

Leonard S. Marcus: The Value of Words in Picture Books

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In this special contribution, Leonard S. Marcus – one of the world’s foremost historians and critics of children's literature – continues his exploration into what makes for a great picture book.

“Picture-Book Pictures/Picture-Book Words” offers us a reflection on the relationship between words

and image in picture books and the importance of the written word along with outstanding visual art. The vital role of picture-book writers is at the centre of the “Astra International Picture Book Writing Contest”, the first worldwide competition for picture book authors whose purpose is to encourage, discover and honor talented writers of texts for picture books from all over the world.



PICTURE-BOOK PICTURES/PICTURE-BOOK WORDS

What makes for a great picture book? Artists, writers, and publishers have been asking themselves this good question for well over a hundred years! Words and pictures... pictures and words. There's magic to be had in hitting upon just the right combination of the two--but no magic formula for doing so. History, though, can at least provide a few hints.

Randolph Caldecott--the waggish, Victorian freelance illustrator and visionary--deserves our praise as the artist who reinvented the picture book as the lively artform we know today. Caldecott tossed out the static old way of arranging words and images like stacks of bricks on the page and instead created dynamic scenes drawn with a sense of freedom and eye for action that often feels to be on the verge of animation. Caldecott knew all about white space, all about saying "more with less", and all about marrying words and pictures in a free-flowing, spirited kind of dance. Picture-book artists have never stopped learning from his genius example--often without knowing it when they take the time to look closely at the celebrated work of one of Caldecott's most ardent students and admirers, Maurice Sendak.

Not a writer himself, Caldecott looked to a variety of sources for the texts he illustrated. For some books, he simply picked a favorite nursery rhyme like "Hey, Diddle Diddle" and went to town spinning out a fully elaborated visual world around it. For *The Diverting History of John Gilpin*, he took a different direction, choosing a fast-moving ballad (one that had been written originally for adults) about a bumbling man's misadventures astride a runaway horse. Would children care for a book that did not put a child character center stage? Evidently yes--if the story and pictures were exuberant enough and gave young children the chance to laugh out loud at a grownup's foolish behavior. Tomi Ungerer, John Burningham, and William Steig all carried this shrewd insight about the stories children love into the present day.

By the 1940s, ideas about education based on the new science of child psychology were having an impact on picture books, too. Picture-book writers spoke less about what children should be like and more about what they *are* like: often mischievous, sometimes badly behaved, and always with a surprisingly broad range of emotions. In addition, as learning by doing began to replace rote memorization as a classroom paradigm, picture book makers looked for new ways to engage children as collaborators in their books. A picture book need not always tell a story: it might instead create an immersive experience--a "happening"--for a child and parent to share in the moment. The American poet Margaret Wise cast her *Noisy Book* as a raucous guessing game that called upon children to imitate city street sounds--the drumbeat of a jackhammer, the rumble of a passing truck--at the top of their lungs. Italy's Bruno Munari and the Czech Republic's Květa Pacovská created toylike, sculptural picture books featuring paper doors for children to open, die-cut holes to peer through, and more. Munari and Pacovska's graphically bold art styles, like those of Soviet illustrator Vladimir Lebedev, the American Leonard Weisgard, and others deftly pivoted away from realism toward colorful abstraction in order to open up wider spaces for a child's imagination to flourish. French artist Hervé Tullet's more recent *Press Here!* is perhaps the cleverest picture-book happening of all.

Some artists even gave their writer friends the day off and produced entirely wordless or "silent" picture books that invited children to tell their own stories based on the visual cues provided in the illustrations. *Anno's Journey* by Mitsumasa Anno of Japan is a towering example of this radically collaborative approach; artists as geographically far-flung as Korea's Suzy Lee, Colombia's Dipacho, and David Wiesner of the US have continued to investigate the silent book's myriad possibilities.

This special category of books aside, one of the more striking picture-book trends of the last few decades has been the notable imbalance between the explosive growth in the number of artists working in the genre and the far more modest increase in the ranks of its writers. Why might this be? It is often said that we live in a "visual world": perhaps this widespread perception helps to explain the trend. It is certainly true that publishers rely more heavily on the illustrations of a picture book as a selling tool; that parents are apt to judge a book by its pictures in a big-box store; and that when the original art for picture books is exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, the words for the books are typically treated as an afterthought. In any case, picture-book writers have not always gotten their due! Yet for the children themselves, the words they meet in their first books remain as life-changingly significant as ever: as their first experience of the pleasures of storytelling, narrative non-fiction, and poetry; as their best introduction to the power of language as a playful possession and as a tool for living.

As a long-time book reviewer, I often found myself drawn to a visually remarkable new picture book only to discover, minutes later, that the words that accompanied the illustrations were no match for them. Every so often, however, a book would turn up that had been written with all the wild beauty, distilled insight, and emotional clarity of a memorable song lyric or short story or poem, and I would be reminded once again what a joyful thing a great picture book can be for any reader, young or old.

Last year, when I set aside my review work to join Astra Publishing House as Editor at Large, I was excited to be given the lead role in the judging of the first worldwide writing competition for picture book authors, the Astra International Picture Book Writing Contest. The goal of the contest is to raise the awareness of the genre's writers as full partners in an artform that continues to find new audiences across the world; and to recognize and reward the best practitioners this deceptively simple artform.

The Astra contest is currently open for submissions by anyone twenty-one years or older living anywhere in the world and writing in English, Chinese, French, German, or Spanish. The rules are quite simple: the manuscript--only one per entrant, please!--must be suitable for publication as a picture book for children ages 3-8, and it must be no more than 1000 words long. The manuscript can take any form: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or some combination. It must be an original work and it must be unpublished. There are cash prizes for the winners--more than twenty in all--as well as opportunities for publication. The deadline for submissions is this April 30th.

I invite everyone who might be interested to seek further information at [Astra's website](#). There you will also find the contest registration form for submitting your manuscript. Good luck to all!

Leonard S. Marcus is one of the world's foremost writers about children's books and the people who create them. He is the author of Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon and over 25 other award-winning books. He is a trustee of the Eric Carle Museum, teaches at New York University and the School of Visual Arts, and recently joined Astra Book House as Editor at Large.

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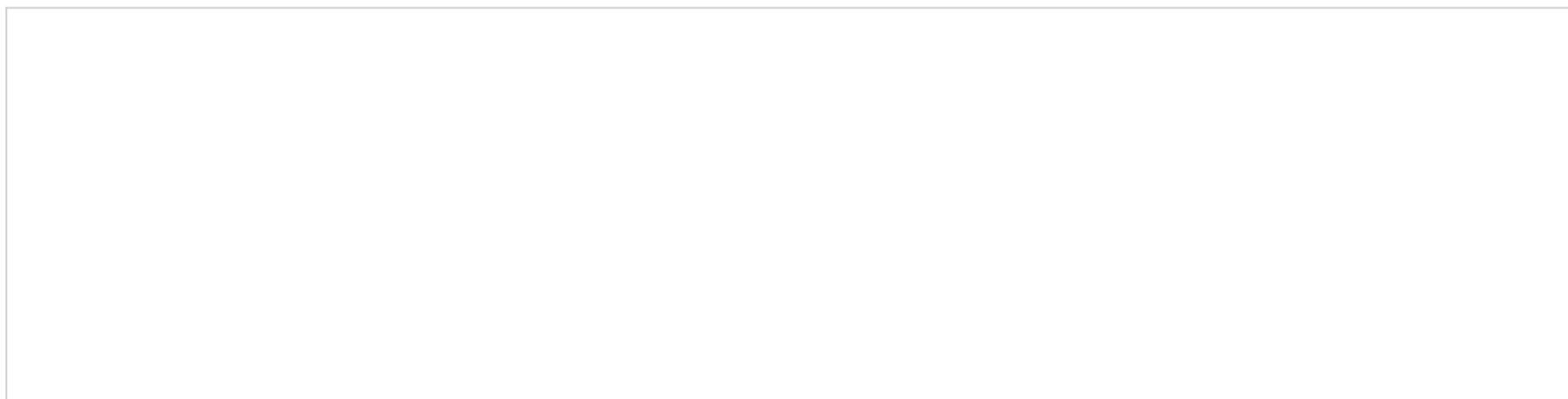
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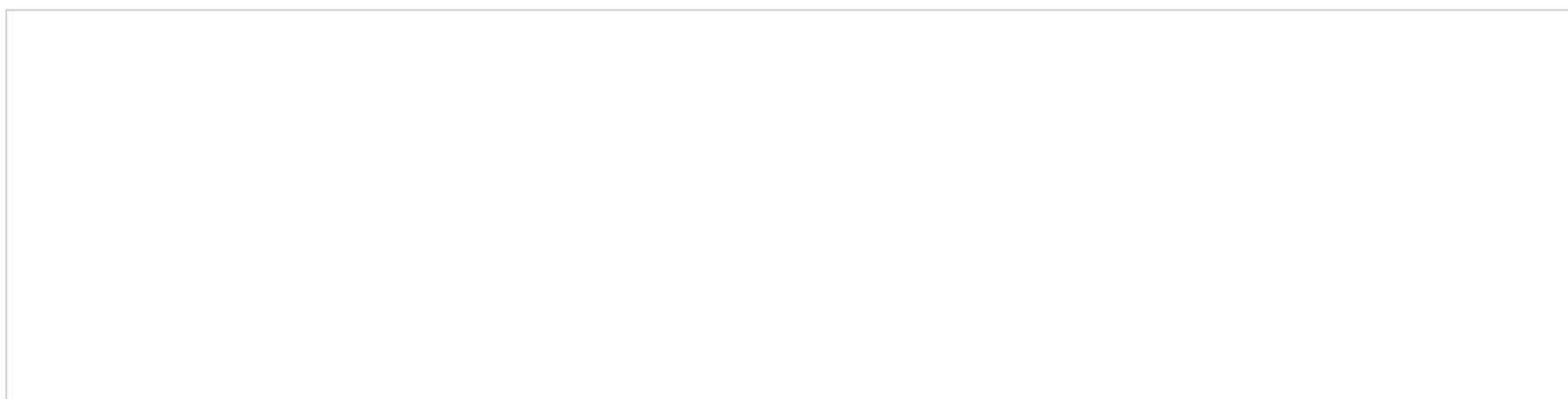


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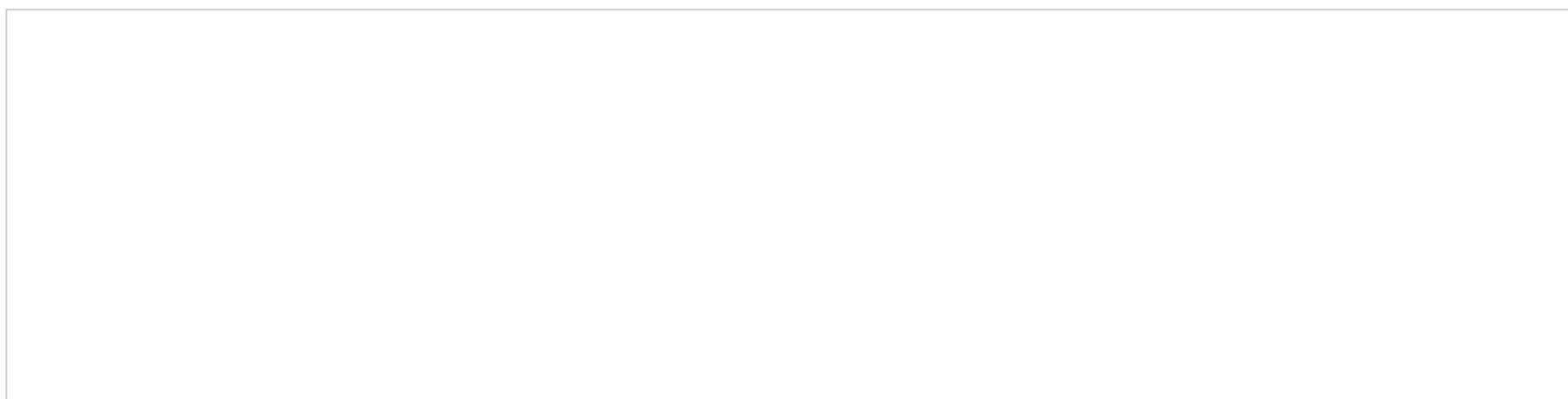
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