



Analysing a Picture Book

Article Author:

[Jane Doonan](#) [1]

[86](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Jane Doonan explores Helen Cooper's **The Bear Under the Stairs**.

Jane Doonan explores **Helen Cooper's The Bear Under The Stairs**

<!--break-->

Do you remember, when you were young, being just a bit scared of parts of the house which seemed to be creepy when grown-ups weren't there, and of dark spaces - the upper hall landing in the evening, or the cupboard under the stairs? Was something wandering around at night? Even though you knew it was silly, the fears were real but you couldn't bring yourself to tell anyone. By finding a form for such common childhood experiences Helen Cooper has made a remarkable picture book which deserves to become a classic.

The Bear Under the Stairs plays with the delightful absurdity of a grizzly bear inviting itself to stay in an ordinary family house. We can share its experience on a literal level. Or, if you look at this picture book another way, it is centred on William, who is afraid of bears and the cupboard under the stairs and who lets his imagination run away with him, so that William and the bear are one. For in this picture book there are two stories interwoven in a complex counterpoint between the words and the pictures: William and the bear seamlessly exchange roles as hero, villain, perpetrator, and victim, depending on where we do our viewing from - inside or outside the cupboard. Who says picture books for the young are a simple art form?

We meet the bear, twinkle in its eye, smile on its muzzle, on the cover of the book, and watch it travel into its story in a wordless visual prologue. The bear, a Michael Palin of animals, is depicted stepping briskly off a boat, carrying cases and a jolly green umbrella, next waiting for a coach, and then striding up a garden path.

It tactfully takes up residence in a cupboard, does a little unobtrusive snuffling around by day, and reserves serious domestic exploring until night time when it has tremendous fun, playing with a train set, taking a bath, trying on clothes, dancing, watching television and making pancakes. However, William, the small boy who lives in the house, is distinctly unfriendly and he and his mother sweep the bear into the open. A visual epilogue shows this resilient character on its travels again, this time by air. The last time we see the bear, it's parachuting towards a neat timber-clad cottage . . . no doubt hoping for a better reception . . . after all, one person's fears might be another one's joys.

The *text* begins William's story. We first see him on a small scale, from behind, climbing a darkened staircase, which curves from right to left. The bannisters throw shadows of bars on his body, as if caging him in fear. His form moves away from us literally, and because of the orientation of the staircase, he appears to be turning in on himself psychologically: we follow. Although the fear of bears is directly addressed, it is perfectly possible to interpret the story as being about fear of the dark, which William justifies by the invention of a bear which he really believes in. William's fear gets out of control and the bear is everywhere. As a defence measure, in case a hungry bear might eat little boys, he takes to throwing food into the cupboard, feeding the bear, and thus feeding his fears at the same time. The decaying food begins to 'pong' as his mum puts it, and she decides to do some cleaning. William, terrified that the bear will attack

her, bars the door by standing against it. She cuddles him into telling her what's been happening and together they go into the cupboard with mop and brush. William is helped to overcome his fear of bears by the gift of a toy one, and to control the fear of the cupboard by being shown that there is not necessarily anything wrong with dark, empty spaces in themselves.

Just how Helen Cooper manages to find equivalences for fear and the strategies we devise for handling it, without giving her young viewers a terrible dose of the horrors, is a tribute to her skill with picture book form. She exploits the structure, the tone of the text, compositions, and the layout, so that she can get the effects she wants. Structurally, for instance, using the opening and closing pages, as a visual prologue and epilogue, without any text, is a brilliant device. The bear's story is extended independently of William's, giving us a chance to know it on its own terms. The tone of the text plays a key role in counter-balancing the seriousness of the theme.

Poetry was one of Helen's great childhood pleasures and this comes through in her writing. **The Bear Under the Stairs** has plenty of robust rhythms and rhymes, about 'the bear in its lair under the stairs', and the repeated 'wham, bang, thump!' of the cupboard door prompts young listener participation; who wouldn't relish hearing about the 'bananas, bacon and bread' and the 'hazelnuts, haddocks and honey. ..'which William lobbs into the cupboard. The little dialogues between William and his mother, which carry a sense of their personalities, are utterly natural.

For the artwork Helen employs various distancing techniques. There are no close-ups of William's face: the hunched shoulders, the worried expression, the timid gesture, his closed eyes, are sufficient to show his frame of mind. Quite often the face is averted, or we see him from behind, so we empathise with his feelings through the pose rather than look at his features. Helen also keeps the action at a middle distance - no looming close-ups to narrow the gap between the image and the viewer. And when the bear goes jolly about all over the house from attic to kitchen, the only room in which it is not shown is William's. That might have been too disturbing for a young viewer.

Helen's painterly style is an antidote for the marshmallow school of children's illustrators. Angela Lee, Helen's art teacher at school, encouraged her to experiment with technique and to trust her own judgement. Helen's influences now include the Dutch artist, Lidia Postma, whose human forms have a slightly distorted quality, Edward Gorey, that master of the telling pose, and Gennadij Spirin, the Russian illustrator, whose paintings are often sombre-hued, interestingly detailed and elegantly wrought. Both William and the bear are unsentimental, unsterotypical images. William, with his spiky hair and pallid face, is a boy saved from plainness by the curve of his cheek. The bear is not a toy, an inflatable or a monster. It menaces the child in as much as the child is menaced by his own imagination, and in places William is given a bear-shaped shadow to make the point.

For **The Bear Under the Stairs**, Helen's pictures are reminiscent of late Victorian watercolours. The surface is densely worked, the medium layered with a relatively large brush and a very delicate meticulous gesture; you can almost see her 'feeling' for the form. Additions of fine splatterings of paint promote the impression of texture and depth, and settle the image on the page. (More 'distancing', in effect.) Colour and tone are used expressively. Muted greys, sepia cooled with blue or warmed with rose and orange, and earthy browns, contrast with passages of intense cobalt, ultramarine, and violet, when feelings run high. Darker tones act as a metaphor for shadowy fears, whereas in the prologue and epilogue the bear, as hero in his own right, is bathed in a benevolent (and decidedly otherworldly) light. After the climax of the action, the penultimate opening has four beautiful vignettes with a wonderful sense of time and space created by sensitive modulations of colour and texture, and through diminishing scale: this holds back the viewer before the final surge - the picture of the bear dropping in for his next call. Musical analogies suggest themselves.

Just as the colour serves the emotional development of **The Bear Under the Stairs**, so, too, does the layout; illustrations come in all shapes and sizes, double-spreads to vignettes, ovals, squares, rectangles, with soft edges and harder ones. Helen chose not to use a grid when designing the pages. (A grid is an underlying framework which shapes and places the illustrations so there is visual unification throughout the sequence of turned pages.) Her freestyle layout represents the best way she could show this story and a couple of examples will serve to make the point. In the moment of William's greatest terror when he's stopping his mother from going in the cupboard, he's depicted not much bigger than a postage stamp, isolated on the expanse of white page-space, and dwarfed by a huge printed 'No!' which he

screams. After a pause (suggested by the words being set at the bottom of the page) and in a quieter voice (suggested by reduction in the size of type) he adds 'Don't go in there!'

Earlier, when he is bombarding the bear in the cupboard with food, the composition is structured as a pyramid of action, William at the apex in command (even if he does have his eyes shut) and the bear depicted four times, bewildered, assaulted, miffed, and mollified by what hits it. Neither this wild freefall of food and feelings, nor William's heroic stand, could have been given these particular dramatic visual patterns had Helen been working in conditions imposed by a grid.

How cleverly Helen exploits the device of viewpoint can be seen in the two openings which show William drawing the bear opposed by the picture he has made, and the bear a little later in the book doing likewise. In William's case he's placed low on the picture plane, in small scale, and the big bear observes him from behind a tall chest of drawers: the viewpoint is the bear's eye-level. Looking vulnerable, William sucks his fingers, then draws a savage bear, claws and all. Helen minimises the effect by making traces of where William rested his drink of blackcurrant juice during his labours - a realistic and homely detail.

The bear, by contrast, is comfortably positioned in the middle of the picture plane, and given a surreal setting, which accords with the text telling us William is dreaming and equally well as a symbol for the bear's pleasure. From a vantage point outside William's house as if looking in through a window, we observe the bear about to start drawing. Everything within the frame glows in mellow golden candlelight and shares the bear's furry quality. This framed portrait of the artist as a happy bear is set not in the outside wall of the house as would be logical, but in luminous blue space, dissolving and swirling in crystalline patterns and spangled with carmine stars. The bear's picture of William, which shows him sticking out his tongue and wagging his fingers in cheeky defiance, is about as close to the reality as William's rendering of the animal, a point which will not be missed by observant young viewers.

Children like searching pictures for details which carry meaning, as Helen knows. Rewards here include Bear's green umbrella hanging on the handle of the cupboard door, the pear-patterned hall wallpaper pre-figuring the 'pear for the bear' which William palms at the tea table, Superbear on the television, and the levels of honey going down in a jar every time we see this motif.

Although Helen has made the bear as endearing as possible, there's a frightening aspect to the story in that William is alone in his ordeal. This promotes an underlying message to young listeners that it's better not to keep fears hidden, to tell parents or friends, and really the 'worry' may be nothing to worry about after all. Fruitful discussion between reader and listener could enable this picture book to be a 'helping text' for overcoming fears of all kinds.

There's a last little tale to be told about the bear. Helen's text begins as Helen's history. When she was a small girl she had an imaginary pet lion who lived under the stairs, but slowly he got out of hand, and she grew scared of him. He got bigger and bigger and she can remember feeding him Smarties and cabbage leaves. Some time ago Helen wrote down her childhood experience. Originally she did not intend to have the animal represented at all, in case it frightened children - but she also knew that as an idea for a picture book it somehow didn't work, so the manuscript went into a drawer. Then in 1990 she illustrated Stephen Gammell's text, 'Wake Up, Bear ... It's Christmas' in **Christmas Stories for the Very Young**, selected and edited by Sally Grindley for Kingfisher. She enjoyed drawing the bear so much she just had to find a story for it. So, she opened the drawer and there it was. No wonder Bear has such a pleased expression on its muzzle; it's been waiting to go travelling for a long time.

The Bear Under the Stairs (0 385 40,210 4) is published by Doubleday, priced £8.99. The paperback will be available in September.

Jane Doonan is the author of **Looking at Pictures in Picture Books** (0 903355 40 X), published by Thimble Press and costing £8.50 - see the News page in **BfK 80**, May 1993.

Page Number:

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '20): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/86/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/analysing-a-picture-book>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/jane-doonan>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/86>