

The Great Bear V the school reader

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My thanks to Robyn Ewing, Geoff Williams and Lorraine Wilson for many conversations about Children's Literature that have informed my thinking.

In 1999 Armin Greder and I published *The Great Bear*. It was the culmination of four years intense collaboration. In 1990 I published two titles in a reading scheme. That was the result of a number of hours fiddling with words on the page. A look at the two different writing processes is very revealing both for the creative tasks involved and I believe the reading experiences that result.

One morning in 1995 I woke with a series of images from my dream strong in my memory. So strong that I wrote them down, pondering their meaning. The sequence was a huge dancing bear in a medieval village, somewhere in mountainous Central Europe. The bear was tormented and tormented and finally broke free. She ran to the centre of the village square, climbed the flag pole and balanced on the top. I knew she could never climb down but I was unafraid for her. Then she launched herself into the stars and I thought of Ursa Major, the Great Bear constellation. It felt very satisfying. I knew there was a story there and so wrote out the sequence of events. This was an aid to memory - not even a first draft. The next step was to relate the dream to Armin Greder, the illustrator I have most often worked with. He grew up in Switzerland and brings a strong European sensibility to his art. He immediately related to the story (which had not yet been written) and began drawing. I struggled to write the tale to accompany the pictures he was sending me. It was prosaic to begin with, a simple story relating the events as dreamt. It was not 'good' enough. It needed to be lifted to a level of intensity. I wanted the reader to feel the bear's anguish and to understand the desire to break free. I wanted drama and poetry. I wanted the levels of psychological and mythological insight to be available to very young readers. I talked at length with Armin and then went back to my desk and struggled with the ideas, with the structure of the story, with the language - every word, every nuance of meaning.

He kept drawing. He sent me rough images of brutish cruel faces, those who bully and torment. We discussed the role of the sky and how to show it as a character in the story - a potential place of freedom. How could he draw those stars to depict them as vital and inviting? The action takes place at night, how could we use colour to alleviate the overarching evil of the villagers? What perspectives could draw the reader into the story?

Armin Greder believes strongly that his role is to draw in the spaces between and beyond the words. It's a view echoed by Ron Brooks and I regard them as two of the finest illustrators working in this country today. They don't decorate texts or draw to give a visual rendition of the words. They are there to create the visual narrative that takes you beyond the words, that helps the reader to construct meaning from the whole.

We were nearing completion of this book when Armin told me that in the last third of the text, he could find no place to illustrate. There were no 'spaces between the words' and he felt he could create nothing but a visual rendition of my text. Would I consider dropping the words? I barely hesitated. By the time the reader arrives at the point where the written text ceases, the story line is so powerful that there is no danger of a lack of understanding developing. In fact, some readers have suggested that the silence of the last section of the work renders the first sections of written text all

the louder and more powerful. We also decided at this point to add the star charts as endpapers. We felt these added a layer of suggestion to the reader that the mythical element, the origin of Ursa Major was there in the story.

We took the book to our publisher, Alf Mappin at Scholastic, aware that he would have to really understand and like what we had done and be prepared to champion it through the process of evaluation by his colleagues in sales and marketing. He did.

Compare this process with the way in which two short books were written by me for a reading scheme. *Hurry Up* (illus Mitch Vane) and *Walking to School* (illus Linda McClelland) are both published by Nelson. I was approached by the publisher in 1988 and invited to submit work for a reading scheme that would not be 'readers' but would be 'real books'. I was at home with a newborn baby and two other children under four. I was between novels and the idea of writing picture book texts was very appealing. It was quickly apparent that complex, subtle stories were not what was wanted. I persisted. I pondered everything I could imagine that was relevant to a young child and created little stories from them. Sometimes I worked on two or three a day, creating texts of no more than a dozen lines. I cannot call them stories though someone else may do so. Thankfully Nelson only accepted two. Once I had the idea, the writing took hours and days, not months and certainly not years. There was no pondering of layers of meaning or subtlety, little drama and certainly no poetry. I never met the illustrators of these texts and had no discussion with them or with an editor about the different readings possible. The pictures in these books are visual renditions of the story, assisting the reader to guess the meaning of a word on the page. In retrospect, these books were about words and syntax, not about meaning.

I am not proud of the latter two works. I am proud of *The Great Bear*. And yet I suspect the two little stories may well be the ones that find their way into the classroom where young children are learning to read. That saddens me. Those two stories are not works of literature although they are better than the simple exercises in labeling that pass for books in some early reading schemes. In them there is no real characterisation, little dramatic tension, and little incentive for real engagement of the reader with the text. There is no room for varying interpretations of the story, no inspiration to interrogate the text, no place to play.

The latter idea, of stories as places to play was suggested to me by Geoff Williams. He likened stories to 'adventure playground(s) in which the nature of the game played is strongly influenced but not wholly determined by the structures available. We can't play just any game around the structures, but there is also not just one game we are allowed to play.'

Good picture books offer the space for readers to play different games. Illustrators like Armin Greder invite readers to think beyond the words, to ask questions of the story. His images in *The Great Bear* are varied from the small crayon drawings of the bear on the lower, left hand page to the brooding, menacing dark images that dominate the centre of the book. In them he shifts perspective, drawing the reader into thinking they are the bear. You cannot read this work without feeling as the bear feels, identifying with her suffering, celebrating her liberation. As such it is a book that encourages contemplation and discussion.

And contemplation and discussion are the behaviours I engage in as a reader. They are what adult readers do with fiction. I believe very strongly that they are what and how we need to teach our children.

To do this, we need books and stories that encourage these behaviours. My two reading scheme works don't, although you could design comprehension questions around them. (Heaven forbid). We

need books that challenge young readers, give them space and arouse passion and interest. And we need children to have the permission to choose for themselves what it is that they will read.

There is currently much talk about 'levelling texts' a la a remedial program. I am alarmed when I hear that children in many places now have to work through a yellow box and a green box and a red box of books before they get to the purple box. (Or whatever the designated levels of text might be). On what basis has this return to SRA style reading scheme/Basal readers - circa 1962 occurred? How are the books levelled? Linguistic complexity? Is that all reading is mastery of words? The construction of and understanding of meaning is complex and difficult and something we don't fully understand. The best books for children don't reduce the task to simple acquisition of mastery over a word or syntax but, in Margaret Meek's words, 'offer invitations (to young readers) that are far from infantile. Children who encounter such books learn many lessons that are hidden forever from those who move directly from the reading scheme to the worksheet.'

Good books such as many of the trade picture books published in this country, take their readers seriously. There is no 'writing down' to the audience, no compromising on the quality of artistry because the reader is a young child. There is experimenting with ideas, with language and form until the writer and illustrator are satisfied that this is the best way to tell this story. And constant exposure to this kind of book teaches a young reader how to read a wide range of types of discourse.

Is the emphasis on using texts classified into levels a sop to those who would put measurement and simplistic reporting ahead of true learning? Is it convenient to be able to say that 'x%' of all children in our school are reading at level 'y' and therefore we are doing a good job? Have the politicians completely taken over from the educators?

Some years ago I was astounded to hear a teacher say that she was looking forward to leveling novels, including mine, for classes in the senior primary school. I asked on what basis this would be done to a complex novel, a work that used multiple text types, shifting points of view and other sophisticated aspects of modernist writing.

She couldn't answer. What I didn't say, but I wish I had, was that she should be wary. The word level has many meanings. As a verb it can mean 'knock down'. As an adjective: 'uniform.' Is this a linguistic or educational version of the tall poppy syndrome, a reduction of our expectations of children to the lowest common denominator? We are capable of, and they deserve, much more.

References

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