



The Story Machine

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~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

Elliott, an inquisitive boy, finds a strange machine on a foray into a dark forgotten place: perhaps it's the loft, perhaps it's under the stairs. To those of us old enough to remember, the machine looks like a typewriter. Apparently, Tom doesn't recognise it but somehow realises he needs to feed a sheet of paper into it. By inadvertently sitting on it, he discovers it 'makes letters' and so he declares it 'a story machine'. Then he finds he is not too good at making words, but notices that, in his failed attempts, he has created a picture, so he makes more pictures 'pictures that tell a story'. But, alas, the machine is overworked and breaks down. Tom falls back on his own resources and, using pencil and paintbrush, realises that it was not the machine, but him, that was making the stories and 'he was really rather good at it.'

This is the paperback edition of a book that has already had a lot of praise, particularly for its encouragement to dyslexic readers, its inspiration to creativity and as an endorsement of the powers of the mind over technology. I get all that and I like Tom McLaughlin's illustrations, particularly the ingenuity with which he makes pictures from typed letters. But this prosaic grouse in the corner is still not convinced by the argument as it is set out 'and this is a book that for me raises more questions than it answers. Is dyslexia a matter not of print but of the perception of words 'in which case technology is a side issue? Would a child reader be rather confused by Elliott, who is so good at working old technology but doesn't realise he can draw pictures himself rather more easily without it? Doesn't Elliott know that when he operates the typewriter, he is making the pictures not the machine, which is totally inert otherwise? Can't modern technology actively encourage and aid creativity and circumvent the problems associated with print as the sole source of story? This is a book that presses all the right keys in terms of what we enlightened advocates of individual creativity and universal access to story believe, but rather muddles the questions of pencil, brush and paper versus keyboard and screen, the problems created by print for dyslexic readers, and the limiting perception that writing a story means using words rather than pictures. Incidentally, this is a story that, like most picture books and comics, uses both.

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