

**21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY MAKERS AND MATERIALITIES**

**Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial**

**Research Through Design Conference | RTD 2015**

Salisbury, M., Palmer, B., and Manolessou, K. 2015. Engineering the Book: the relevance of material design to investigations of the picturebook, comic and graphic novel. In: Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial Research Through Design Conference, 25-27 March 2015, Cambridge, UK, Article 15. DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.1327987](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1327987).





# Engineering the Book: The relevance of material design to investigations of the picturebook, comic and graphic novel

Martin Salisbury<sup>1</sup>, Becky Palmer<sup>1</sup>  
Katherina Manolossou<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge School of Art  
Anglia Ruskin University, UK

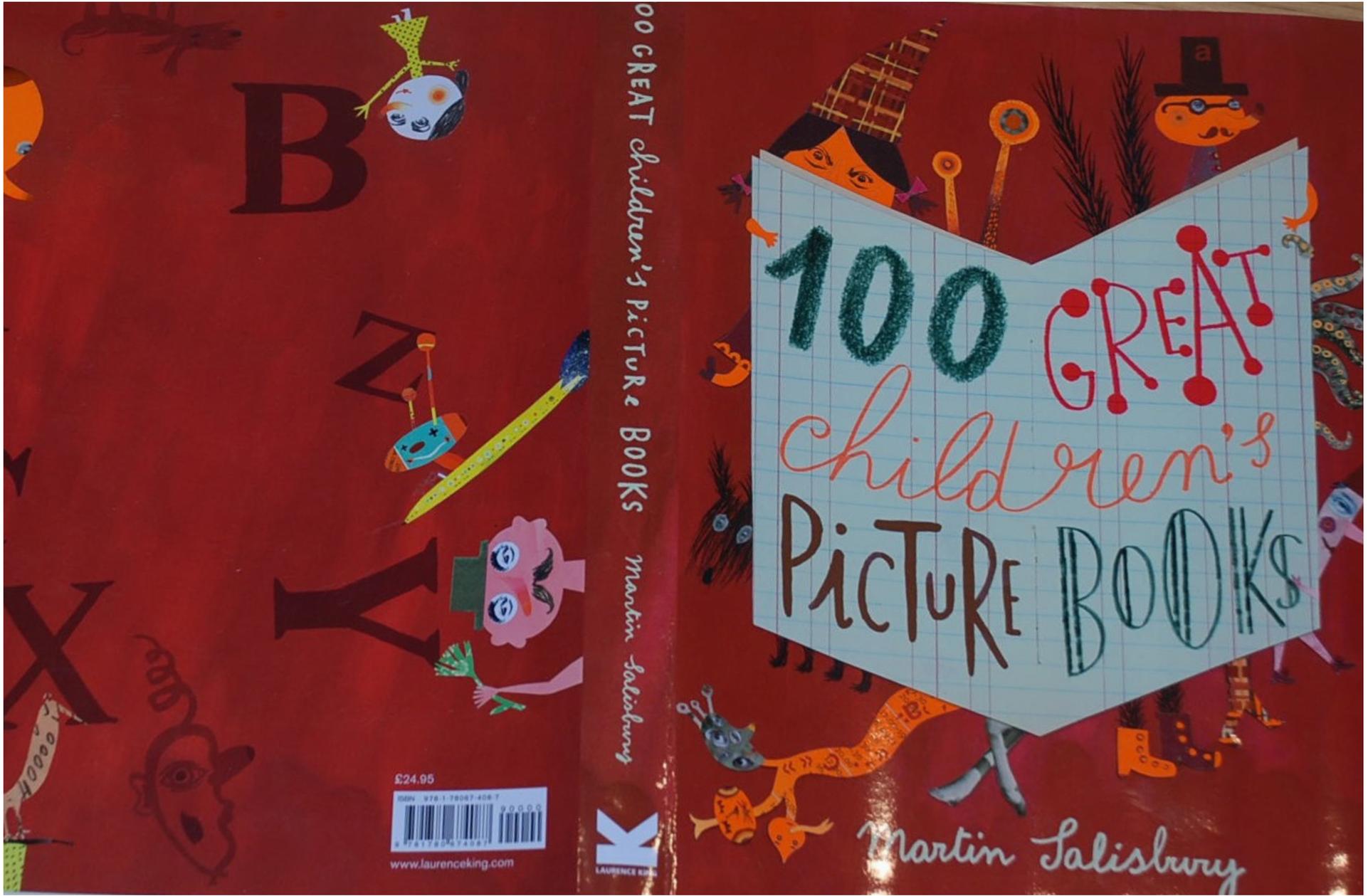
<sup>2</sup> University of Westminster  
London, UK

**Abstract:** This 'project' is in the form of a three-way dialogue between three artist/designer-academics whose work as practitioners and theorists aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the picturebook and its ever-evolving form, boundaries and status. Through practice-led PhD research, the three are all examining issues around the making of picturebooks. The Research Through Design forum is seen as particularly

appropriate for this work, focusing as it does on the designing and making of what is primarily a visual communication form. Most research in the field of children's picturebooks has hitherto been from the field of children's literature studies.

Martin Salisbury introduces the work of the three contributors, and describes through words and pictures the book which he has written on the subject of the picturebook, and the importance of its own physical form. Becky Palmer outlines and shows her practice-led research, exploring the boundaries between the picturebook and the graphic novel. Dr. Katherina Manolossou focuses on the dummy book as a tool for constructing the picturebook story.

**Keywords:** Picturebook; Book design; Book Illustration; Children's book illustration.



Salisbury, Palmer, Manolessou



## 1. Martin Salisbury: Introduction

This 'project' is in the form of a three-way dialogue between three artist/designer-academics whose work as practitioners and theorists aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the picturebook and its ever-evolving form, boundaries and status. The three of us are practicing artist-authors-academics within the broad field of illustration and the graphic arts. Each of us is familiar with the tensions between creative freedom/ambition and the perceived commercial considerations of the publishing industry. The artefacts presented here all negotiate, straddle and embrace those tensions and are all published or about to be published in the mainstream as well as academic domain.

As First Supervisor of the doctoral research of the two co-presenters I am presenting a brief overview of this ongoing collaboration and also presenting my own recently completed book, *100 Great Children's Picturebooks* (Laurence King Publishing, March 2015). I am presenting this book both as a traditional text-based research outcome and as a designed artefact. I should make clear from the outset that I am not the designer of the book. However I am fortunate to work with a publishing team who share my concern for the physical form of the book (this is after all a book about visual books) and with whom I work very closely on the process of selecting e.g. size, format and cover artist.

## Context

"A Picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child.

As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page." (Bader, 1976)

Barbara Bader's (1976) above definition is much quoted and was perhaps the first to acknowledge the importance of the physical form of the book, its role not just as a repository of visual and verbal information, but as a carefully considered amalgamation and synthesis of the two. In the decades since Bader's comprehensive examination of the form, the proliferation of electronic media that are seen as competing with, or even exterminating the picturebook, has focussed attention on the defining characteristics of the physical book. As the ubiquitous screen absorbs an apparently infinitely increasing proportion of our time, the hardback book must fight its corner by becoming an object of desire. Sales of hardback cookery books have been on the up again in recent years, particularly those at the more lavish and sophisticated end of the market. The need to own and cherish a book means that, in certain contexts, including the picturebook, it will continue to be with us for some time. The author Joe

Queenan<sup>1</sup> has argued that for many people, print is the only medium that will truly satisfy this need, further observing that “Some people may find this attitude baffling, arguing that books are merely objects that take up space. This is true, but so are Prague and your kids and the Sistine Chapel.”

*100 Great Children’s Picturebooks* is a subjective selection that covers roughly the last one hundred years and is broadly international. There is an inevitable concentration of mid-twentieth century English language books as this was such a key time and place in the evolution of the picturebook as we know it today. The book follows from three others that I have written over the last ten years; *Illustrating Children’s Books* (A & C Black, 2004), *Play Pen: New Children’s Book Illustration* (Laurence King Publishing, 2007) and *Children’s Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling* (co-authored with Pr. Morag Styles, Laurence King, 2012).

The selection in *100 Great Children’s Picturebooks* is made on the basis of the graphic and aesthetic qualities of the books as artefacts rather than on criteria that reflect their standing as children’s literature. The book builds on my experience as a practitioner, craftsman, curator and teacher. All aspects of the physical form of the book have been discussed in detail between myself and the publishing team. As has been the case with my previous books for this publisher, I have drawn up a shortlist of internationally renowned artists with a view to the design of the cover. In this case, we chose Sara Fanelli, whose work is celebrated throughout the

industry for its innovation and influence. Having decided on a wraparound dust-jacket over printed boards with illustrated motifs, I briefed the artist on the technical specifications and the general ‘tone’ that we wished the book to project, leaving plenty of room for her to respond subjectively and intuitively. Fanelli’s characteristic use of reds was encouraged and played a part in her selection for the cover.

## Ways of Knowing

The creation of this book, the creation of my previous books and our pioneering development of practice-led research in picturebook-making is partly motivated by a desire to introduce the experiential knowledge of the maker into the sphere of picturebook research. The latter has hitherto been almost exclusively the domain of the field of children’s literature studies, despite the fact that the picturebook is a primarily visual medium and is increasingly referred to as visual text. Furthermore, its exponents are predominantly visually trained graduates from the Art & Design sphere. This situation has led to a critical understanding of the picturebook that is rooted only in the published outcome as literature, free from examination or understanding of the foundations, process or *engineering* of the book.

A picturebook is clearly user-centric. Yet a common misconception (partly due to the preponderance of research from non makers) is that in order for it to be so, its author must be consciously audience-focused



during the creative process. My own research, through practice and in interviewing many leading makers for a previous publication (Salisbury, 2014), concludes that the artist must focus on making the book work for herself, for the book to achieve the kind of integrity that will allow it to *find* its audience. The two artist-researchers whose contributions follow demonstrate this in words and pictures.

Perhaps Suan Tan's (2011) summary of the book-making process is also helpful here: "After a while, every artist comes to realize that they are not just expressing an idea, they are engineering a personal language, tailored to suit that idea. For an illustrator, it's a language that involves image, text, page layout, typography, physical format, and media; all things that work together in a complex grammar of their own, and open to constant reinvention." (Tan, 2011)

The book work of both Katherina Manolossou and Rebecca Palmer appears in *100 Great Children's Picturebooks*.

## 2. Becky Palmer: Reconciling art and design in the making of comics

A book in which both the printed image and the material form are essential aspects of the communication of meaning is a site where the practices of design and art meet. In *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (2006), Cross defines

design as a 'third culture' of knowledge that has yet to be fully credited in academic circles, encompassing "the collected body of experience, skill and understanding embodied in the arts of planning, inventing, making and doing" (Archer et al 1979, cited in Cross 2006:1). The practices designated 'Design' here include those that artists engage in, yet Cross makes a distinction between design and art, evidently agreeing with Slager that the planning, inventing, making and doing that artists engage in is part of their philosophical and aesthetic reflection on the world, our experience of it and art's role in it (Slager, 2009). Cross understands this difference in terms of the core values that he attributes to the Arts and to Design: for, he suggests, where the former is concerned with "justice", the latter's concern is for "appropriateness" (2006: 1). However, Cross does not reveal whether he understands these to be fixed positions, or perspectives that both designers and artists may occupy. Nor does he say whether the two concerns are mutually exclusive. Yet the relationship between justice and appropriateness, between art and design, seems increasingly important and challenging to me in the research I am conducting through the making of books.

The uncertainty of this relationship is certainly reflected in ambivalence concerning the role that the user, or reader, should play in the development of a book. In his introduction, Martin Salisbury states that "the artist must focus on making the book work for herself for the book to achieve the kind of integrity that will allow it to find its audience."

Practitioners often see this as a responsibility to the story they are telling, first and foremost. Shaun Tan, for example, writes that he does not see himself as picturebook maker or graphic novelist per se: rather, he uses the means available to him to tell a story the way it needs to be told, whether through images, words, or a combination of both (2011). He is one of many creators of books that are read and enjoyed by children as well as adults who claims not to consider his readership in making his books. This places him and other author-illustrators like him with the Arts, their principle intention being to do “justice” to the narrative, allowing “appropriateness” to be determined by the users themselves. And yet, the commitment to tell the story as well as possible prioritises communication with one’s reader, shifting the emphasis back to appropriateness or fitness for purpose. How can we reconcile what seem to be contradictory statements: that a book’s integrity depends on its specific and subjective truth and effectiveness for the author, on the one hand, and on the other, that its integral purpose is to communicate with others?

Research through practice affords an opportunity for probing such questions in the context of professional creative practice. Reflecting on the development of my first graphic novel, *The Biggest Helping* (published in France in 2014 as *La Soupière Magique*), I ask myself whether I had a reader or group of readers in mind from the outset. In answer, I can say that I began with the intention to make a comic for younger readers. That

being the case, how did I go about conceiving and developing a story that would be relevant and interesting for those readers? My methods were not those espoused in other areas of design research, where a systematic study of the user group and their needs is an essential part of the development process. Rather, I proceeded as many makers of books do: by going back in memory to my younger self and making a book that spoke to my experiences, emotions and escapist fantasies at that age. In this book, the truthfulness of the relationship between the two sisters is crucial, and I drew on relationships with my siblings to achieve that (figures 2a and 2b). The story stems from my particular experience of being young, and is shaped by a continual back-and-forth between my young self and the adult sensibilities I have developed over years of experience as a reader and as a professional artist and writer.

The process is largely an unconscious part of the storytelling. Comics as a form for narrative make sense to me because I can inhabit my characters, telling their story in a voice that is and is not my own. Raymond Briggs likens this process to acting in a performance where the author plays all the parts (2003). Since I make the roughs for comics in an improvisatory mode, building on a basic plot outline, my judgements concerning the effectiveness of the work are initially made in the midst of action, which Schön calls “reflection-in-action” (1991[1985]: 68-9) (see figure 2c).



In the editing stage, I am able to sit back and interrogate the storytelling more consciously and critically, becoming my own reader in order to see where it does not yet chime with the experiences and interests of my young self. This focus on making a book for myself appears, on the face of it, to result in an outcome so specific to my experience that it seems sheer hubris to insist on its effectiveness as a means of communicating with others. Yet it is one of the basic tenets of literature that the particular can communicate far more powerfully than a narrative that attempts to speak to an amalgamated universal reader could. In this way, art and design coincide in the making of a book, where a concern for justice becomes a concern for appropriateness: for it is only by telling stories that are true to our subjective and particular experience that we can make books that will communicate effectively and meaningfully to our readers.



Figure 2a. *La Soupière Magique*, 2014: 5. In this book, I tried to represent the relationship between the two sisters who are its main characters as believably as possible, and drew on my own childhood experiences to do so.



Figure 2b. *La Soupière Magique*, 2014, page 9.

Figures 2a and 2b.

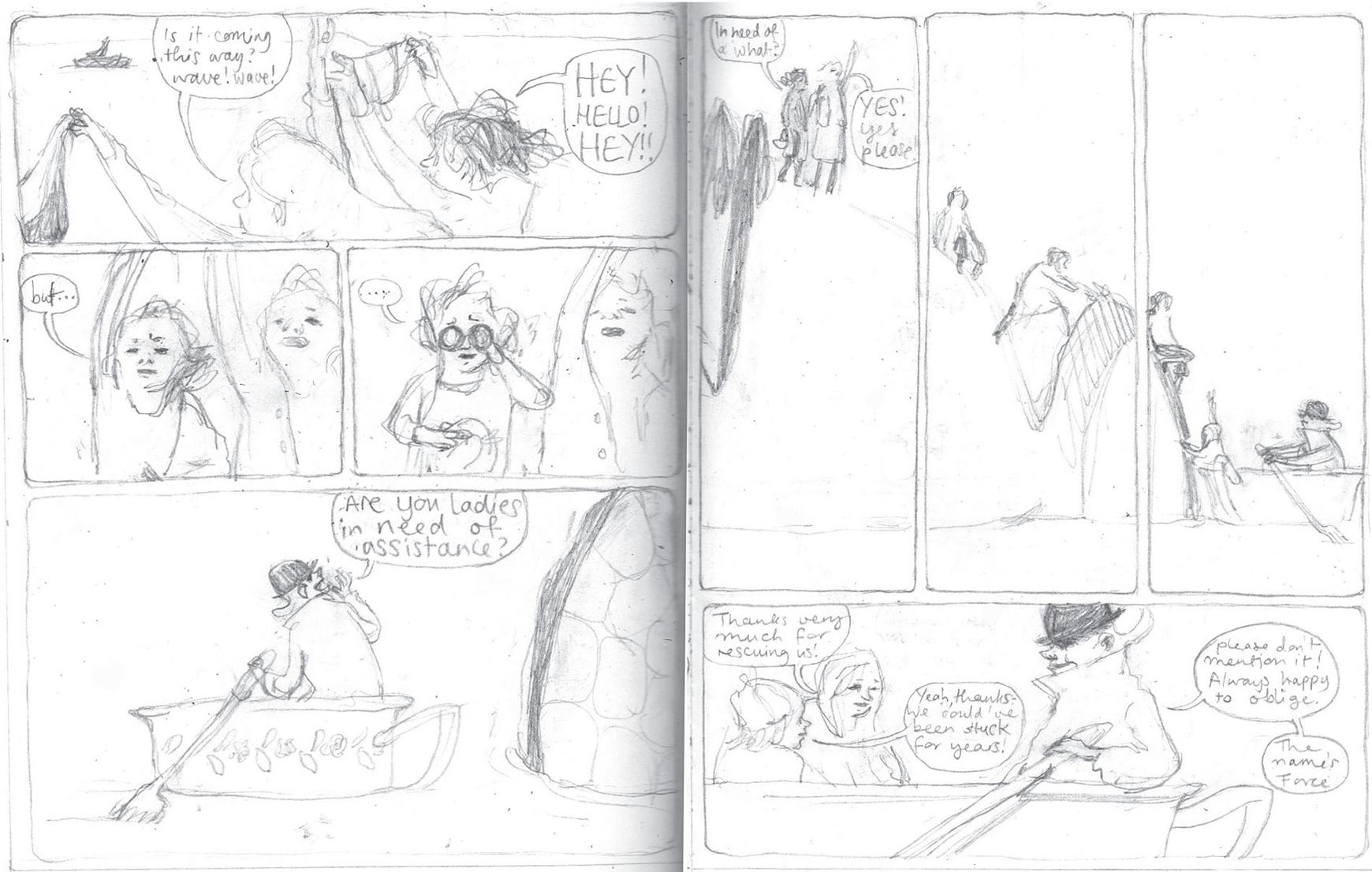


Figure 2c. A rough spread from *The Biggest Helping*, translated and published as *La Soupière Magique* in 2014. This spread is an example of the first draft, in which I improve the roughs as the story develops in my mind. Before beginning this stage, the story has developed to the point where I have an outline of the plot and its main events mapped out. Once I have completed the first version of the roughs, I go back to read, edit, before thinking about the final artwork, repeating this process as often as necessary until the rhythm, pacing and dialogue ring true. However, I often return to the first rough for the final layout: the initial period of concentrated imagining that produces the first draft frequently conveys what I want to tell better than subsequent edits.

Figure 2c.

### 3. Katherina Manolessou: Dummy books as a tool for constructing the picturebook story

*Zoom Zoom Zoom*, published by Macmillan Children's Books in 2014, was developed through my practice-based PhD research at Anglia Ruskin University. The PhD thesis, *A Practice-based Investigation of Animal Character Development in Picturebooks for Children* focuses on the illustrator's practice resulting in a commercial children's book.

My contribution to this paper is a discussion on how the picturebook narrative and characters were developed through the construction of successive storyboards and dummy books. In particular I would like to refer to the feedback loop of the dummy book process and to how colour, composition, and the gap between the illustrations were affected by the construction of the dummy books.

Storyboards (two-dimensional plans of the picturebook) were particularly useful at the beginning of the picturebook development when I was trying to structure the story and resolve the basic plot. They helped me to simultaneously be aware of all the elements of the picturebook. (fig 3a)

Dummy books (three-dimensional models of the picturebook) allow the illustrator to come as close as possible to the finished book and the experience of reading it (Shulevitz, 1985). The picturebook is a physical

object, and it was crucial that its relation to the content was put to the test while the work was still evolving (fig 3b).

Dummy books were a necessary tool for synchronizing the pace and rhythm of the story to the act of reading the book and turning the pages. They also ensured that the work complied with a traditional narrative structure (beginning, middle, and end), a predetermined outcome (a 32 page commercially publishable picturebook) and a specific audience (preschool children). I used the dummy books when improving the book (as discussed below), when discussing the development of the book with my supervisors and publisher, and when occasionally reading the story to my son.

Each successive storyboard and dummy book was an improved version of its predecessor, involving gradual improvement in construction and craft. I use these words advisedly to emphasise the notion of creating or adding something to what has been achieved before. Construction refers to planning and building the book, bringing the necessary elements together and making sure they interconnect. Craft refers to specific skills developed through the repetitive construction of the different versions of the picturebook story.





Every improvement and successful new idea could not have materialised if I had not created the previous versions of the picturebook. It was only when a new idea was applied in the form of a dummy book, and then read and tested, that I was able to decide if it worked. In her PhD thesis, Illustrator Sarah McConnell describes her process of constructing a picturebook as ‘looping back on itself’ (2010, p.89), constantly changing and enhancing the artefact. Reflecting on his writing practice, poet Michael Rosen (1997, p.85) argues that it is ‘virtually impossible to think of the act of writing as separate from the reading process’ and that he has ‘grown to understand that what takes place is a feedback process where an idea:

- 1) is concretised into text which is then in turn
- 2) tested for potential impact on an imagined or idealised reader (s) and then
- 3) kept, changed or scrapped as the writer thinks fit.’

I would like to suggest that the feedback process that Rosen describes is very similar to that of an illustrator working on a multimodal text, such as a picturebook.

The changes that resulted from this looping feedback aimed at a more concise, clear, intriguing story, and more believable and compelling characterisation. This can be seen in the changes that happened to the first spread of the book during this process (every drawing and dummy book was dated) in figure 3c to figure 3l. The issues dealt with during the development of the dummy books include:

**1. Moving from a black and white line drawings to colour images** where colour is an important tool for both individual ‘pictorial organisation’ (Arnheim 1974, p.344) but also for organising the book as a whole. With every new dummy book, there was a gradual building of an ‘internal system of colour associations’ (Nodelman 1988, p.144) where a specific hue was associated with one (and only one) specific character or place: red for Monkey, blue for Bird (with a different blue hue for the night sky), green for the jungle. This system affected the characterisation, the secondary worlds, and the continuity and direction of the narrative.

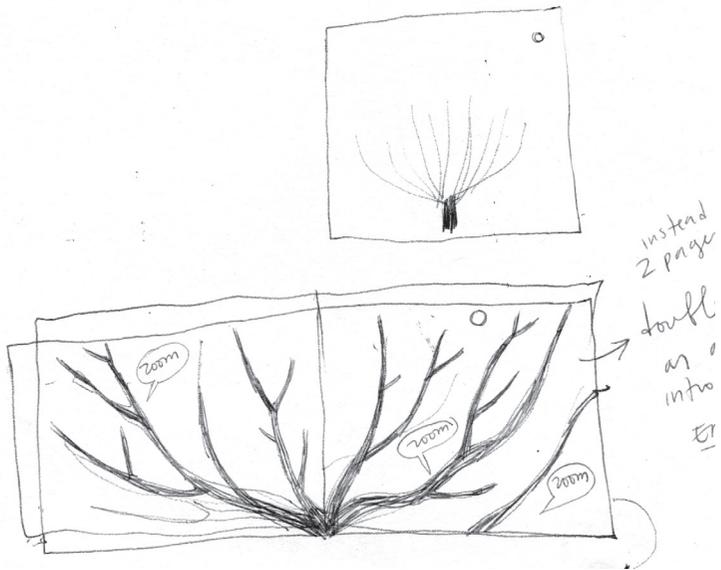
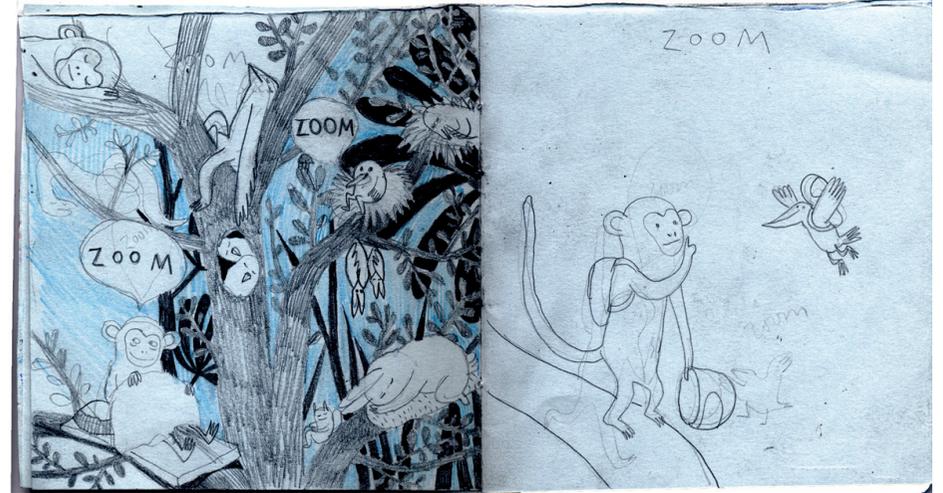
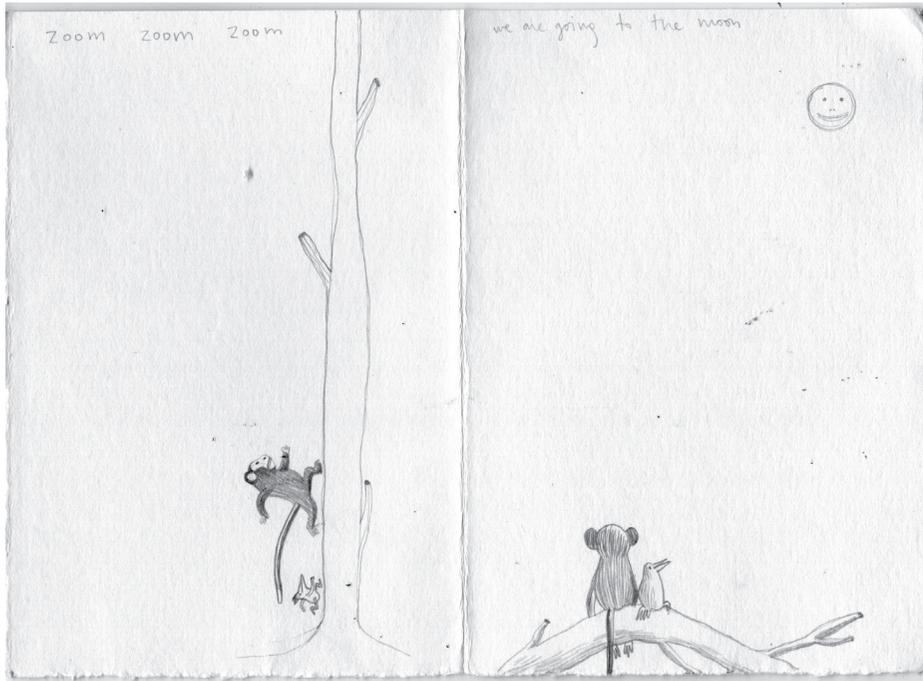
### **2. Adapting images so that they always move the story forward.**

Picturebook illustrations are not created to be seen in isolation (as editorial illustrations would be for example). Instead, they are part of a continuing and unfolding action. They need imbalance and directed tension towards the next image or page, so as to make the plot progress – and make the reader turn the page. In the early dummy books the first spread was symmetric and the characters’ poses were too relaxed – there was tension or momentum to start the story (figures 3d, 3f and 3h) Composition and body language were re-worked so that the plot would be in motion from the very first double spread (fig 3l).

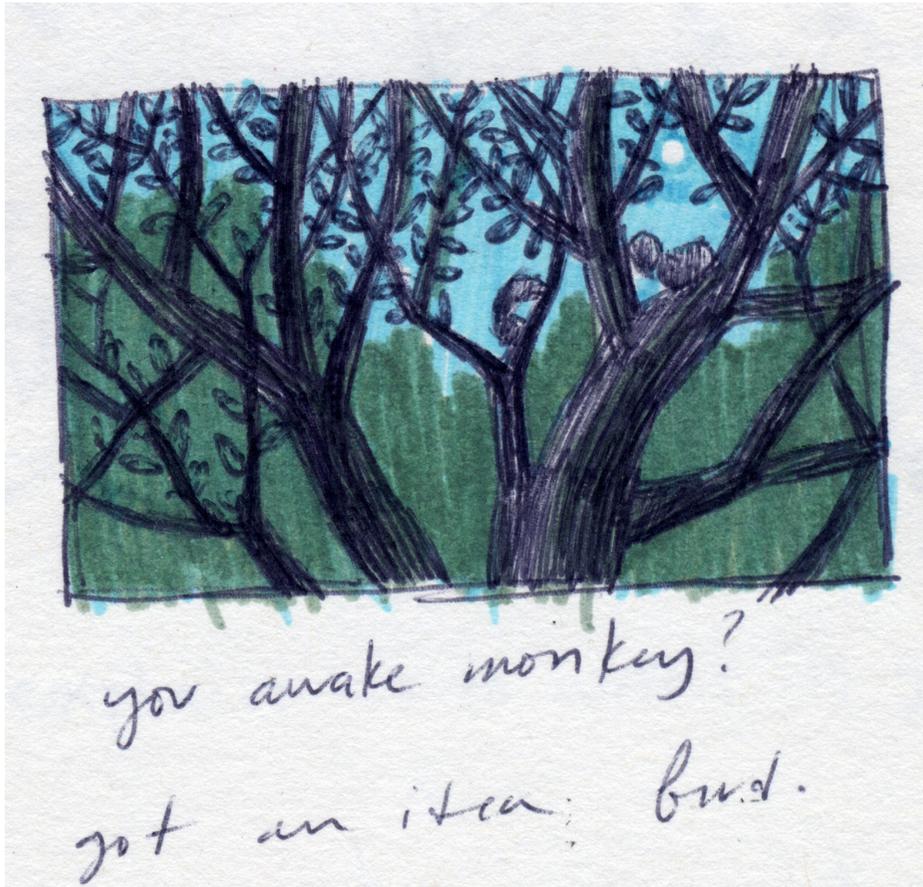
**3. Words and Pictures working together.** The verbal and visual text were developed together and I went through each dummy book again and again testing how they compliment or contradict each other. The words on the

first spread 'I can't sleep Bird!' were contrasting with the early drawings of Monkey who seemed happy on a branch tree (fig 3h ). On the final illustration (fig3l) he is shown upside down to express that all is not well. In this final version the text is 'anchoring' the image, giving it a specific reading, that the character cannot sleep (another reading would be that the character is unhappy or upset).

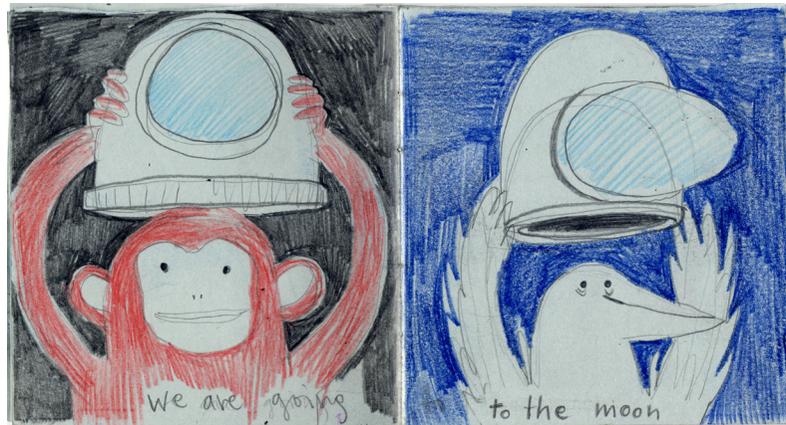
**4. Choosing the right moment to illustrate.** The choice of which moments to depict is crucial for the illustrator as Quentin Blake reflects in *Words about Pictures* (2000). In *Zoom Zoom Zoom* the pictures carry a lot of the narrative weight, therefore my choice of moments was largely directed by this narrative function. At the same time, pictures, unlike words, are 'disjunctive' (Nikolajeva 2010, p.29) and in relying on them to tell a story it was crucial that the narrative gap between them could be bridged by the reader. Working with dummy books, I was able to comprehend the importance of these gaps in my story and experiment with how big or narrow they can be. Moreover I was able to play with the pause created by turning a page, a gap in the storytelling that is directed by the actual book. I was able to use this pause to introduce an element of surprise or to imply the passage of time. This can be seen in how the gap between the first and second spread changed between figures 3d and 3m in comparison to the gap between figures 3l and 3n.



Figures 3c-3f.



Figures 3g-3j.



Figures 3k-3n.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Wall Street Journal, via <http://mashable.com/2013/01/16/e-books-vs-print/>

## References

- Arnheim, R. 1974. *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Bader, B. 1976. *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to The Beast Within*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co
- Blake, Q. 2000. *Words and Pictures*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Briggs, R. 2003. *Blooming Books*. London: Jonathan Cape
- Cross, N. 2006. *Designerly Ways of Knowing*. London: Springer.
- Queenan, J. 2013. Wall Street Journal, via <http://mashable.com/2013/01/16/e-books-vs-print/>
- McConnell, S., 2010. *The Art of Children's Book Illustration: An Exploration of Creative Practice with Particular Reference to Character, Dramatic Action and Pictorial Atmosphere*. Ph. D. Anglia Ruskin University.
- Manolessou, K. 2012. *A Practise-based Investigation of Animal Character Development in Picturebook Illustration*. Ph. D. Anglia Ruskin University
- Nikolajeva, M. 2010. *Interpretative Codes and Implied Readers of Children's Picturebooks*. In Kummerlig-Meibauer, B., Colomer, T., and Silva-Diaz, C., eds. 2010. *New Directions in Picturebook Research*. New York: Routledge. Ch. 2.
- Nodelman, P., 1988. *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Palmer, B. 2014. *La Soupière Magique*. Paris: Éditions Sarbacane.
- Rosen, M., 1997. *A Materialist and Intertextual Examination of the Process of Writing a Work of Children's Literature*. Ph. D., University of North London.
- Salisbury, M., 2004. *Illustrating Children's Books: Creating Pictures for Publication*. London: A&C Black.
- Salisbury, M. 2007. *Play Pen: New Children's Book Illustration*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Salisbury, M. 2015. *100 Great Children's Picturebooks*. London: Laurence King Publishing
- Salisbury, M. and Styles, M., 2012. *Children's Picturebooks: The art of visual storytelling*. London: Laurence King Publishing.



Schön, D. 1991. *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Aldershot: Avebury.



Shulevitz, U. 1985. *Writing with Pictures: How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books*. New York: Watson Gupstill.



Slager, H. 2009. *Art and Method*. In J. Elkins (ed.), *Artists with PhDs: On the new Doctoral Degree in Studio Art*. Washington: New Academia Publishing, 49-56.



Tan, S. 2011. *The accidental graphic novelist*. *Bookbird* 49(4). 1-9.



