



Two Children and Dick Bruna: a Tribute

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Two Children Tell: a tribute to **Dick Bruna**

In the latest of her series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** recalls the impact Dick Bruna's stories and pictures had on her own young children.

Nicholas was only three months old (0y3m), contented, full of milk, lying beside me on the big bed. It was time, I thought, to replace my own reading-while-feeding novel, with something for him. At hand was Bruna's **B is for Bear**.

He was only vaguely interested in the turning pages and big splashes of primary colours on Apple, Bear, Castle, Duck ? glancing briefly at them and then away. Oh well, I thought, they are two different people. There's no reason why he should find the Bear exciting, as his sister had at this age. I was preparing to test this theory by turning to the Lion ? far and away her favourite until 0y6m ? when we turned to the next opening, uncovering the Eskimo.

Nick was transfixed. No longer one glance then away, he was staring at it, then began to vocalise, wave his arms, deliberately hit it with his fists, and generally show every sign of excitement. He seemed particularly interested in the coloured triangles decorating the bottom of the man's clothes. Ah, I thought, pattern, design ? that's what he likes. The four previous openings were basically big blocks of one colour, and Rebecca's favourites, the Bear and the Lion, are both completely yellow with Bruna's thick black outlines.

After several minutes I thought I'd move on to the other pages, taking advantage of the baby's still excellent concentration, Mistake! The Fish and Ivy held him for just a second, as did Rebecca's Lion, then he started to grizzle, so back I turned to his Eskimo, which he greeted again with enthusiasm.

This was repeated several times, until eventually he seemed to be getting bored with his friend at last, so I went through the rest. At the next human ? Queen ? he became interested again, picking at the end of her skirt and ?talking? to her a little, but at the next grizzle, which even the Eskimo didn't satisfy, I decided that was enough ?reading? for one day.

So it wasn't pattern or blocks of colour as I'd imagined ? it was people! And, even now, he is a people person. I'm sure it's not a coincidence that Rebecca is an animal person, as well. The Bear and the Lion are both recognisable simply styled animals (which the Mouse, for instance, with no legs showing and side-on, is not).

I had expected that Bruna would appeal to babies, for the clear colours and black outlines. But not for a minute did I expect that they would be able to recognise objects in the pictures, so basic and so simplified. How wrong I was. Rebecca and her animals, Nicholas and his people ? now I can see clearly that this was what they were responding to, not the colours ? it was the subject! How we underestimate them.

The Brunas were significant in other ways too. Because we would often say on rushed nights ?there's time for a quick Dick Bruna? and because they were all the same size and hence shelved together, his was one of the first author's names known by both children.

Miffy's Birthday, which he received for his second birthday, was the first time Nick had articulated identifying with a

character. Miffy is given a teddy bear. Nick's favourite toy was a bear too. After hearing the story he set off to bed clutching his teddy and told us 'Miffy bear, me bear' (2y0m).

In **The Egg** he first learned to say something in opposition to his pragmatic knowledge. 'What do you think was inside it?' asks the text and he gradually learned to answer what the text and the illustrations tell him on the next opening; 'A duck! A duck!' rather than what he knew was inside our eggs, albumen or 'water' as he put it (2y2m).

The Sailor inspired Rebecca's first quotation from a book (2y0m). She had complained that her dinner was 'hot'. 'No, it's warm? I told her. 'Warm and cosy?' she replied, and tried to tell us this was from 'The Sa?'or?' but when we didn't understand, she fetched it from her room. Sure enough 'The igloo was warm and cosy'.

It was in **Miffy at the Zoo** that it first occurred to her, with great hilarity, 'but animals can't talk!' (3y7m). Though her books often featured articulate animals and she knew real animals didn't talk, she had never before found this dichotomy amusing. She laughed every time she heard the book, for the next six months.

B is for Bear has been reprinted since, with each page a different coloured background. Our copy had white pages, was bigger, and much clearer I think. Nick's Eskimo has been replaced by an Elephant.

We will always be grateful to Dick Bruna, for his wonderful clear stories 'just the right length for a baby of one, say' and his brilliant pictures in clear primary colours with black outlines.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Australia. She is the proprietor of Create a Kids' Book, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

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