

Chapter 1

How Do You Know If It Is Any Good?

The Development and Application of an Evaluative Framework to Assess Contemporary Children's Books

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of books are published every year both in paper form and online. For a parent or a teacher who is new to the profession, relying on the classics or well-known authors is one way to ensure the books children are reading have literary merit. Yet not all books stand the test of time, and are these traditional choices appropriate for 21st century children? With such a plethora of material now available, how can parents and teachers evaluate the material they are buying or reading to children? This chapter is not written for literacy specialists but rather for those who are keen to make informed book selection choices. It identifies key elements of quality contemporary children's books and provides guidance for their assessment.

INTRODUCTION

There is a huge difference between reading a book and evaluating its literary merits. Evaluation takes time and in our busy lives when thousands of books are available, this process can seem overwhelming. Identifying material that has the ability to engage and draw in its reader is no easy task. Traditionally people have chosen books on such criteria as an absence of swearing, and scariness, or on which

morals or topics are emphasised. Others have focussed on structural aspects such as the book's brevity and use of simple vocabulary or the quality of its illustrations. Yet "the most trustworthy standard for viewing the whole book is to look at the experience that it offers" (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2011, p. 11). Motivational merit reflects readers' interests and is therefore contingent on personal taste (Goodwin, 2008). This engagement may be derived from traditional literary appeals

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or from more contemporary elements developed within radically new forms of the children's genre.

Technology has brought about many changes and literature is no exception. These changes include how we read and what we read. The 'truth' is now constantly in question. The Internet has enabled access to thousands of views on the same topic. Readers have control over what information they read and whether the information is appropriate and credible. Facts can be checked at the touch of a button. Rarely does a person sit and read an entire article; rather they jump from one site to another in an unpredictable fashion. Software packages such as Photoshop have enabled editing of images and photos which can no longer be relied upon as evidence of reality. The younger generation understand and accept this – they have known no other way. Finding books which appeal to this new generation may seem daunting (especially if you are not a digital native yourself).

The books which this new, digital, generation find engaging are the books that provide them with the same aesthetic qualities that they are obtaining from their interactions with the digital world and children's reading preferences are changing as a result of this (Cremin, Mottram, Bearne, & Goodwin, 2008). If you are not a librarian or reading specialist, assessing a book holistically can seem daunting, even overwhelming.

This chapter is designed to provide the reader with a brief explanation of the key elements which leading experts believe should be included in children's books. These key elements have then been developed into a one-page framework to help the reader with initial assessment. It is not anticipated or expected that this framework be used as a rigid 'tick the box' system but rather a method to enable the reader to notice elements often overlooked and to help assess books in a more holistic manner.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of children's literature today, whilst the second outlines a review of the key elements which should be an inherent part of

this literature. The third section includes an evaluative framework and provides suggestions on how this framework could be used to gain awareness and confidence in the selection of contemporary children's books.

BACKGROUND

There are many forms of books, including textbooks, mass-market books, trade books, and e-books. Each of these forms is designed for a different market and purpose. Before evaluating a book it is important to identify who it was written for. A 'text-book' is a book published for the instructional market alone, whilst a 'mass-market book' is a book published solely for the consumer market. These books (e.g., 'Little Golden Books') are generally inexpensive and often sold in supermarkets or airports. 'Trade books' are created for both the consumer and institutional market. These are sold to libraries and schools but are also sold to consumers through bookstores. Publishers are generally keen for a trade book to be popular in both the consumer and institutional markets and both quality and child appeal are considered when deciding on sales potential. Electronic books (e-books) may or may not have a printed equivalent. Their digital format allows multimedia and non-textual information to be included. In order to narrow the scope of this chapter, textbooks have been excluded as they are directed at an instructional rather than an institutional or consumer market. For this reason the term 'book' shall refer solely to mass-market books, trade books, and e-books for the remainder of the chapter.

Children's books typically are categorized by age level and genre. Non-fiction/informational books are generally written across all age levels, whilst fiction on the other hand is divided into picture-books (which are often aimed at younger readers), sophisticated picture-books (aimed at a broader age group including the older teens), easy readers (which build the skills of early readers), transitional books (which bridge the gap between

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