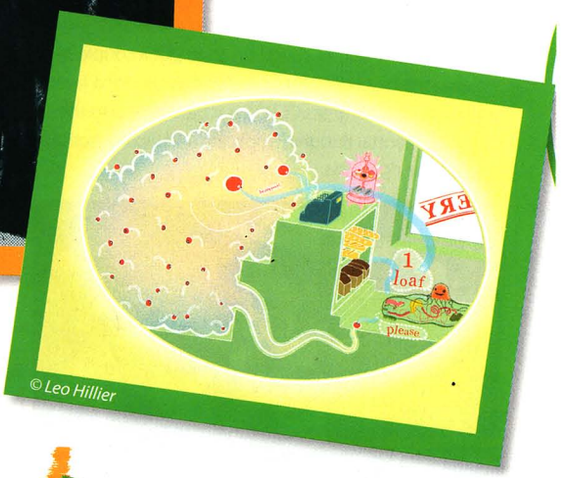

© Oliver Jeffers

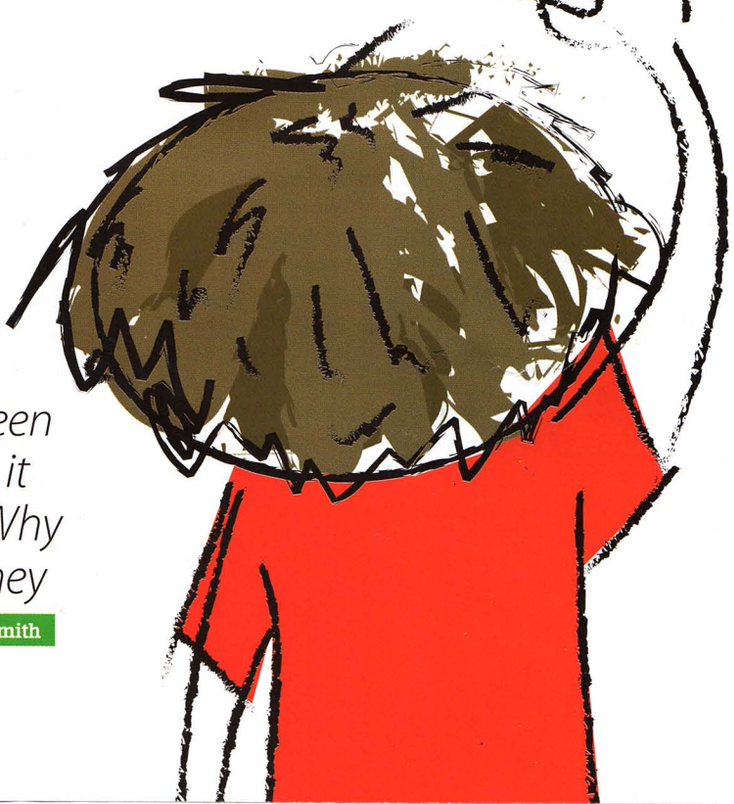

© Neal Layton



© Leo Hillier

NEAL LAYTON (ABOVE): *"It's a pleasure doing something that I love. It is incredibly satisfying to be involved in the whole process – writing, illustrating, design and production and finally seeing the finished product on the shelf"*

children's illustration

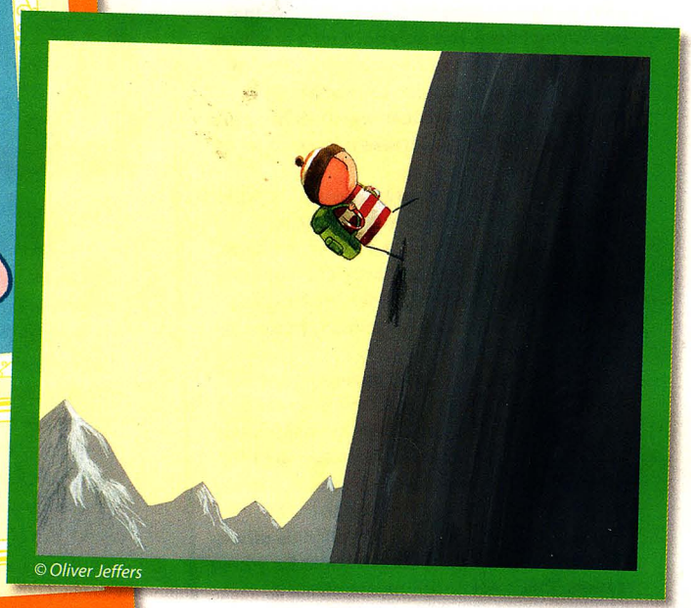


Children's illustration is a style that, although much loved, has often been patronised in the past. So how has it recently become more accepted? Why have attitudes changed and will they last? Adam Smith finds out BY **Adam Smith**

© Leo Hillier

LEO HILLIER (LEFT): A One Night Stay *was created for the STAY exhibition at The Great Eastern Hotel, London in 2005, as a limited-edition leather-bound book, sitting on four painted tables in the lobby and adjacent the library*

OLIVER JEFFERS (BELOW): *Jeffers says that children's illustrations are finally being seen as art in their own right, encouraging more artists to take it up*



© Oliver Jeffers

Illustration is primarily defined as "pictorial matter used to explain or decorate a text" within the Collins English Dictionary. In essence, illustration has always strived to encourage an emotive response, essentially creating an intimacy with its anticipated audiences.

There is no more prevalent example of this than in children's illustration. No other format exposes or decorates a story quite like this style. Children's illustration excels in communicating subtle thematic tones within lush narratives, as well as inspiring viewers, increasingly young and old alike, to feel emotions that serve to expand the linguistics of any given story. Without a doubt this style of illustration surely endears itself to most, be it either enthusiastic reader or the most ardent of creatives, through nostalgia or common appreciation.

Despite this popularity, there hasn't always been a unanimous fervour for children's illustration, certainly in what appeared in 'credible' sections of the design world. At times classed as inferior to other art forms, labelled as lavishly illustrated in ways rarely appropriate for adult literature and audience, such assertions could be questioned. However, what was apparent was that children's illustration, and to some extent illustration as a whole, was considered as a small part of the creative and entertainment industries. It is apparent now, however, that such stigmas are being relieved.

wonderland

At the present time, the creative climate for children's book illustrators is good. A newfound tolerance has been evolving for such an expressive style and its true potential seems to be being recognised by the high and popular culture sectors alike. This can be accounted for through the appreciation within the gaming, cartoon and, importantly, publishing sectors. Art galleries hold evocative tributes to commendable examples, book fairs and international awards recognise artistic achievement and the publishing industry steadily expands. This, of course, can only be a good thing for artists looking to make headway with their own comparative styles.

Back in 2003, it was estimated by the appropriate authorities at Book Marketing Ltd, disclosed to and by AllBusiness.com, that there was distinctive growth in the children's book market. Surprisingly, adult audiences instigated this with some 19 million children's books bought by older readers that very year. Purchases had grown by 20 per cent, with BML suggesting that the figure fell to just 2 per cent once counting the number of books bought for children.

So with this information taken into account, contemplating the subsequent potential growth of the children's illustration market up until the present day and disregarding the myth of age group appreciation, it's apparent that negative views surrounding the style are perishing. This is an opinion shared by some of the industry's finest contributors, for example, the world-renowned Oliver Jeffers. »

"Children's illustration excels in communicating subtle thematic tones within lush narratives"

case study

Child's Play International

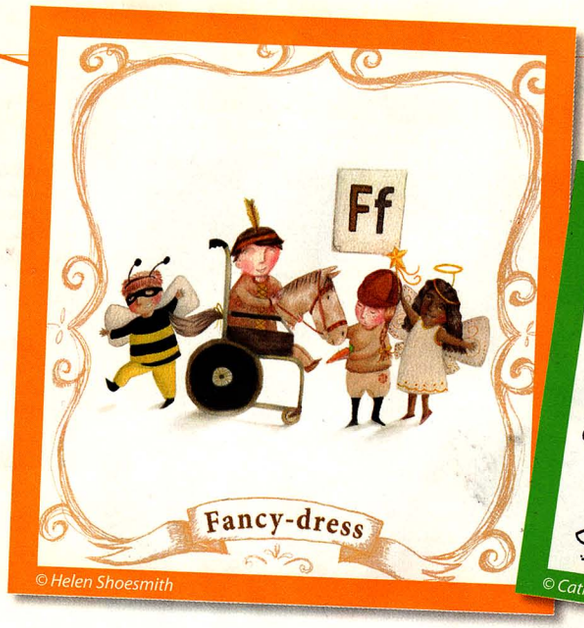
Child's Play describes itself as much more than a publishing house. Not only because it produces games, toys and associated materials, chosen and interwoven to provide a range of approaches to different learning objectives, but due to its philosophy that sees it strive to set standards as a 'family'.

With titles ranging from ages one to eight, it covers a spectrum of educational and motivating titles that can be appreciated by all ages. But it also strives to change the face of the industry for the better of readers, authors and artists alike. It does so by expanding tolerance and understanding.

A great example of this is its recent support for the In The Picture project, now in its third year. This pioneering campaign, corresponded by SCOPE, aims to promote the inclusion of disabled children in children's books. This is an issue that needs to be addressed so that disabled children are included alongside others in illustrations and storylines in books for young readers. This is not an attempt to create a separate strand of children's literature that tackles disability issues.

The project aims to involve people from all the many areas that are concerned with children's books, so that they can be part of changing the culture that currently means disabled children are virtually invisible in early years' books. Hopefully, the 770,000 disabled children in the UK who have virtually no role models in literature will find themselves included.

www.childs-play.com
www.childreninthepicture.org.uk



© Helen Shoesmith


© Cathy Hughes

IN THE PICTURE: *The In The Picture project aims to help children with disabilities see others like themselves represented in illustrations and books*

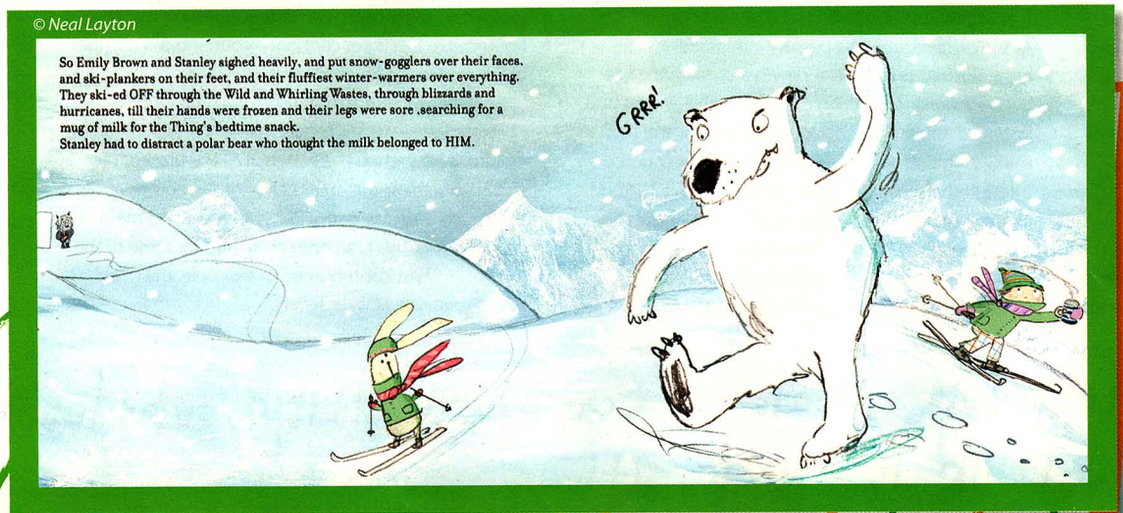
With over eight years' experience and top-selling titles under his belt such as *The Incredible Book Eating Boy* (Harper Collins Children's Books) and *How to Catch a Star* (Putnam Pub Group), Jeffers shares his own positive insight into the objectives of the children's illustration industry. "Children's books, and the way children's books are seen, are evolving. The picture books that are being created now are more exciting than at any time in the last two decades," he exclaims, an encouraging fact for all those involved in pursuing such a style. He goes on to add: "But of equal importance is the sea of change in attitudes towards them and with that the credibility that is beginning to rightly come their way. They are fashionable now and this helps to bring some of the best creative minds into the industry."

Asserting that previously considered as a lowly cousin of the fine arts, Jeffers feels the attention at times reserved for formal arts is being noted more frequently in the world of picture books. An authoritative statement from an artist who is revered equally in fine-art circles: "Children's illustrations are beginning to be seen as art. As students and emerging artists are less frequently practising and being encouraged to practise, in just one medium and with one style, a blur between the traditional boundaries of image making is occurring. With it comes a blur between what is considered 'worthy' art in the traditional sense."

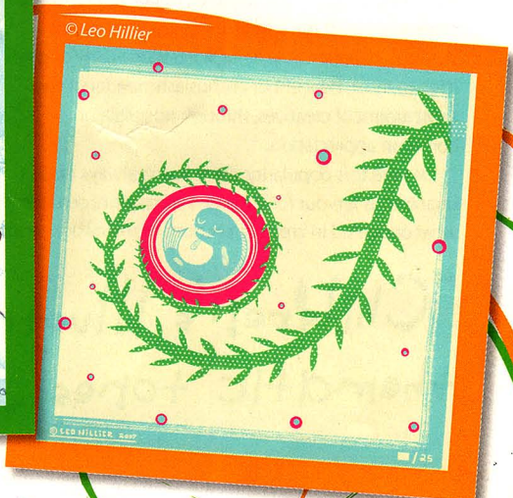
The new generation of artist, delivering distinctive style through a sundry of methods, has provided ammunition, forcing many authorities to re-evaluate their opinions. So what of the digital revolution that has been taking place in consequent years throughout the walks of the creative world? Has this assisted the advancement of opportunity within children's illustration? " Creative software developments have played a huge part in the kind of children's books that have been made," confirms Jeffers.

digital delight

As a purely creative tool, used in an editing capacity or to accelerate pre- and post-production, the involvement of digital application has become more and more integral to the alchemy of children's illustration. Neal Layton, an illustrator with over ten years' freelancing experience, has witnessed this digital development come into play and endorses its contributions, within both the industry and personal practice. Realising the potential of the G3, Layton produced his first digitally constructed picture book, *Oscar and Arabella*. "At the time there were very few publishers willing to print a

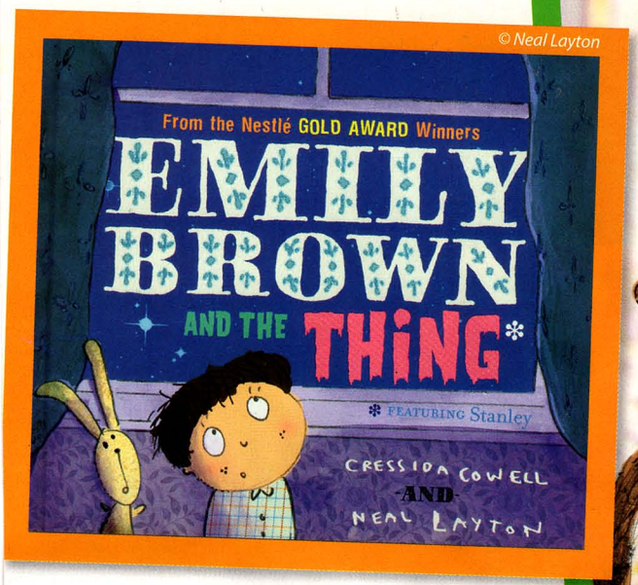


© Neal Layton


© Leo Hillier

NEAL LAYTON (LEFT): *"Children's books also have a longevity to them that other areas of illustration sometimes lack"*

NEAL LAYTON (BELOW): *It took Layton over four years for his first publication. But the wait was worth it, as he explains: "It's a pleasure doing something that I love. It is incredibly satisfying to be involved in the whole process"*



book using digital illustrations and they needed a lot of encouragement," he explains.

How times have changed. Since then, Layton, along with many other children's illustration contributors, has been producing consistently in one digital capacity or another. The merits are simple and extremely apparent: "Using Photoshop has given me much more control over my work. I am able to pour over literally every pixel of an illustration and make sure I am happy with it, and using a well-calibrated monitor and careful proofing I can be fairly sure how colours will print CMYK."

You could say that the intervention of digital media is almost indispensable when concerning all phases of the creative process at the present time. In an industry where publishers anticipate thousands of pounds worth of revenue for their publications, where time consumption is assured and deadlines are constantly imminent, the pressure on a children's illustrator has perhaps never been greater. Opportunity goes hand in hand with demand, after all. But software such as Photoshop can help ease these burdens. Layton corroborates by saying: "I find working in a digital environment much quicker and more versatile. I can make an infinite amount of changes to an artwork before it is finished. Sometimes pictures might go through quite radical transformations before they reach an end result. A physical artwork can only take so much over-painting and amending before it starts to fall apart!"

However, there is a common consensus among associated creatives that under no circumstances should we think that digital application implicitly ensures good children's illustration. While you may think this a contradictory remark, what is meant is that children's illustration is only as good as the sum of its parts. Oliver Jeffers explains: "Having talked with other illustrators, the process of creating a picture book has often been compared with the process of directing a film. There is a certain amount of time and space in which to communicate a narrative, so one small change in tone, speed or spacing can have a knock-on effect, and this needs to be balanced out in order to emphasise the correct aspects of the story."

Composition, colour, shape and narrative all play a major role in fashioning a children's book. Digital application is certainly an element that has prompted evolution in each of these factors, and so it would seem that the experimentation and use of this is best described as a means to an end rather than simply an end itself. Leo Hillier agrees by adding: "In terms of creating imagery, I think it's still true that if the idea or initial drawing isn't looking good, making it digital won't really help. But what's really amazing is that Photoshop offers possibilities for editing and evolving your work, and seeing things you might not have done just on paper."

"Composition, colour, shape and narrative all play a major role in fashioning a children's book"

case study

Oliver Jeffers

Jeffers' eight years of creative experience have seen him flourish as a children's book illustrator. However, he wouldn't exactly associate himself exclusively to this genre. "I make art," he explains. "From figurative painting and installation, to illustration and picture-book making. I have exhibited in New York, Dublin, London, Sydney, Washington DC, Belfast and a few other places. As a co-founder of the art collective OAR, some large projects have included nine days in Belfast and the award-winning BUILDING."

However, he admits that a children's book style has lent itself to his apparent artistic method. "There has always been a strong undercurrent of narrative behind my work, but much of my current interest in making art lies in the anomaly between logical and emotional thinking." As a man of much aptitude, Jeffers was also keen to admit the benefits of being the sole architect of his titles.

He reveals: "One of the advantages I feel that I have over picture books that are written and illustrated by separate people is that instead of a finished manuscript existing before the story is visualised, I have the opportunity to have the illustrations inform the text. Often, the text for my books, when looked at in isolation, might seem quite flat and matter-of-fact, almost separated, and when the illustrations are looked at without the text, they are quite heavy with emotion and narrative. So, when you put the two together, they work off each other creating an overall effect that is neither and both; emotive and engaging without being sickly sweet."

case study

Healthy competition

Many events exist that allow children's illustrators to represent their talents with the possibility of global recognition. Professionals throughout the British publishing arena can be presented and awarded through one of the UK's longest-running and prestigious prizes, The Nestlé Children's Book Prize. This event has seen over half a million school children involved in choosing winners. Ceremonies are held in December.

There are impressive opportunities for enthusiasts, and none more so than those attending related university and college courses. Competition guidelines are sent out to universities and colleges, receiving entry forms in January with an April deadline for participants. Those successful in participating will have their design reviewed by a judging panel that includes two or three leading children's illustrators. Those of you who succeed in winning will see your work exhibited in one of the capital's exemplary galleries.

Then there is the Bologna Children's Book Fair. An event of mass appreciation through continental recognition, BCBF puts on a show to remember. This one is for artists, authors, publishers, TV and film producers, librarians and many more. This event offers great prospects to buy and sell copyright, establish new contacts, strengthen business relations and essentially discover and learn the newest trends and developments in the industry. In 2007 this 'exhibition' attracted 1,300 exhibitors from 66 countries from around the globe. And of course, let's not forget the chance to win the most prestigious BolognaRagazzi Award, a prize recognising outstanding graphic and editorial design.

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION (ABOVE): *The Bologna Children's book fair is a massive event that has been running for 45 years. It is attended by book publishers, literary agents, TV and film companies and developers, among others*


© Oliver Jeffers

lessons learnt

Hillier's experience of the industry differs from that of Jeffer's and Layton's. A budding talented freelancer, having entertained clients such as Pictoplasma, ABC Trust and Yummy Industries, Hillier's an artist looking to make headway in the children's book illustration arena, with several books already ready to be published. But Hillier hits upon a key concern that has plagued the children's book industry for many years and those wishing to participate, subsequently contradicting Oliver Jeffer's earlier opinions. A concern referred to as 'censorship'.

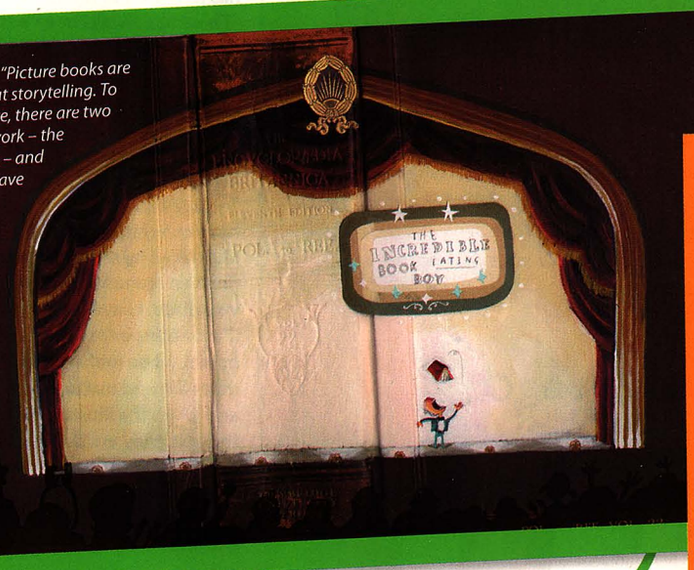
After research it seemed that the issue had 'reared its ugly head' many times in ethical debates throughout authoritative examples, including *The Telegraph* national newspaper. Fears over health and safety, political correctness and other such social concerns have said to be accountable.

In a sales-driven market, it is understandable that publishers would hold reservation over titles that would seem to disturb and deter parents buying for younger audiences. But does it apply to those of the older variety?

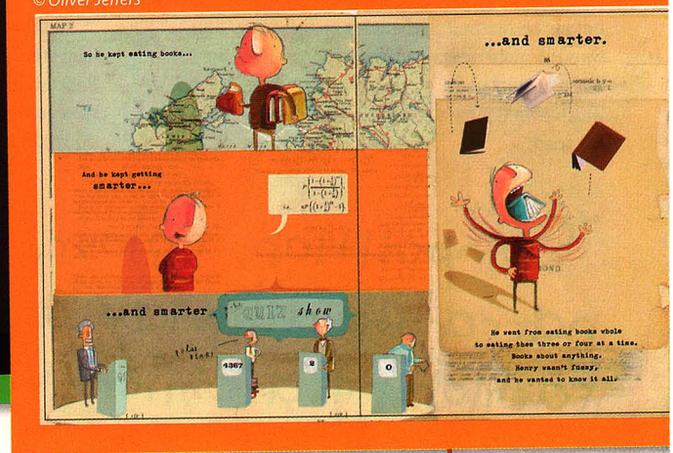
Hillier explains: "I'm not sure things are going in the right direction, if you are thinking about creative standing within history and other areas of children's entertainment." He goes on to elaborate: "I think there's a problem, perhaps particularly with British publishers, that the safe option is the better option. I think the best children's books, those that are memorable and last, can be those that are unusual and even frightening. Go into a bookshop today and it's worrying how much work looks the same, and the stories are tired and often empty. There will always be exceptions, but I'm thinking of the big chunk of paper weighing down the shelves in the middle ground." Considering this statement, a few points spring to mind. Beyond the euphoria displayed in

OLIVER JEFFERS (BELOW): *Shape, colour and form are essential elements in children's illustration: "My older brother has a six-month-old son, who apparently stares at the double pages of art in my first two books (which are very colourful and spacious), but cries when he's shown anything by Maurice Sendak"*

OLIVER JEFFERS: *"Picture books are first and foremost about storytelling. To do this, to communicate, there are two separate elements at work – the words and the pictures – and the relationship they have with each other is without question the most important aspect of the picture book"*

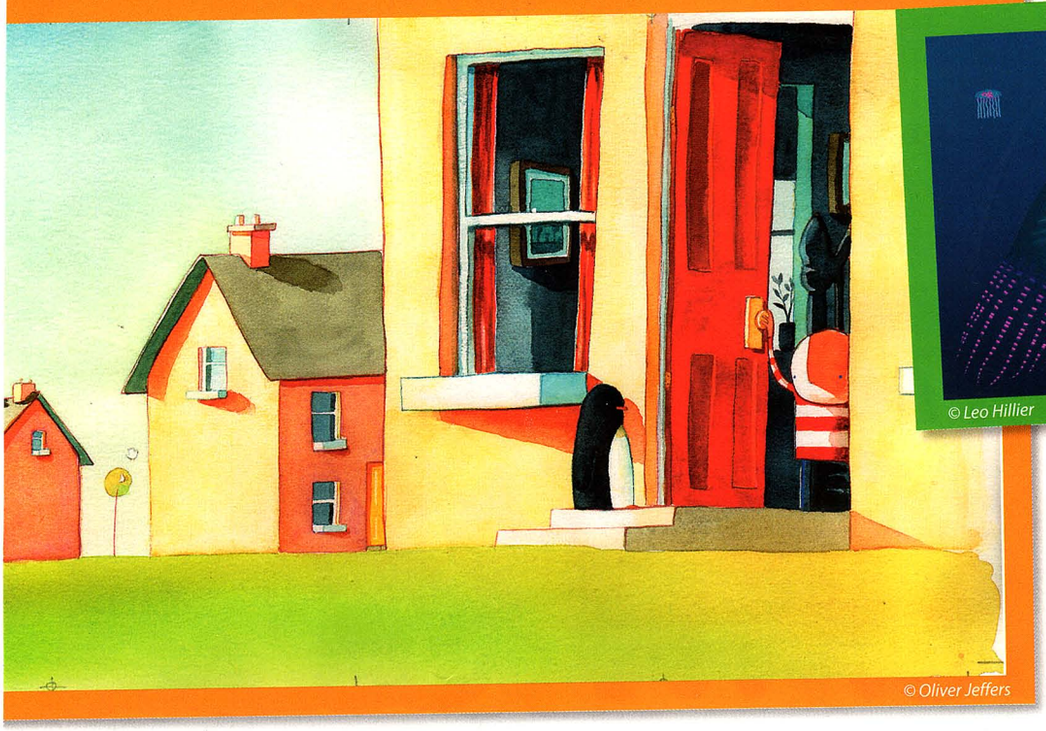


© Oliver Jeffers



© Oliver Jeffers

OLIVER JEFFERS: *Jeffers found the children's illustration profession by accident: "I never really intended or decided upon that direction. As an artist I've always been interest in the nature of words and their relationship with pictures"*



© Oliver Jeffers

© Leo Hillier

LEO HILLIER (ABOVE): *"The freedom and creative possibilities on a children's book project seemed to outweigh those on other illustration projects"*

both design and opportunities, is there is a responsibility when creating children's illustration? Perhaps creative freedom is a luxury for the more established or distinctive illustrator? Or perhaps it's that the market, although under a flux of evolution, isn't getting a consistent diversity of contributors? Hillier shares his opinion: "I think publishers have put more money into the quality and diversity of the printed papers, which is good, but it comes sometimes at the expense of good storytelling and exciting imagery. I would say that modern artists, especially those not just young but with a drive to be different, are trying their best to make the books they want to, but the industry moves slower and in a more conservative fashion."

Such a critical statement surely deserves some genuine answers. Annie Kubler is good enough to supply these. With 18 years' experience, Kubler is the present art director for Child's Play publishers. Without doubt such a job demands a great deal and she, like many others in her vocation, is responsible for shaping the way children's book illustration is received by related audiences. She explains: "The art director has an important role in shaping the look of a publishing programme through the choices of illustrators."

When asked about how stigmas and censorship applied in the modern industry her response was positive, going so far as to endorse an artist's contributions as a catalyst for change. Kubler says: "Britain has always been at the forefront of children's illustration, breaking boundaries, setting trends and very innovative in the design of novelties. Despite this, there is hardly any recognition of this talent in this country and illustrators and designers deserve more. Things are moving though: 'The Big Picture' is a national campaign to promote picture books, launched in October by Booktrust and supported by most British publishers."

happy ever after?

So it seems that Child's Play is a publishing house that recognises the efforts and attitudes of emerging artists. Maybe this is due to Kubler's capacity as an in-house illustrator as well as art director, or perhaps more and more publishing houses are sharing the same views. It certainly seems that all concerned are slowly but surely starting to pull in the same direction. Only time will tell if this is established, but Kubler reveals the importance and responsibility of the art director to endorse illustrators appropriately now and in the future. This may, however, be considered an intricate task for UK publishers and art directors in that they operate in a versatile, multicultural society. British publishers seem to come in for a lot of flack when concerning their 'generalised approach', but the previous point may be a contributing factor.

Kubler explains: "The type of society depicted in children's books is also partly the responsibility of art directors. We can choose and ask the illustrators to represent a certain type of society. We can make the decision of making it inclusive with a variety of ethnicities, abilities, social groups, gender roles, etc… To me this is a very exciting aspect of my job. It keeps me on my toes, reflecting and questioning all the time. Together with the illustrators, we are the people deciding what sort of world the children will identify with."

No matter what shape or form this 'world' takes, be it innovative, depicting the lives and rituals of disabled children, socially provoking, presenting awareness of issues such as paedophilia and abuse, or just a book jam-packed with entertaining and undisruptive aesthetic appeal, one fundamental issue is still principal for all parties concerned.

Kubler sums this up: "We have a message and aim to communicate in the most exciting and efficient way. This is often the hardest part in the briefing and liaising with the illustrator, but it's the most important aspect of producing books." Be this for adult or children appreciators, all aspire to create, produce and be a part of work that fundamentally communicates, engages and is remembered fondly by many, having an influence on so many people's formative and seminal years. Long may it continue.

"Go into a bookshop today and it's worrying how much work looks the same"