



# Picturebooks: the best art form for something you to have to say

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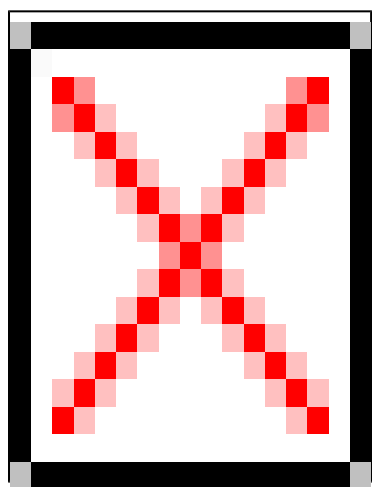
[Morag Styles](#) [2]

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An extract from the new edition of **Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling**

[Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling](#) [4] was published in 2012, winning the **United Kingdom Literacy Association Academic Book Award** the following year. Since then, the children's picturebook has continued to evolve and grow as an art form and indeed in the new edition of the book authors **Martin Salisbury** and **Morag Styles** argue that we are currently enjoying a new golden age of children's picturebooks. In this extract from the book, they examine the increasing phenomenon of picturebooks as a medium of communication for all ages, and their ability to convey the most sophisticated messages, and also discuss [The Journey](#) [5] with its creator [Francesca Sanna](#) [6].



## Man's inhumanity to man

*There are three ways of writing for children?the third way, which is the only one I could ever use myself, consists in writing a children's story because a children's story is the best art form for something you have to say.* C.S. Lewis

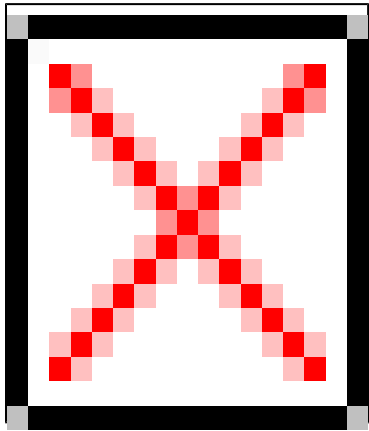
Very different approaches to the broad subject of wars and racial tension can be seen in Armin Greder's award-winning **The Island** (first published in Germany by Saurlander Verlag in 2002 as **Die Insel**) and David McKee's [The Conquerors](#) [7] (Andersen Press, 2004) and **Tusk Tusk** (Andersen Press, 1978).

**The Island** offers a bleak view of mankind's propensity to be influenced by a lynch mob mentality.

With limited use of colour and dark that are reminiscent of the work of Honoré Daumier, Greder creates an island world that is turned upside down by the arrival of a naked, wretched-looking man, washed up on the shore. What possible harm can this sorry figure cause? But gradually he becomes a focus of blame; a convenient scapegoat for all the islanders' ills and fears. Mothers use him as the bogeyman with which to threaten their children if they don't eat their

food. **The Island** plots the gradual spread of suspicion and fear of someone different. It is a bleak book that offers no hope in the form of a traditional happy ending, but its universal message is powerfully conveyed.

The recent surge in small, independent studio publishers has facilitated the arrival of a greater number of picturebooks that tackle subject matter not traditionally deemed suitable for children. André Letria and his Lisbon-based studio, Pato Lógico, is one such publisher. **Ah Guerra (The War)** was published in 2018. A collaboration between André and his father, the writer José Jorge Letria, the book is a timely, powerful and unrelentingly dark sixty-four-page statement on the tragedy of war.

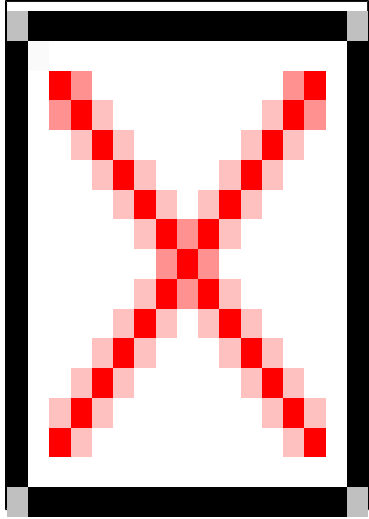


In **The Conquerors** and **Tusk Tusk**, David McKee takes a much gentler look at man's apparent perennial need to invade and conquer his neighbours' territories. McKee's approach is a more typical, less direct Anglo-Saxon one than Greder's, using humour and irony to tackle equally serious material. **The Conquerors** is a beautifully understated book that tells the tale of a small nation that, rather than engaging in war, prefers to devote its time to culture in the form of storytelling, singing songs and quietly celebrating its heritage. Its larger and aggressively expansionist neighbour, led by the stereotypical medal-strewn general, continually invades the nation but somehow never conquers it. The invading soldiers are greeted quietly, told stories and sung to; eventually they have such a good time that, before they know it, they themselves are being conquered with culture and charm. The book sends a profound message with effortless elegance.

Although McKee's **Tusk Tusk** is a small picturebook that features apparently simple, sweet, stylized elephants set against a colourful jungle background, its themes are hatred, racism, war, violence, difference and outsiders. It is designed and marketed for a young audience, but McKee offers a no-holds-barred view of some of the worst aspects of humanity. The Eden-like existence of the elephants in a land bursting with gorgeous vegetation soon ends as the black elephants hate the white elephants and vice versa. Trunks turn into guns, and war and killing ensue until the environment is laid waste and the peace-loving elephants are left no choice but to hide in the depths of the forest. Decades later, as the land once more bursts into beautiful life, grey elephants appear, the progeny of their peace-loving forebears. The reader believes McKee will provide a happy ending after all, but the final sentence in the book is: 'But recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks.' McKee is not afraid to challenge children. He is better known for the gentler elephant series [Elmer](#) [8], but it is worth pointing out that even here the hero is multicoloured and multicultural.

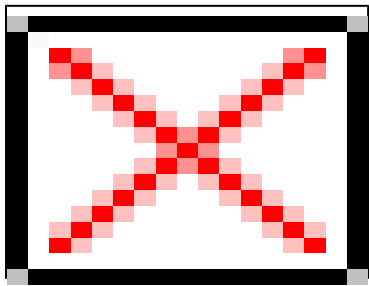
Already much respected as an illustrator, Pam Smy's debut authorial work, **Thornhill** (2017), breaks out of many of the perceived boundaries and definitions of word-image relationships in children's literature. It is a dual narrative told by the main protagonists, through pictures in one case and written diary entries in the other. Although it is a bleak Gothic ghost story with disturbing themes of loss, loneliness, mutism, neglect and bullying, and there is certainly no conventional happy ending, friendship and kindness also feature at its heart. Unusually, and most welcome, all the significant characters in this book are girls or women. The darkness of the tale is emphasized not only through chilling imagery in Smy's powerful illustrations – a haunted house, tangled creepers, crows, spiders, creepy puppets, barbed wire – but also by the number of completely black spreads that close each chapter. Using flat layers of emulsion paint with black acrylic ink on top, Smy, through her publishers, David Fickling Books, has produced a beautifully designed doorway of a book that asks a lot of its readers, not least to contemplate the deep unhappiness of its central child

characters and the inability of the adults around them to intervene and save them from harm.



The volatile political and environmental times in which we live are increasingly reflected in the content of picturebooks. One political and social issue that has come to the fore over recent years is that of human migration. With graphic scenes of the misery and tragedy of displacement played out repeatedly on our television screens, children will inevitably be exposed to the issue. Sadly, many will have direct experience of it. Picturebook-makers have become increasingly emboldened to tackle such subjects.

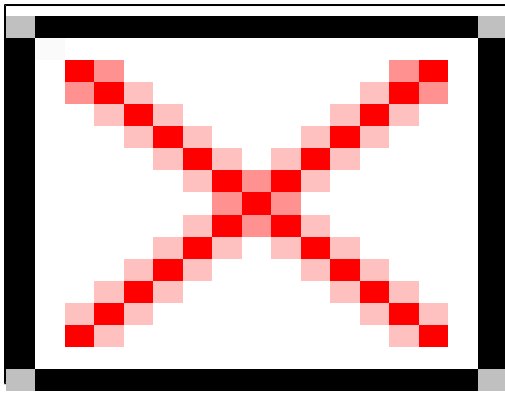
### **A conversation with Francesca Sanna**



**The Journey** is a masterclass in the mechanics of picturebook-making. Just as rhythm, meter and patterns of regular and irregular 'pulses' lead us, often invisibly, through a poem, the visual cadence of Sanna's sequence of images is meticulously crafted to maximize our engagement with the trauma of the family's experience. The overall left-to-right direction of the journey is punctuated by meetings with right-to-left obstacles and hazards. Rich combinations of complementary colour are used with great skill. Visual metaphor abounds but is used subtly to represent the incipient arrival of war or the flight to freedom. Sanna also explains that the book contains many personal motifs and references to her mother, the library, her cat, flamingos from Sardinia. Like many picturebook-makers, she has the opportunity to work with children in schools and says that she is delighted to see how the children 'get' the metaphor of the bird.

In terms of process, how are the images created?

'The images are all constructed digitally. I make marks on paper in the planning and, yes, I have experience of printmaking - screen printing and lithography. But the process now is digital. I work out the overall colour structure from the start.'



At the time of our conversation, Sanna was working on a new project, taking the research element of her work further through a collaborative project in the form of a research fellowship with a well-known British university, developing a follow-up to **The Journey**. The research looks at the concept of integration and 'acceptance'. Sanna has taken this research into schools and made contact with immigrant children in different cultures. She has also delved into the historical context of the subject. This work takes the picturebook to a new level of social and political relevance. Does she see herself as a picturebook-maker who will always make work that has a political edge?

'Yes to being a picturebook-maker. I see myself as a sequential narrative thinker. No to always making work that is political. It can be too 'heavy' and I am scared of making mistakes. There is a weight of responsibility. But it is a positive thing to open up discussion about these things with children. And I love to express ideas in a personal way, from personal experience. But I need to become a better businessperson!'

The huge international success of **The Journey** has helped to open the door for makers and publishers to address some of the most important issues of our time through the medium of the picturebook.

**Children's Picturebooks Second Edition: The Art of Visual Storytelling** [9] by Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles, Laurence King Publishing, 978-1786275738, £29.99pbk.

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