



# How Do You See?

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[Barbara Jones](#) [1]

[19](#) [2]

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**Barbara Jones** considers the work of two picture book innovators: **Anthony Browne** and **Jeannie Baker**.

**Barbara Jones** looks at the work of two young artists whose picture books offer exciting and mind-opening experiences to everyone who is finding out how to read pictures.

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## JEANNIE BAKER

Jeannie Baker has used collage for the five picture books she has so far had published: **Polar** (with a story by Elaine Moss), **Grandfather**, **Grandmother**, **Millicent** and **One Hungry Spider**. She was not the first to use this technique: during the seventies Eric Carle, Maureen Roffey and Rodney Peppe were all creating pictures for children from pieces of paper and fabric. They have moved on to making pictures in other ways, but Jeannie Baker following in their footsteps has moved the use of collage in picture books to a completely new level. Her pictures are full of realistic details and so three-dimensional that you want to reach into them to touch.

For me, her work is at its best in **Millicent**, created after a move from England to Australia where she now lives and works in Sydney. **Millicent**, published by Andre Deutsch in 1980, is about an old lady who feeds the pigeons in a park. After setting the scene and outlining the characters in an introductory page of text Jeannie Baker provides the story line in the form of comic strip bubbles of the old lady's thoughts as she walks through the park.

The real star of the book is not Millicent but the art work: the trees, the grass, the plants, the park furniture, the animals and the people are tiny, exquisitely detailed pieces which are assembled and photographed. The art work is made to the dimensions of the book, so each piece is the same size as the figures we see in the pictures. The trees are real pieces of foliage and the grass is a special, very fine-bladed variety: foliage and grass are dipped in a mixture of six chemicals to dry them out. As this process removes texture and colour the next stages involve soaking them in a mixture of acetone and glycerine to restore life and spraying with oil paint mixed with thinners to provide colour. The figures are drawn, traced onto card and cut out. Relief and details for limbs and faces are made by applications of Das clay which can be painted but does not need firing. Clothes are made from tiny scraps of material. Millicent's blue cardigan is knitted from strands of wool on fine needles.

When the art work for each page is completed there comes the important stage of getting the lighting and the photography right to capture an accurate image. Jeannie Baker takes an active interest in these technical processes and has become very aware of the complexities of colour printing and how precisely everything must be gauged to recreate her original work.

After the photographs have been taken the art work is exhibited and offered for sale in fine art or craft galleries. This is why so much trouble is taken in preparing the vegetation. It could not be exhibited or sold if the grass and trees withered and moulted. Each picture is roughly the size of the picture book page and varies in depth from one to four inches.

**Millicent** was not Jeannie Baker's first book. That was **Grandfather**, created while she was still working in England. Andre Deutsch appreciated her talents but in 1974 were reluctant to take a risk with an unknown illustrator's picture book about an old man who lives in a junk shop. Instead they launched her with her second book, **Polar**. **Polar** is about a bear, a more traditional topic for a children's picture book. The story was written by Elaine Moss, a famous name for a new illustrator. The artwork is closer to the work of other collage illustrators - figures set against a flat plain background - but the characteristic Jeannie Baker touch can be seen in the details of the figures. Polar wears a knitted suit in bold primary colours; the whole book is full of bright colours. It is a witty and entertaining story which children under five enjoy.

Then it was time for **Grandfather**, published like the next two books in a period when the idea of what constitutes a children's picture book was being well and truly tested.

But even now in 1983 there are lots of adults who think that children's picture books should divert and entertain only: their role is not to explore serious relationships or potentially disturbing situations. I have known teachers reject **Millicent**, **Grandfather** and **Grandmother** because the central characters are old people. It seems a shame to deny children the opportunity to share in the affectionate relationship that a small girl has with her grandparents. Most young children have grandparents and respond well to reading about them, especially when the collage illustrations are so absorbing and visually rewarding. Grandfather's junk shop is untidy, disorganised and full of old clothes, old photographs, broken furniture and clocks and televisions which don't work properly - a treasure trove for a small girl to explore. Grandmother has lots of cats and a house full of mementos to be examined. Both grandparents are pleased to be helped and offer patient explanations.

Her most recently published book, **One Hungry Spider**, took Jeannie Baker less time to complete than the others because the art work was not made for permanent exhibition: it was assembled, photographed and dismantled. **One Hungry Spider** is a counting book which also provides a lot of information about a day in the life of a spider. The web is made from thread and attached to the familiar Jeannie Baker foliage. The background changes from the pale light of dawn, lighting up the dew drops in the newly-made web, to blue sky, clouds and bright sunshine, to evening and finally the dark of night when the remains of the day's web have to be rebuilt into a new one for the next day. The counting element, which includes addition and subtraction, is in the insects that escape the web or are caught and eaten. At the end of the book there is more information about spiders for older children or parents.

Jeannie Baker's newest book was conceived and created in New York when she was there for nine months on an Australian Visual Arts Board bursary. It is to be called **City in the Sky** and is about life on the rooftop of a tall building in New York where a young black man keeps pigeons. Publishing details are still being negotiated. If all goes well it should be available in England, Australia and the U.S.A. in 18 months. Like her other books it has an urban setting and like them it also contains a strong feeling for nature.

The audience for Jeannie Baker's books is wide: pre-school children enjoy her unambiguous pictures: her themes provide stimulating talking points for infant and junior school children who, along with older children and adults really relish the ingenuity and fine details of her collages. To explore the textures, the varied materials so subtly used and combined to complement and extend the story is a delightful lesson in how to see.

## **ANTHONY BROWNE**

Anthony Browne's most valuable and distinctive contribution to children's picture books is to make the ordinary extraordinary, and the extraordinary ordinary. He introduces an element of surrealism into stories which are witty and

full of visual jokes but deal with important and serious themes.

Anthony Browne lives and works in a small village in Kent. He studied graphic design at art school in Leeds and then worked in Manchester as a medical artist, drawing and painting specimens, operations and post-mortems. Perhaps this training accounts for his multi-layered, three-dimensional illustrations which are full of textured details. His first free-lance work was designing children's greetings cards for Gordon Fraser. This led to creating picture books for children and Hamish Hamilton published his first book, **Through the Magic Mirror**, in 1976.

**Through the Magic Mirror** is about a small boy who is bored and fed up until he looks into a mirror and sees, not his front view as expected, but himself from behind. He reaches out to touch the mirror and ends up walking through it into a different and strange version of his own world: a cat is chased by a gang of mice, an invisible man walks past, and trains and boats have appeared on the main road. Children enjoy spotting the absurdities and adults who know the work of surrealist painters like Magritte and De Chirico will appreciate the quotations from their work - like the scene in which it is raining choir boys. The small boy gratefully escapes back through the mirror to the safety of his own house.

**A Walk in the Park** is about two pairs of parents and children from opposite social backgrounds who take their dogs for a walk in the same park. The dogs make friends immediately, the two children make contact eventually but the two adults remain isolated. **Look What I've Got** also takes place in the open air. Jeremy is a boy who has everything and boasts about it to his less well off friend Sam. After a series of mishaps, caused by Jeremy overreaching himself through showing off, it is Sam who is the lucky one: he is happy while Jeremy is still trying to find happiness. These relationships are expressed in Anthony Browne's distinctive graphic style - sharply outlined and brilliantly coloured pictures which are fully of witty details. The park benches are wearing shoes (odd shoes): a man is playing golf with a fish instead of a golf club: a washing line includes Y fronts, X fronts and Z fronts: a tomato is being taken for a walk on a lead: and the trees are a topiarist's dream. Each double-page spread contains lots of visual puns which children relish. His pictures offer a wealth of accurate fine details to relish and encourage children to be observant. They have an almost three-dimensional effect, created by superimposing three scenes one upon another - background, middle distance and foreground.

Anthony Browne has produced two smaller picture books about a small white bear, **Bear Hunt** and **Bear Goes to Town**. Bear has a particularly magical skill - he can draw his way out of trouble. In **Bear Hunt** he draws his way out of capture by the hunters. The jungle foliage contains lots of surprises: fingers masquerading as plants and leaves which are really little fishes. In **Bear Goes to Town**, Bear rescues himself and a group of animal friends from the clutches of a group of humans who are vivisectionists: the animals then escape from the crowded cruel city to the peace and tranquility of the countryside. The device of near being able to wield a magic pencil works well in **Bear Hunt**. This is a story in which the humour is slapstick and Bear and the humans have the simple outlines of cartoon characters. **Bear Goes to Town** contains some humour but it is more serious and even rather sinister. The humans are photo-realist with unmistakably Nazi uniforms and habits.

To illustrate **Hansel and Gretel** Anthony Browne changed to a more aptly sombre and gloomy range of colours and a visually pun-free, serious style. This time the innovation is a modern setting. The two children live in a neglected house where the wallpaper is peeling off the walls, the television has been wedged on the sideboard, the ironing board is out, the table-cloth is grubby and the stepmother sits in the only armchair. The stepmother has obviously spent the down-at-heel balding father's money on a showy imitation leopard skin coat and not on food or bedclothes for the children. There are some stunning images seen within the frames of mirrors or through the windows which presage Hansel's incarceration in a cage and the witch getting her come-uppance as she is pushed into her own oven. Throughout the book there are sinister triangular black shadows reminiscent of the witch's hat. There is a distinct resemblance between the faces of the stepmother and the witch. It is a memorably effective book and it is to be hoped that perhaps in the future Anthony Browne will be equally inspired by other fairy tales.

**Gorilla**, Anthony Browne's next book is due out in April. His central human character is a little girl whose father is too busy to play with her or take her to the zoo to see her favourite animals, the gorillas. Instead she is given a small toy gorilla as a birthday present. She is disappointed by the toy until suddenly in the middle of the night it turns into a large

real gorilla who takes her off on adventures.

Anthony Browne is currently working on a book about a small boy. walking through a wood, who falls prey to fantasies about Little Red Riding Hood and other fairy tales - a treat in store for the growing band of Anthony Browne fans.

## **The Books**

### **Jeannie Baker**

All published by Andre Deutsch

**Grandfather**, 0 233 96864 4, £3.50

**Grandmother**, 0 233 96975 6. £3.95

**Millicent**, 0 233 97201 3, £3.95

**Polar** (by Elaine Moss), 0 233 96695 1, £3.95

**One Hungry Spider**, 0 233 97429 6. £4.95

### **Anthony Browne**

**Through the Magic Mirror**, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 89307 0, £4.25

**A Walk in the Park**, HH, 0 241 89397 6, £4.50

**Bear Hunt**, HH, 0 241 89921 4, £3.95

**Bear Goes to Town**, HH, 0 241 10817 9, £4.50

**Look What I've Got!**, Julia MacRae Books, 0 86203 004 8, £4.95

**Gorilla**, Julia MacRae Books. 0 86203 104 4, £4.95 approx. (April 1983)

Page Number:

4

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