

Writing a Picture Book with Terry Farish

Picture books for children are poems with pictures. They can be funny. They can bring a family memory to life. Maria Popova describes picture books as “stories that tackle with elegant simplicity such complexities as uncertainty, loneliness, loss, and the cycle of life.” What makes a story one that children will love? What are the components that blend and form the structure and beauty of a picture book story? With a focus on the writing, we’ll explore scenes from picture books, words and images, that help a picture book sing and might inspire your own.

Broad Categories of Picture Books

The Story of a Life

The long-view picture book tells the story of a life in key moments and great leaps of time. Examples are *Hello Lighthouse* by Sophie Blackall and *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney

A Family Memory

Here is a picture book that is structured around an activity, event, or situation remembered. Examples are *Wild Berries* by Julie Flett.

Laugh-Out-Loud Picture Book

Examples include *Officer Buckle and Gloria* by Peggy Rathman, *Hush Little Baby* (Marla Frazee’s adaptation), and many cumulative tales.

Subversive Story

Might not be “considered auspicious by parents,” as one reviewer put it. Examples are the books by Jon Klassen such as *This Is Not My Hat*.

Love Song

Picture books can be love songs to a person, to a place, to an animal. This describes many books; one is *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* by Isabel Quintero, illustrated by Zeke Peña.

Lullaby

Consider *Naamah and the Ark at Night* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, illustrated by Holly Meade told in an Arabic form of poetry with each couplet ending in the same word, preceded by a rhyming word.

Picture Book Fictionalized Biography or Autobiography

Consider *16 Words: William Carlos Williams and “The Red Wheelbarrow”* by Lisa Rogers. Also, *This Is the Rope: A Story of the Great Migration* by Jacqueline Woodson.

Components of Picture Books

Here's a gathering of features I've seen in various picture books. When you write a story, you, the writer, are in service to the story. The story is the prize. Could these components serve your story?

The story is child focused. The story is told from the child's point of view, or in a way that children can identify with the story interaction. It has a child audience as in a lullaby or another kind of song, or it's a sandwiched story passed down to a child.

The story has an arc of rising action or tension, the structure of the western narrative. (There are many other ways to structure a narrative in the art forms of different cultures.) The arc of the story can be the cycle of a day of berry picking as in *Wild Berries* by Julie Flett. Most often, the arc revolves around a culminating scene of discovery or change.

My favorite way to say that is:

The story asks a question.

The story can have a refrain. A refrain is a type of repetition. It can be a repeated line or stanza that appears when a poem or story divides into different sections; A refrain can be compared to the chorus in music; It can be seen to hold the main idea or big picture of the story. Children often love the predictability of these lines.

The picture book story can have the structure or pattern of a poetic form. The language is spare like a poem; it may have internal repetitions like a poem; or it may in other ways reveal a pattern of words. The story can develop using formal poetry structures or be a prose poem.

A picture book story can be told in two languages, or the writer can offer key words in a language other than English. Many educators today offer dual language instruction for the many benefits this offers children. If you were told stories as a child in a language other than English or if you heard the language spoken by your grandparents and you are writing a story that arises from this culture, you might think about including words in that language. You would do this in a way that supports the narrative structure of your story.

Humor is gold. The story can be funny, or there can be subtle, sly humor in dialogue or description.

The voice serves the story. The voice helps to develop characterization and ground the story in place.

Writing Practice

“Stories move in circles...

And part of the finding is the getting lost.

And when you're lost, you start to look around and to listen.”

quoted by Sue Bender in *Everyday Sacred*

Here's a free write idea to help writers listen to themselves -

Identify a time of the day you can most easily slip into your imagination. Let this be a time you can be undisturbed. Sit with paper and pen or pencil. Do this every day for a week at this same time. Many things I have written have come out of my 5 a.m. free writes. What I write then comes with a clarity I had lacked or as a surprise. The practice of allowing that deep dive into your mind at a time when your mind is least cluttered with daily life is a way to understand what you already know. This is slightly different from morning pages because your writing is guided by a specific question.

Question 1

Imagine a character who could be in a picture book. There are no rules here. Begin to imagine this character in words. Everything you write is part of a path to beginning to see this character. Simply catch first ideas about who your picture book character could be. You may not use these words in the story. You are creating space in this moment to see the character. Maybe you can sketch the character in words. Can you hear them? Does the character reveal anything to you?

For each day's free-write, pose a question to yourself about this story that you are breathing life into. You might make a list of possibilities, or experiment with various passages to compare possible answers to a question. Could any of the questions below serve you to do a free write about as you imagine your story?

2. What is your main character's motivation to act?
3. What's in the character's way of trying to get what they want?
4. What structure do you imagine would serve your story?
5. What is the emotional context of the story? How do you reveal this?
6. Write one sentence that is the essence of your story. Experiment with different versions of this sentence.
7. Is there a sound that can be woven in as part of the fabric of the story?
8. What do you see as the overall theme of the story? That's the big picture idea that might make it universal.

Making it a Story - the Story Question

Write down your story question and keep it beside you. Let your story question guide you in writing the story. What you include in the story is determined by the question the story will answer.

- The story question is the core question the story will answer.
- It gives the writer a path for action and keeps the writer on track.
- The story question is the central dramatic question or the story engine.

“A Story Question is the underlying question that your main character is wrestling with throughout your [story]... and that they’ve answered in some way by the time they reach the end. Your readers are also subconsciously wrestling with the Story Question, too, as they journey through the story with your characters, and as you, the author, pull them into the emotions and choices your characters face.” Beth K. Vogt, writer

“Readers are always predicting, trying to solve the mystery of the story.”

Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story*

Critique Guidelines

Here are questions that will guide the discussion about participants’ picture book ideas or drafts:

1. What is one thing that is really alive in the story.
2. What is one question you have for the author, something to give you clarity?
3. What is the story question?

Picture Books Mentioned in the Workshop

16 Words: William Carlos Williams and "The Red Wheelbarrow" by Lisa Rogers, illus. by Chuck Groenink. (Random/Schwartz & Wade) 2020.

Alma and How She Got Her Name by Juana Martinez-Neal, (Candlewick) 2018.

Bear Came Along by Richard T. Morris, illus. by LeUyen Pham, (Little Brown) 2019.

Birdsong by Julie Flett (Greystone Kids) 2019.

The Blue House by Phoebe Wahl, (Knopf) 2020.

The Cat Who Liked Potato Soup by Terry Farish, illus. by Barry Root (Candlewick) 2003.

A Feast for Joseph, by Terry Farish and OD Bonny, illus. by Ken Daley (Groundwood) fall 2021.

Goodnight Gorilla by Peggy Rathman, (Penguin) 1994.

Hello Lighthouse by Sophie Blackall, (Little Brown) 2018.

The House in the Night written by Susan Marie Swanson, illus. by Beth Krommes. (Houghton) 2008.

Hush Little Baby, a Folk Song with Pictures by Marla Frazee, (Houghton) 1999.

I Want My Hat Back by Jon Klassen (Candlewick) 2011.

The Little Tree by Muon Van, illus. by JoAnn Adinolfi (Creston Books) 2015.

Love, Matt de la Peña, illus. by Loren Long. (Putnam) 2017.

My Papi Has a Motorcycle by Isabel Quintero, illus. by Zeke Peña (Random House) 2020.

Naamah and the Ark at Night by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, illus. by Holly Meade (Candlewick) 2011.

Pig Pig Grows Up by David McPhail (Dutton) 1992.

Officer Buckle and Gloria by Peggy Rathman (G. P. Putnam) 1995.

Swashby and the Sea by Beth Ferry, illus. by Juana Martinez-Neal (Houghton Mifflin) 2020.

This is a Poem That Heals Fish written by Jean-Pierre Simeon, illus. by Olivier Tallec, (Enchanted Lion) 2007.

This is Not My Hat by Jon Klassen, (Candlewick) 2012.

This Is the Rope by Jacqueline Woodson, illus. by James Ransome, (Nancy Paulsen Books) 2013.

Wild Berries by Julie Flett, (Simply Read Books) 2013.

Happy writing everyone,

Terry Farish

tfarish@gmail.com

<https://terryfarish.com/>