



Ten of the Best: Picture Books on ?Issues?

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Ten of the Best

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Pam Smy chooses her top ten.

Ten of the Best: Picture Books on ?Issues?

?There are some subjects that are difficult to explain in words and here the picture book comes into its own,? says illustrator **Pam Smy**. ?Good illustration can express emotion, evoke atmosphere, and use visual metaphor to communicate feelings and situations with direct immediacy on the page. So, when a picture book combines excellent text with insightful illustration the result is greater than the sum of its parts. Here are my favourite ten picture books that deal with issues and emotions. Some are old favourites, and some are new titles. All should be pulled off the ?issues? shelf and celebrated as life enhancing books to savour.?

Old Pig

Margaret Wild, ill. Ron Brooks, Allen & Unwin, 32pp, 9781741757064, £10.99 hbk

Old Pig is an old favourite. The happy companionship between Old Pig and her Granddaughter is rocked by Old Pig?s sudden illness and the subsequent break in the reassuring and familiar routine. Old Pig tenderly prepares her Granddaughter for life without her, not just with sensible practicalities, but by showing her the beauty of the world around them: ?Do you hear the parrots quarrelling? Can you smell the warm earth? Let?s taste the rain!?

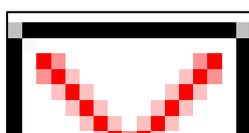
Ron Brooks subtly manipulates colour to reflect the sadness Granddaughter feels, and lifts the palette again to depict how the legacy of a loving relationship ultimately outshines grief. This is a gentle, optimistic and quietly beautiful book. (4+)

John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat

Jenny Wagner, ill. Ron Brown, Catnip, 32pp, 978 1 9051 1796 3, £6.99 pbk

Initially this book seems to be about Rose?s Dog, John Brown, not wanting to accept newcomer, the Midnight Cat, into their cosy home. But the elderly and increasingly tired Rose is yearning for him. Once we acknowledge that the Midnight Cat is Death, we, as John Brown does, can understand that letting him in is a part of letting go.

This is an aspect of bereavement not often tackled in picture books, and the interplay of text and image is crafted so well that no mention of death is ever made. The subtlety of this approach is a gift to those who have been left behind by a loved one, whilst making this an enduring addition to any bookshelf. (4+)

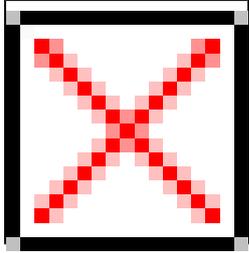


Kes Gray, ill. Lee Wildish, Hodder, 32pp, 978 0 3409 5711 0 £5.99 pbk

The quest to find a glue to mend a broken marriage is the focus of this story. Kes Gray's rhyming text explores the feelings of bewilderment and loss that children can experience as parents separate, but ultimately reassures us that ruptured adult relationships do not weaken the love that bonds parents and children together. (5+)

My Grandpa

Marta Altes, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 0 2307 6039 4, £10.99 hbk



This picture book is not published until July but it will be well worth the wait. Text is pared down to make space for the images to do the talking about the changing of roles between a young bear and his grandfather as the older bear begins to succumb to dementia. Altes celebrates the richness that older people bring into young lives, and the similarities and shared experience between the very young and the very old: 'Sometimes he is my eyes and sometimes I am his.' The interaction between the two characters is enchanting and life-enhancing, and their loving, shifting relationship is deftly portrayed in this confident, memorable and very beautiful book. (5+)

Leave Me Alone: A Tale of What Happens When You Face Up to a Bully

Kes Gray and Lee Wildish, Hodder, 32pp, 978 1 4449 0015 6, £5.99 pbk

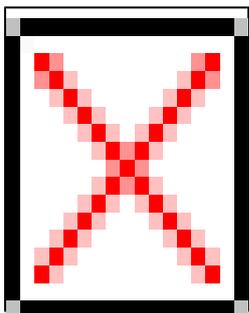
Leave Me Alone is an empowering story that describes the sense of isolation and fear experienced by the bullied, but celebrates the turnaround that can be made if a problem is aired and shared.

Lee Wildish should be congratulated on his depiction of the bully, who first appears as a lurking shadow and grows into a terrifying dominant fury on the page. This is the strength of this book - it doesn't shy away from representing fear, and therefore the defiance of the bully by the tiny group of friends is all the more triumphant. (5+)

Rote Wangen (German text) www.alibris.com/search/books/author/Janisch [3] Heinz Janisch ill. Aljoscha Blau, Aufbau Verlag GmbH, 978 3 3510 4062 8, £12.04 hbk

The grown ups seem to think that Grandfather's stories are outlandish. Who could believe tales of meeting the Yeti and flying on angel wings through the forest? But this is the bond that holds the boy and his grandfather together, so much so that the stories outlive the old man and endure in the heart and imagination of his grandson. This cheeky game of stories is told so well in Aljoscha Blau's illustration that it works even if a translation of the German or Spanish text is not available to English readers. Blau manages to express the boy's joy of memory comfortably alongside the emptiness of absence. And stories, just like people, live for as long as we choose to remember them. (5+)

La Visite de Petite Mort (French text)



Kitty Crowther, Ecole des Loisirs, 24pp, 978 2 2110 7132 1, £8.83 hbk

This picture book is a warm, funny and quirky look at dying from Death's point of view. It is a shame that people cry

when they see him. They're cold. They don't speak. So when Elsewise is happy, relieved even, that Death has come to take her from her long painful illness it's a bit of a welcome surprise. The two become playmates, until it is time for Elsewise to move on, and Death is left to mourn. Crowther's playful storytelling and warm illustration combine to make a funny story that portrays Death as a welcome guest instead of something or someone to be afraid of. It is a pity this picture book isn't available in English ? it's great! (7+)

Michael Rosen's Sad Book

Michael Rosen, ill. Quentin Blake, Walker, 40pp, 978 1 4063 1784 8, £5.99 pbk

This picture book is in a class of its own and is unlike any other book published. Michael Rosen probes sadness from different aspects, his poetry, reflection and humour poignantly balanced by Quentin Blake's masterful understanding of how to communicate emotion through the use of light, atmosphere, and posture. Every turn of the page reveals a fresh insight into living and dealing with sad feelings and, eloquent as **Sad Book** is at describing life's darker emotions, it lights the way to balance and acceptance and is a positive portrayal of living with, and beyond, depression. (10 ? adult)

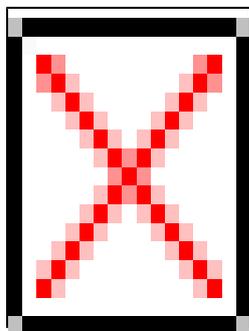
The Island

Armin Greder, Allen & Unwin, 32pp, 978 1 7417 5266 3, £11.99 hbk

Where **The Arrival** shows us how the immigrant can thrive in challenging circumstances, **The Island** shows us what can happen when a stranger enters a community that is hostile, suspicious and unwelcoming. The vulnerability of the man's situation is emphasised by his nudity and passivity throughout the book, in stark contrast to the large stature and threatening demeanour of the island's occupants, who oppress and demonise the new stranger in their midst. This is a bleak, dark, sad book and a useful prompt for discussion. (10 ? adult)

The Arrival

Shaun Tan, Hodder, 128pp, 978 0 3409 6993 9, £14.99 pbk



Shaun Tan is the master of depicting the outsider, and here he does so in an epic, wordless graphic novel that explores the vulnerability, bravery and determination of the immigrant. This is a wonderful book for looking at visual representations of oppression, fear and alienation ? the snaking monstrous presence over the streets as the family sneak away to make their goodbyes a real gut wrenching interpretation of living under an oppressive regime. This is the book to coax young people away from their Playstations and Wiis. It is action-packed, thought-provoking and original. A sensational masterpiece. (12 ? adult)

Pam Smy is an illustrator and Lecturer in Illustration on The MA Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art.

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