

Publishing challenging picturebooks

Introduction

Academic studies have explored international picturebooks from pedagogic, literary, and art and design perspectives. However, fewer look at the role of the publisher from a practice-based perspective. This chapter seeks to explore some of the roles played by the publisher in the creation and distribution of picturebooks, and attempts to articulate some of the thought processes behind the commissioning editor's decision-making. Commissioning is a subjective process and successful commissioning editors bring together a nuanced range of skills and creative approaches: "editors who have the right combination of judgement, taste, social flair and financial nous are highly valued assets" (Thompson, 2012: 7). This chapter will attempt to unpack some of these elements by considering the challenges that commissioning editors working in the children's category face in the UK market, and to explore how a publisher might begin to learn the skills they need to thrive in this environment. The examples include a publisher's reflections on buying the rights for a Canadian picturebook on mental health for the UK market, and an undergraduate Publishing student's response to depictions of gender in a cautionary tale from the 1930s. They explore different, specific aspects of the publishers' role, and are intended to exemplify some of the choices a publisher considers during the creation of a book. The second section considers how a publishing student might begin to understand what these choices are, and their possible implications.

Publishing studies as a discipline is growing in UK universities, and with it a new body of literature is developing. However, debate on what constitutes 'publishing' is rife, and the roles and practices of publishers remain elusive (Bhaskar 2013: loc 132). The role of the publisher has been categorized in numerous ways. These can vary from a tangible list of tasks, such as John B Thompson's "content acquisition and list building, financial investment and risk-taking, content development, quality control, management and co-ordination, sales and marketing" (2012: 19), leading to his loose definition of a publisher as a "merchant of culture" through to Michael Bhaskar's classification of the role of the publisher as someone who "filters and amplifies" (2013: loc 183). These interpretations cast the role of the publisher in different lights, from the practicalities of turning a manuscript into a printed book within the commercial environment of running a business, to fostering ideas and helping authors and illustrators to develop their work. These differing roles offer an interesting area in which to explore the tensions between creative and business decisions made in the conceptualization, shaping and distribution of books. Balancing these different elements requires a varied skill set: publishing is about "judgement, taste, aesthetics and the exercise of reason, the considered deployment of resources, financial or otherwise. It is anything but straightforward" (Bhaskar 2013: loc 147). While these definitions take account of the wider role of the publisher and differing elements undertaken within a publishing house which comprise numerous departments and individuals, the focus of this chapter will be on the strategic role played by the commissioning editor, defined by the Publishers Association as: "to find new authors, books and ideas to publish. Their aim is to build up a

publisher's list with successful authors and books. A publisher's 'list' just means the list of titles that they publish."¹

Categories of publishing have their own distinctive characteristics, or as Thompson describes them, "peculiar traits" (2012:4). Academic publishing is different to trade publishing, as is illustrated publishing, professional publishing and children's publishing². In his frequently cited *Communications Circuit*, Robert Darnton outlines the stages a book goes through from author to publisher, printer, shipper, bookseller and finally reader in the context of social, legal, economic, political and intellectual influences (1982: 68). While this provides a useful overview, it has been criticized for not engaging with the "messiness" of publishing, including the aspect of financial and other risk (Bhaskar 2013: loc 2037). Financial aspects are interesting when placed in the context of children's publishing, as the language of adult trade publishing sits uncomfortably alongside perceptions of children and childhood. In her study of the commercialisation of *Peter Pan* of 1984, Jacqueline Rose considers the contrast between money, which is perceived as dirty, and the sentimentalized image of the innocent child (Rose, 1993: 87). However, to overlook the financial aspects of the children's publishing industry would exclude an important aspect of the environment and challenges faced by publishers. In terms of revenue, the children's publishing market is one of the strongest performers of the UK publishing industry. In September 2018, it posted growth for that year to date of 0.7% overall, with particular areas of growth in non-fiction, up 10.2% from 2017, (O'Brien 2018) and novelty books. Current predictions suggest that non-fiction will continue to grow – non-fiction books make up one third of the adult market, but only 15% of children's (Eyre 2019). Picturebooks have remained steady, with growth of 0.7% (O'Brien 2018). While commentaries on current trends in the publishing industry are to an extent speculative, as developments in publishing are fast moving, they are worth acknowledging as a snapshot of a particular moment in time. From a publishers' perspective, the current children's market presents challenges of saturation, with a vast number of new titles reaching the market each year, but also creates opportunities both in terms of aesthetics – in an interview outlining differing markets in the US and UK, Harriet Birkinshaw, Senior Commissioning Editor at Flying Eye Books suggests: "... we appear to be having a golden age in illustration which is opening the UK market up to different types of visual storytelling" – and also in terms of different content as a key factor.

Challenging content

¹ An expanded definition is available here:

<https://www.publishers.org.uk/activities/careers/discover/editorial/commissioning-editor/>

² Under the Book Industry Communication (BIC) Standard Subject Categories, the 'children's, teenage and educational' category comprises the subcategories: 'picturebooks, activity books, and early learning material; children's and teenage poetry, anthologies and annuals; children's and teenage fiction and true stories; children's and teenage general non-fiction; educational material; children's and teenage reference material; personal and social issues (children's and teenage); children's and teenage stationery and miscellaneous items' (*BIC Standard Subject Categories & Qualifiers*, 2010). In 2013, a new subject categorisation system for a global book trade, Thema, was launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair. BIC categories are mapped to Thema, however Thema has more sub-categories than BIC in the children's category.

In this examination of “challenging” picturebooks, Kimberley Reynolds’s (2007, 2015, 2016) explorations of “radical” children’s literature in the context of ideas of literary Modernism will be drawn on, particularly “... where fictions for the young can be seen to be contributing to thinking and debates associated with changes to narrative and culture” (Reynolds, 2007:2). Here the publisher potentially has a leading role, as the conceptualization and distribution of books has “consequences for our literary and intellectual culture” (Thompson, 2012:25). While this is relevant to questions concerning the boundaries of literature and culture, it is also pertinent in terms of how books handle complex, challenging topics. Reynolds explores the scarcity of children’s books on the topic of depression, suggesting that in UK and US publishing there is a perception that children’s books should conclude with a positive resolution. She also speculates that the text and image dynamics in picturebooks make them a powerful and important form to explore complex emotions (Reynolds, 2007:89–90). In an article published at a similar time, Nicholas Tucker reinforces the importance of the existence of picturebooks about depression, but suggests that they should not form part of the mainstream children’s publishing landscape (Tucker, 2006: 208–209).

There is a perception that UK children’s publishers are quite conservative in the types of picturebooks they commission, and many challenging international titles are not translated and published in English (Tucker, 2006; Evans, 2015: 10). However, as Nodelman notes in *The Scandal of the Commonplace: the Strangeness of Best-Selling Picturebooks*, the spectrum across which picturebooks might be perceived as “challenging” is vast (Nodelman, 2015: 36). Nodelman’s list of best-selling picturebooks in the UK and US for a particular week, 13–19 October 2013, is not unusual for a best-selling picturebook list. This is in part due to the strength of the backlist³ in children’s publishing. Popular children’s titles maintain strong sales over long periods of time. For example, Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) has sold 41 million copies worldwide in 62 languages since its first publication in 1969 (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar’s 123*, no date). Backlists form a key part of a publisher’s portfolio; the upfront costs of the book have largely been paid off and aside from costs for printing, warehouse storage, distribution and royalties, backlist titles are economical to produce and represent a steady and relatively predictable income stream from year to year (Thompson 2012: 219). A publisher’s backlist will be supplemented with a frontlist of current titles – in the UK around 10,000 new children’s titles are published each year (Kloet, 2019).

Funds are needed upfront to develop a new frontlist title on commissioning it. It can take years for the initial return to pay off, meaning that cashflow is not an uncommon challenge for publishers (Thompson, 2012: 107–108). As a business model, this makes it hard for smaller and younger publishers to thrive (Thompson, 2012: 159–163). While big publishers are large, global organizations, the majority of publishing houses are small, with modest staffing and budgets (see *The UK Book Industry in Statistics 2016*). Once the development, production, distribution and marketing costs have been covered, the profit margin for a mid-selling title is modest. Over the past few years, production costs have increased as UK publishers have been affected by a weaker currency combined with rising costs of wood

³ Defined by Nielsen as a title published more than 12 months in the past.

pulp driving up the price of paper – the average unit price of producing a paperback has nearly doubled in the last three years (Mansfield 2019). Additionally, in picturebook publishing, full-color printing increases the print costs. This makes co-editions⁴ and sales of international rights highly attractive to a publisher. The decisions that publishers make when buying and selling rights is key to both their commercial viability, but also the vitality and creativity of their list. Thompson describes how small publishers, which commission titles that the owner feels passionately about “tend to be strongly editorially driven” (Thompson, 2012: 160). The majority of English-language publishers sell rather than buy rights to picturebooks. The main exceptions to this are Gecko Press, based in New Zealand, and Book Island, based in the UK.

Buying rights: *Virginia Wolf*

Virginia Wolf (Maclear and Arsenault, 2017) was published in Canada by Kids Can Press in 2012, and the UK edition was released by Book Island in 2017⁵. Established in New Zealand in 2012, Book Island moved to Bristol in 2016. A small, independent publisher, Book Island has one permanent member of staff, founder Greet Pauwelijn. Book Island specializes in publishing English language editions of foreign titles. Awarded the prestigious Bologna Award for Best Children’s Publisher in Oceania in 2016, Book Island books are developed with high production values, and present a range of themes, including dark topics such as the depiction of depression in *Virginia Wolf*. On describing her first impressions of the book that led to her buying the rights, Pauwelijn states:

I first spotted the book at the stand of the Canadian publisher at the Children’s Book Fair in Bologna. It didn’t have a prominent spot on the shelves, as it had been released a few years earlier. I was immediately drawn to the illustrations on the cover and intrigued by the title (Pauwelijn, 2019).

⁴ An edition of the same book that is released concurrently by different publishers, usually in different languages and different countries.

⁵ English language rights are broken into two mutually exclusive territories: the UK and the Traditional British Commonwealth (including or excluding Canada) and the US, its dependencies and the Philippines. The publisher can only publish in territories that they have bought the rights for. When buying rights, the publisher might make changes to the title, cover design and content to reflect the territory they publish in. In this instance, some place names were anglicized for the UK edition (Pauwelijn, 2019).

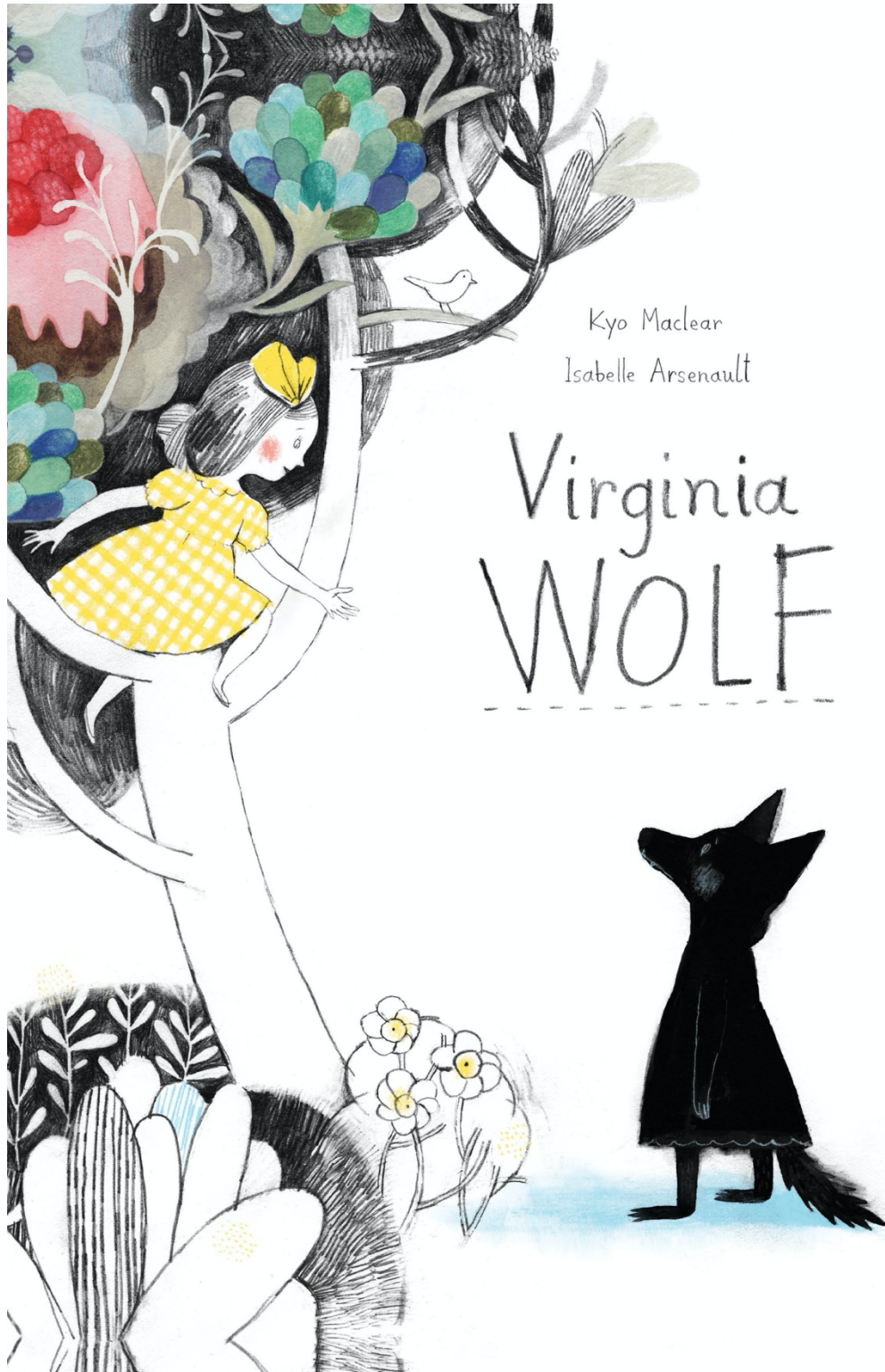


Figure 1: *Virginia Wolf*, cover design. Illustration © Isabelle Arsenault

The title references potential biographical interpretations within the book, with a verbal / visual pun on Virginia Woolf's name, illustrated by the protagonist Virginia, as a girl whose depression is articulated as a feeling of "wolfishness". On the front cover, Virginia is depicted as the silhouette of a small, anthropomorphized wolf, looking up towards her sister, Vanessa, climbing in a tree (Figure 1). As the story progresses, the illustration slowly metamorphoses into the figure of a girl: the wolf's triangular body becomes a dress; its

pointed ears become a bow in Virginia's hair. "Being very layered in its story and illustrations, the readers will discover various themes in the story" (Pauwelijn, 2019). On a literal level, the book tells the story of a little girl called Virginia, who wakes up feeling "wolfish" one day.



Figure 2: Virginia Wolf. Illustration © Isabelle Arsenaault

Narrated by her sister Vanessa, Virginia is described as "a very bossy wolf" who growls and moans and scares visitors away (Figure 2). She goes to bed, pulls up the covers and "... she said nothing. To anybody." Eventually, Virginia replies to Vanessa's question about what would make her feel better:

If I were flying right now I might feel better. ... I would travel to a perfect place. A place with iced cakes and beautiful flowers and excellent trees to climb and absolutely no doldrums. ... Bloomsberry of course.

Vanessa takes her art box and paints what "Bloomsberry" sounds like with a swing, a ladder, flowers, birds, and butterflies. Virginia says it is perfect and they play together in Bloomsberry (Figure 3). At a literal level the book includes references to depression in Virginia's wolfish behaviour, and also allows the reader to explore "the power of sisterhood and imagination" (Pauwelijn, 2019).



Figure 3: *Bloomsbury*. Illustration © Isabelle Arsenault

On a non-literal level, an implied awareness on the part of the reader of the life and death of Modernist writer Virginia Woolf and her relationship with her sister, the Bloomsbury Group painter and designer, Vanessa Bell, creates poignancy by creating space for the reader to project additional information. There is an interesting tension in *Virginia Wolf* between the perception of the characters as fictionalized children and the body of literature about their lives as adults. Woolf's letters, such as her suicide note to her husband, Leonard, allude to her depression as "terrible times". She writes about the feeling of "going mad" and that she "begin[s] to hear voices and ... can't concentrate" (Oyebode, 2010). Contextual awareness of Woolf's life allows the portrayal of depression in *Virginia Wolf* to become "... an underlying, more subtle theme, which helped me find a wide audience for it [the book]" (Pauwelijn, 2019).

The range of audiences for picturebooks is vast and there are several academic studies which examine the tensions associated with dual audience in children's picturebooks (Scott (1999), Beckett (2013), Ommundsen, (2014)). From this perspective, *Virginia Wolf* is an interesting example of a picturebook that can be read in numerous ways by adult as well as child audiences. A review in *The Guardian*, for example, describes it as likely to "delight literary-minded adults as much as the kids they're tucking in" (Carter, 2017). From a publishers' perspective, the decision to publish this title in the UK demonstrates a conscious desire to allow this picturebook to be a way of "initiating conversations":

At the time of discovery there were indeed very few picture books in the UK exploring that topic [depression], despite the mental health issues many people in the UK are suffering from. When I discovered *Virginia Wolf* I knew it could help initiate conversations about depression, without having to be an 'issue' book (Pauwelijn, 2019).

However, the way the picturebook is constructed allows considerable freedom regarding the depth or level at which a conversation about this challenging topic might take place. The complexities of the subject matter of *Virginia Woolf* are echoed in the sophistication of the design. The combination of flat color and highly decorated backgrounds that spill over the boundaries of the page creates a visually rich impression. Vanessa's paintings in *Virginia Woolf* allude to Bell's painterly style (see Figure 4); echoes of European Avant-Garde influence are apparent, if understated.



I made a garden.
I painted trees and sweet-shaped blossoms and green
shoots and iced cakes. I painted leaves that
said *hush* in the wind and fruit that squeaked,
and slowly I created a place called Bloomsberry.
I made it look just the way it sounded.

Figure 4: Vanessa painting Bloomsberry. Illustration © Isabelle Arsenault

On the release of the Canadian edition of *Virginia Woolf*, the US-based publishers' industry magazine, *Publishers Weekly*, praised the ambition, complexity, and execution of the book, however, they also commented on the "ferocity" of the depictions of Virginia in her full wolfish state (Virginia Woolf 2012), offering interesting parallels to depictions of violence in the Modernist child of the early twentieth century (Higonnet 2009). There is a significant body of literature on the role of the Bloomsbury Group in the history of English Modernism (e.g. Wolfe 2011), but this movement is infrequently alluded to in picturebooks.

In the case of *Virginia Woolf*, an awareness of social and historical context from Woolf's and Bell's childhoods offers further levels of meaning. Domestic illustrations within the picturebook are loosely sketched, with insufficient detail to place them accurately within a particular time period. However, among the odd toy, boxes of tubes of paint, pots of brushes and numerous books litter the background of the spreads, offering both suggestions of the children's later interests as adults, but also potentially referring to domestic and social elements of Woolf's and Bell's childhoods. The Golden Age of children's book illustration in the late nineteenth century occurred when Vanessa Bell (1879–1961) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) were children. In later life, Woolf and Bell both engaged

with book creation, both through Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, which published much of Woolf's writing, often with covers designed by Vanessa Bell, and through other publishers, such as Penguin, which published Woolf's work in paperback posthumously. While many of the complex aspects of Virginia Woolf's adult life and personality are not explicitly articulated in *Virginia Woolf*, it contains sufficient tangible references to offer a coherent structure for the reader / viewer to project and build additional aspects of the story and create a nuanced and substantial narrative.

Since the UK publication of *Virginia Woolf*, Book Island's list has expanded with the commission of further titles that feature challenging topics, such as *Mum's Jumper* (Perkin, 2019), which explores grief from a child's perspective after the death of a parent. In February 2020, *Mum's Jumper* became one of 35 children's titles on the Reading Agency's 'Reading Well Books on Prescription Programme'. This programme, formed in 2013, comprises a list of titles chosen by experts to allow GPs and mental health practitioners to prescribe books to patients that tackle topics such as depression, chronic pain or dementia (Flood, 2020). The development of Book Island's list and the critical acclaim their titles are achieving, suggests there is space within the UK picturebook market for titles which explore challenging content to flourish.

Future Publishers

As an evolving industry, the roles played in a publishing house change with developments in technology and staff. In the UK there has recently been a shift as commissioning editors take a less hands-on approach to working on a manuscript, leaving a potential gap in a future publisher's skill set:

This passing on of skills and a creative approach to the editorial role is something that could be considered as important for the sustaining of editorial integrity and quality. ... It is worth considering how the current and later generations of commissioning editors ... will learn their craft and 'nose' for publishing (if indeed the latter can be taught or encouraged), now that the senior commissioning staff are more involved in just the early – more conceptual and strategic – stages of a book's life (Reeve 2018).

This change in the training of new commissioning editors implies new developments in universities and publishing courses that present interesting challenges to the next generation of publishers in the articulation of the nuances of the publisher's role.

Publishing degrees are becoming increasingly common in the UK at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The institution where I am based, Bath Spa University, developed a creative studio-based undergraduate publishing degree in 2007 and launched a specialist practice-based MA in Children's Publishing in 2018. Students progress to careers in both large and small publishing companies in editorial, marketing, sales, design and production roles. In 2017, 100% of our graduates were in work / further study within six months of graduating (DLHE 2018). Our students work on numerous projects in children's and other book categories. The example below looks at our first-year students' first experiences of children's publishing with challenging content. Publishers work with other people's text and images; the degree of influence they have over that content depends on numerous factors. The balance between intervening and holding back can be a delicate one. As a first-year project, the primary aim was to explain publishing processes; students took their ideas

through industry-standard editorial and design processes to reach a successful conclusion, in this case, a printed book created in response to Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales for Children* (1907). However, the task was also intended to encourage students to explore ways of understanding the content they worked with. As a picturebook has been defined as:

... text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child (Bader, 1976:1)

students are encouraged to place emphasis on visual as well as textual content.

Cautionary tales

In a similar vein to Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales for Children* comprise illustrated, rhyming verses, with grisly consequences for misbehaviour, such as the tale of 'Jim, Who Ran Away from his Nurse and Was Eaten by a Lion' or 'Matilda, Who Told Lies and was Burned to Death'. Belloc's cautionary tales were first published by Eveleigh Nash in 1907 and have never been out of print since (available on Project Gutenberg since 2008). Their enduring popularity is interesting given the differences between cultural perceptions in 1907 and today and the fact that in publishing, increasing consideration in the form of sensitivity editing is given to content that might be viewed as challenging.

Sensitivity editing is becoming increasingly prevalent in children's publishing, particularly in YA books, "following a cascade of controversies over books that some readers found racist, homophobic or otherwise culturally tone-deaf" (Alter 2017). While the idea of a book being checked prior to publication is not new – in academic publishing, for example, peer-reviewing is standard practice – editing for cultural and social sensitivities is a growing trend within the children's category. This process is sparking debate within the industry; it raises questions over the role the publisher has, or is perceived to have, around the moral or ethical content of books and the line between presenting content sensitively and potential censorship. Sensitivity editing can include content, language and images. Additional considerations around language, such as amending archaic phrases that potentially make the text inaccessible to today's reader are included as part of the process of sensitivity editing. In the UK, a frequently cited example of this is Hodder Children's revision of Enid Blyton's Famous Five series in 2010, which saw the adaptation of language that was either perceived as dated, or has alternative connotations in today's usage. Although this decision was based on market research, the perception of readers was that a need to simplify the language to make it understandable to today's children was patronizing to their reading abilities (Flood 2010). Commercially, this endeavour was unsuccessful and the updated series has been discontinued (Cain 2016). While this particular adaptation proved unpopular, it highlights some of the considerations publishers make, and are likely to be required to give greater deliberation to, when approaching challenging topics, or books that contain potentially challenging elements, whether that challenge is based on content, language or illustration.

A student's response

The students were approximately six months into their undergraduate degree when they undertook this short project, which focused on editorial and design processes. Students

were split into groups of two, allowing them to take on a role as either editor or designer and work collaboratively. As the project was undertaken over a very short time period, the ideas presented were not fully refined.

Students were asked to respond to a number of Hilaire Belloc's cautionary tales. Originally published as a series of verses with accompanying illustrations by Basil Temple Blackwood, later editions of Belloc's tales have images by Quentin Blake (1991), Posy Simmonds (1997), and Edward Gorey (published posthumously in 2002). Belloc's ironic humor lends itself to playful illustrations, creating a sense of irreverent glee in many of the images regardless of the different illustrators' styles. The dark humor of the text offers considerable illustrative freedom in depicting quirky scenes and events, often resulting in complementary word and text relationships.

We were curious as to how these tales would be received by a group of 18 to 21-year old undergraduate students and if they felt the content was appropriate for children of the twenty-first century. The brief was deliberately broad in terms of how students might respond to the tales, allowing them to begin to question the nature of adult and child audiences, the appropriateness of humor and satire, and to reflect on the significance of historical, cultural, and social references.

"Designed for the Admonition of Children between the ages of eight and fourteen years", a satirical reinterpretation of the didactic stories prevalent in Victorian times, Belloc uses black humor to present a moral message. Following the publication of his *Cautionary Tales*, Belloc wrote a number of political and religious essays before the *New Cautionary Tales* were published in 1930. While still including black humor and an overtly moral message, tales such as 'Aunt Jane', for example, include verses with a different tone, that reference socio-cultural perceptions rather than outlining the gruesome consequences of misbehaviour.

Aunt Jane (Belloc, 1930) relates a conversation between Amanda and her mother about Aunt Jane. Amanda learns that while austere, her Aunt is principled, and the tale explores the progression of Amanda's feelings of intimidation to admiration as she gains greater understanding of her. Ostensibly a moral tale about judging people, this message is undermined by Belloc's turn of phrase and humorous descriptions which link to our preconceptions of a stock character in the form of a cantankerous spinster. The sketches of one of our students, Jonah Kensett, show a quite literal initial interpretation. For example, on the verse:

"Mamma" said Amanda "I want to know what
Our relatives mean when they say
That Aunt Jane is a Gorgon who ought to be shot,
Or at any rate taken away".

he depicted Amada's perception of her Aunt as a Gorgon (Figure 5).



Figure 5 'Aunt Jane as a Gorgon' by Jonah Kensett

Later verses in the tale describe Aunt Jane's other qualities:

"The Term", said her Mother, "is certain to pain,
And is quite inexcusably rude.
Moreover Aunt Jane, though uncommonly plain,
Is also uncommonly good.
She provides information without hesitation,
For people unwilling to learn;
And often bestows good advice
upon those
Who give her no thanks in return."

In terms of illustration, this extract presents a different challenge. The description of Aunt Jane as a Gorgon gives rise to a very tangible image; however, bestowing good advice, wanted or otherwise, is a much more abstract concept to depict visually. A later reference to her:

"Her conduct has ever been totally free
From censorious whispers of ill,
At any rate, since 1903—
And probably earlier still.
Your Father's dear sister presents in a word,
A model for all of her sex
With a firmness of will that is never deterred,
And a confidence nothing can vex."

led Jonah to explore moments from history which might be relevant. Emmeline Pankhurst's foundation of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903 became a tangible moment for him to illustrate. In his reinterpretation of Belloc's tale, Aunt Jane's virtues are depicted politically, as she becomes a suffragette, standing tall with a proud stance and wearing the green, white and purple colors of the suffragette flag (Figure 6). This response relies on the reader's ability to understand the significance of this color scheme, and offers scope to initiate conversations or debate about women's rights and portrayals of women in our culture.

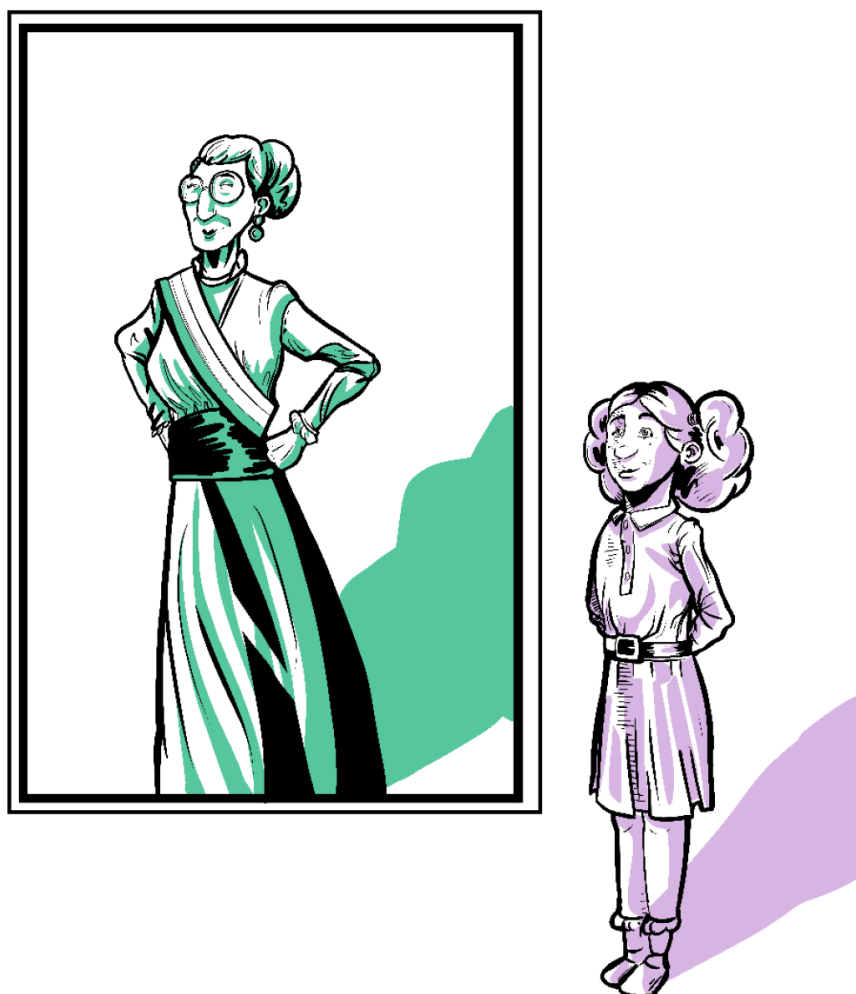


Figure 6 'Aunt Jane' by Jonah Kensett

This project was undertaken in 2018, the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, which gave a vote to women over 30 who met various property qualifications. Anniversary editions are popular in publishing; it is not uncommon to come across special editions with high quality print or production values to reflect a significant moment. As a member of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, it is unlikely that Belloc would have endorsed this interpretation, rather the verse possibly suggests a negative judgement of the suffragette movement by implying that Aunt Jane did attract 'censorious whispers' before 1903.

However, the reference provided a framework that allowed the text to be explored in relation to events that were relevant both at the turn of the twentieth century, when the tale was first published, and the early twenty-first century. An allusion to events of the past is placed in the context of the present and Jonah's progression from the mimetic to the metaphoric became a way to visually explore depictions of Aunt Jane's character in a way that offers potential to initiate socio-political commentary. Through sketching, students begin to understand and respond to content, key skills in a commissioning editor's portfolio, which will create a base of knowledge for them to build on in future years both within their degree programme and also in industry.

This project was designed to give students insight in the publishing process, however it also was intended to allow scope for students to respond to the tales as they explored their understanding of the content and potential interpretations of it. The use of a cautionary tale provides numerous elements to consider; to an extent, the exaggerated content creates a degree of removal from reality. These aspects create a distance for the reader and the content becomes humorous. This approach is in contrast to *Virginia Wolf*, where lightly referenced biographical details tie the book to real events. From the publishers' perspective this requires sensitivity and sophisticated understanding of content. To reiterate Bhaskar's definition of a publisher outlined above, the successful "deployment of resources" is process-driven, however developing an editor's nose or "judgement, taste, aesthetics and the exercise of reason" is a more nuanced experience and one that takes time to refine. Yet arguably, it is in these subtle aspects that the publisher's value lies.

The UK children's publishing market is growing and with this growth it is possible to speculate that an appetite for different types of storytelling in picturebooks is increasing, creating a space where challenging topics which contribute to a discussion around socio-cultural themes emerge. In the first example, the picturebook *Virginia Wolf*, encourages the initiation of conversations about mental health. In the second example, a project on Belloc's poem 'Aunt Jane', a student addresses gender equality in a socio-political context from the turn of the twentieth century. Publishers occupy a space where they reflect, but also help to define the cultural landscape. While "books and the publishing industry do not exist in isolation: they are, and always have been, part ... of a broader symbolic and information environment" (Thompson, 2012: 408). The creation and distribution of challenging picturebooks is an area in which the publisher potentially plays a key role in contributing to our culture. The examples presented here represent a small selection, and focus primarily on the role of the commissioning editor, but it can be argued that the growth in the UK market is offering publishers greater creative possibilities regarding the content they publish. The publishing industry is fast-moving, making identification and prediction of trends difficult to anticipate accurately. However, given that industry sources suggest a growing trend in creative non-fiction in the children's publishing category, it is perhaps possible to speculate on areas in which challenging topics might become more prevalent, with current issues concerning the environment, mental health, diversity and gender potentially becoming more frequently represented in both overt and subtle ways.

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