



New Picture Books

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Clive Barnes looks at a selection of recent titles.

As one of the judges for this year's Book Trust Early Years Book Awards, Clive Barnes has been made very aware as the Award submissions keep arriving, of the number of picture books published each year. **Books for Keeps** asked him to take time off to assess seven recently published picture books. **Clive Barnes** discusses.

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I am one of the judges for this year's Book Trust Early Years Book Awards, so piles of picture and board books are growing ever larger on the floor. I have three groups so far: probables, possibles, and you must be joking. And there are a lot more books, and a lot more head scratching, to come. At the same time, the seven titles in this picture book round-up for **Books for Keeps** arrived. Thankfully, they are all books which, if eligible, I would have put straight on the probable pile.

I'll start with a new appearance of an old favourite. In **Katie Morag and the Dancing Class**, Katie's two grannies once more offer their different versions of what it means to enjoy being a girl as Katie is enrolled in the ballet class in the Struay village hall. Granma Mainland is delighted with the thought of Katie in a pink frilly frou-frou (will she ever learn?). Katie puts on her beloved sweater and wellies over her ballet kit, and finds so many things to do on her way to class that she arrives late and joins in with the big boy cousins doing tap. But she can't ask Granma Mainland to buy tap shoes as well as ballet shoes, so practical Grannie Island adds some hobnails to Katie's wellies (don't try this at home) and, wouldn't you guess it, tap dancing Katie is the star of the end of term show. The joy of Katie Morag and her island is that Mairi Hedderwick continues to realise for us a landscape, a community and a particular way of life. This is picture storytelling at its detailed best.

All about boys

British picture books which depict a real social world like Katie's are rare these days, as publishers go for global markets where it's thought easiest to avoid any reference to social or cultural particularities, which is curious at a time when we are supposed to value diversity. The only other book in the batch which offers us something similar to Katie Morag is **The Boy Who Built the Boat**, touted by the publisher as 'quintessentially Australian'. It's certainly got something of the pioneer spirit about it, being set around a house on stilts at the cliff edge and a shed down the back where dad is building serious boats. Health and safety conscious pre-schools look away now, for there's a clipboard full of risks here, as son Henry, a small chip off the old block, sets about making his own boat from odds and ends. Be reassured though, Dad's got his eye on Henry and these are Henry's own tools. This is a book for boys. Ross Mueller's text is a cleverly engineered rhythmic paean to hammers, drills and saws. Craig Smith's illustrations, predominantly in workmanlike tones of red and brown, are busy, humorous and occasionally touched with real wonder, especially in a

startling double page which shows Henry filling the wheelbarrow with water.

Curiously, the remaining five books are also about boys, although just one of them is human. The first three tackle the well-worn theme of the disturbance caused by someone new. **I Don't Like Gloria!** is the sad soliloquy of a chubby dog who has had his nose put out of joint by the arrival in his household of a cat called Gloria. Kaye Umansky tells Colin's story of everyday injustice in a few well chosen words and Margaret Chamberlain stages the painful memories in the sparsely furnished domestic scenes where they happen. The bemused dog buttonholes the reader from the foreground, while the cause of his misery makes mischief behind him. Poor Colin goes through a range of emotions, from resentment, through tearfulness, to blazing anger. His agony comes to an end only with the arrival of a new pet, Jeffrey the rabbit, when Colin and Gloria can at least agree that they 'REALLY don't like Jeffrey'. Readers will sympathise, and laugh a little too. Nor will they fail to get the point when, on the last page, Jeffrey looks forlornly over his shoulder, the new odd one out.

Male posturing

In **Oscar and Arabella and Ormsby** the friendship of Oscar and Arabella, the woolly mammoths from Neal Layton's two previous Ice Age adventures, seems to have blossomed into romance, as we see Oscar proffering flowers and accompanying Arabella to 'secluded sunny glades'. Unfortunately, no sooner does this happen, than Ormsby appears on the scene, a Woolly Rhinoceros with a smile and a stance like Leslie Phillips at his caddish best. Oscar is careful and considerate, while Ormsby is daring and dangerous. What's a girl to do? Well, in this case, wander off in a snow storm, as Oscar and Ormsby's rivalry develops into a frenzied fight. Arabella seeks shelter in the cave of our solitary human ancestor, warming himself over a fire. Their cries of mutual alarm bring Ormsby and Oscar on a cavalry charge, pelting the long-suffering cave man into submission with a barrage of snow balls. Layton tells the story with dash and humour, and some backdrops of neon intensity between the frequent snow flurries, finally reassuring us that Oscar and Arabella will remain 'very best special friends'.

There's more male posturing in **Cock-a-Doodle-Hooooooo!** Mick Manning and Brita Granström, who made their names with some imaginative non-fiction picture book collaborations, now bring us the pure fiction of a lonely owl who seeks shelter in a chicken coop. Discovered in the morning snuggling up to a speckled hen, owl would like to stay where he is, but he's crashed a raucous hen party (apart from the speckled hen who's nice to him), which demands that he can only stay if he can stand in as the cockerel. Sadly, he gets no points at all for pecking, scratching or cock-a-doodling until the speckled hen gives him an intensive course in rooster behaviour. Soon he is confidently strutting his stuff but, once again, his cock-a-doodle lets him down. And, just when he is exasperated about the whole cross-species thing, a rat invades the hen house and, to general delight, he does what an owl has to do and gobbles it up. With an appealing little owl, and some very rude and intimidating hens, this is a cheerful story told mainly in double spreads in brilliant colour; wonderful for storytelling to a group.

The tender side of the male

The tender side of the male gets a nocturnal airing in **Small Billy and the Midnight Star**. There was a time when wishing for the moon would have been the subject of some gentle caution in a picture book. These days we are all encouraged to dream the impossible dream, even as a spectator sport on TV, and when Billy, the littlest Bilby, falls in love with a distant star, he has plenty of encouragement from the other Bilbies. A Bilby, by the way, is an Australian marsupial about the size of a cat with a pointed nose, large feet and a long tufted tail. It's an endangered species, which is not surprising if the direction of Billy's affections is typical. Australian readers will know it well because chocolate Bilbies, rather than chocolate bunnies, have long been a feature of Easter there. Bruce Whatley makes them huggable, slightly whimsical creatures, clothing them minimally and illuminating their faces with star-shine, as they busy themselves, in a deep blue night, building a platform of stones from which Billy can give his star a kiss. The subtle fun of Whatley's illustrations counters the syrupy taste of Nette Hilton's text, but he may have missed a trick in keeping so tight a focus on the Bilbies. There's a lost opportunity towards the end of the book to open out the view and underline an implicit conservation message by showing us the Bilbies' desert habitat in its full dawn glory.

I've left my favourite to last. **Oliver Who Would Not Sleep** is the tale of a boy for whom bed is the springboard of a restless imagination (probably fuelled by bedtime Maurice Sendak and Raymond Briggs), which carries him past the terrestrial delights of painting, drawing and reading, and sends him soaring into space, before he returns to snuggle down at last ?where all his cuddlies looked cosy and warm?. Mara Bergman's verse begins with the jaunty insistence of a nursery rhyme ? ?Oliver Donnington Rimington-Sneep COULDN'T and DIDN'T and WOULD NOT SLEEP! ? ? revs up at blast off, grows quiet for Oliver's contemplation of Mars, and then whizzes him back home and puts him gently, gently down to sleep. Nick Maland's illustrations keep pace, and they move the reader skilfully between the solid world of the bedroom and its contents, and the porous world of play that Oliver makes of them. Maland's use of a palette of blue, yellow and orange seems to invoke that state that my mum calls overtired, when the body should give in but the mind drives it on. And look at the wallpaper (as you do when you lie in bed for a long time without sleeping). Isn't something happening there? This is definitely one for the top of the probable pile.

Clive Barnes is Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City.

Books discussed

Katie Morag and the Dancing Class , Mairi Hedderwick, Bodley Head, 978 0 370 32910 9, £9.99 hbk

The Boy Who Built the Boat , Ross Mueller, ill. Craig Smith, Allen & Unwin, 978 1 74114 393 5, £9.99 hbk

I Don't Like Gloria! Kaye Umansky, ill. Margaret Chamberlain, Walker, 978 1 84428 026 1, £10.99 hbk

Oscar and Arabella and Ormsby , Neal Layton, Hodder, 978 0 340 88454 6, £10.99 hbk

Cock-a-Doodle-Hooooooo! Mick Manning, ill. Brita Granström, Little Tiger, 978 1 84506 454 9, £10.99 hbk, 978 1 84506 455 6, £5.99 pbk

Small Billy and the Midnight Star , Nette Hilton, ill. Bruce Whatley, Hodder, 978 0 340 94449 3, £10.99 hbk

Oliver Who Would Not Sleep , Mara Bergman, ill. Nick Maland, Hodder, 978 0 340 89328 9, £10.99 hbk

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