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## Readability and children's picture books

ADRIANNE P. HUNT  
JANET R. REUTER

*Some picture books may  
have readability levels  
as high as sixth grade.*

**A** CHILDREN'S room of a public library contains numerous appealing, beautifully illustrated picture books, conveniently displayed on child-size shelves and tables. The children for whom these books are intended, preschoolers and primary grade youngsters, browse and choose those they will take home, with parents helping in the selection or urging their children to hurry. The scene is repeated in elementary school libraries and classrooms.

What becomes of the books, once checked out and in the hands of these youngsters? Will the children be left to explore the illustrations and imaginative language alone, or will parents and teachers share the stories with them? Do the adults concerned assume that the children will be able to read and enjoy the books independently, simply because they *are*

children's books, or do they understand that picture books are meant to be read to children by adults?

Observation has led the writers to conclude that in far too many cases it is the former situation that occurs. Well-meaning parents and teachers supply guidance and encouragement in the selection process, may provide follow-up discussion and activities after the books have been read, but too rarely provide the all important sharing aloud of the illustrations and text.

Observation of this misuse of picture books led to the idea that a study of the readability levels of a sample of picture books would be helpful to the parents and teachers of the very young. Huck (1976, p. 109) notes, "Most picture storybooks require a reading ability level of at least third grade and are generally read *to*



Photo by Lewis Tobias

children. They are written for the young child's interest and appreciation level, not his reading ability level."

A review of the literature revealed no definitive support for Huck's statement and in fact indicated a scarcity of any recent research at all in the area of children's picture books. The purpose of this study was, then, to calculate the readability level of a typical sample of picture books available to children.

#### **Examining the books**

Huck (pp. 107-08) defines picture books as "that group of books in which pictures and text are considered to be of equal importance." Fusion of pictures and text is essential to unity of presentation in such books; a child, having heard the text and seen the pictures once, should be able to retell the story from the pictures.

A related category of books are those designated as easy-to-read. Also intended for the youngest readers, they are written with a controlled vocabulary and are designed to be read independently. Although these books do not usually fulfill the aesthetic and language goals of literature, Shepherd (1976, p. 2) affirms that they do provide the "necessary bridge between being a listener and being a reader."

Books to be included in this study were defined as all those books children might choose from the picture book section of a library, and thus both picture books and easy-to-read books were part of the sample. The sample was chosen from the Children's Room of the Akron (Ohio) Public Library. Random sampling from the approximately 3400 picture books and easy-to-read books available produced a list of 52 picture books and easy readers. The sample

had no duplication of authors, contained a balance of literary types, and appeared to be representative of the selection available to children. Of these books, 4 were published in the 1940s, 4 in the 1950s, 14 in the 1960s, and 30 in the 1970s.

Books in the sample were then analyzed for readability level with Fry's readability graph (Fry 1968) based on sentence and word length (no account taken of frequency of vocabulary used). Grade level indexes are indicated with the list of books examined.

Readability levels of the 52 books ranged from grades one through seven, with the largest number of books (15) written at the first grade level, and the numbers of books per grade level decreasing, predictably, as grade level increased. The median, 26 books, fell between second and third grade level, indicating that half of the sample was indexed at third grade level or above. It is interesting to note that, while most of the easy-to-read books were indexed appropriately at first, second, and third grade levels, one of them had a grade six level of readability!

The reader should note that the sample was defined so as to approximate the effect of a child's random selection of books from the shelves. No attempt was made to include the most widely circulated books.

#### **Implications for parents, teachers**

Realizing the limitations of readability formulas, the writers suggest that many of the books in the sample cannot and should not be used independently by the children for whom they are intended. Individual examination of the books yielded several instances of long and involved complex sentences. Frequent subtleties of plot and illustration called for amplification and discussion between adult reader and

child listener. Phrases such as "dollop of dirt," "dragonfly rattles low," "exquisite flakes," "boondoggle team," "reinforced air holes," "trailing mossy camouflage," "aeronautical engineer," and "meadow rue" were encountered. The fun of word plays, the cadence of language, and the literary effects of many of the books would be lost to a child busily involved in the mechanics of decoding.

Popp and Porter (1975, pp. 92 and 94), in describing their work with readability and children's trade books, note that the "qualities to which human beings are more sensitive will likely always fall outside the range of a practical formula." They further caution that books vary in difficulty from one part to another and that "average" grade level assignments do not insure that a child will be able to read an entire book equally well. Similarly, Moe (1974, p. 4) states, "Most authors of children's trade books—even those intended for the very young child—have never admitted to writing their books with a predetermined vocabulary . . . . Indeed, some authors of children's trade books seem to strive for diversity and complexity." Griffin (1970) reminds us that informed common sense and thoughtful judgment are the most effective standards for use in evaluating children's books.

The writers do not suggest that readability formulas be used to match books and children, but rather that adults consider carefully what is lost when children are asked to read a book alone. The values of reading aloud to children are many. Shepherd (1976, pp. 7-8) notes that sharing books aids in conceptual development and vocabulary expansion, produces awareness of a variety of syntactical patterns, and alerts the listener to the symbolic function of language and its flexibility. Griffin (1970, p. 25) agrees, stating that the skillful use of books

## Readability levels of books examined in the study

Book	Grade level*
Adshead, Gladys L. <i>Brownies, They're Moving!</i> ** H.Z. Walck, 1970.	4
Anglund, Joan Walsh. <i>A Friend is Someone Who Likes You.</i> ** Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958.	3
Bannon, Laura. <i>Red Mittens.</i> ** Houghton Mifflin, 1946.	2
Becker, John Leonard. <i>Seven Little Rabbits.</i> Walker, 1973.	6
Bernstein, Margery. <i>Earth Namer: A California Indian Myth.</i> Scribner's, 1974.	1
Bond, Michael and Fred Banbery. <i>Paddington at the Circus.</i> ** Random House, 1974.	3
Brenner, Barbara. <i>Baltimore Orioles.</i> Harper & Row, 1974.	1
Brown, Margaret Wise. <i>Country Noisy Book.</i> Harper & Row, 1940.	2
Burchard, Marshall. <i>I Know a Baseball Player.</i> Putnam, 1975.	2
Carrick, Carol. <i>The Pond.</i> Macmillan, 1970.	4
Charushin, Evgenii Ivanovich. <i>The Little Gray Wolf.</i> ** Macmillan, 1963.	5
Conover, Chris. <i>Six Little Ducks.</i> Crowell, 1976.	5
Delton, Judy. <i>Two Good Friends.</i> Crown, 1974.	2
Disney Productions. <i>Walt Disney's Brer Rabbit and His Friends.</i> ** Random House, 1973.	1
Early, Margaret. <i>Sun Up.</i> ** Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.	1
Farber, Norma. <i>Where's Gomer?</i> Dutton, 1974.	2
Fox, Paula. <i>Good Ethan.</i> ** Bradbury, 1973.	3
Friskey, Margaret. <i>Indian Two Feet and His Horse.</i> ** Childrens Press, 1959.	1
Gates, Arthur Irving. <i>tommy Little.</i> ** Macmillan, 1951.	1
Gilbreath, Alice Thompson. <i>Beginning-to-Read Riddles and Jokes.</i> ** Follett, 1967.	1
Greenburg, Polly. <i>Oh Lord, I Wish I Was a Buzzard.</i> Macmillan, 1968.	4
Harrison, David Lee. <i>Little Turtle's Big Adventure.</i> Random House, 1969.	2
Hirawa, Yasuko. <i>Song of the Sour Plum.</i> Walker, 1968.	2
Hood, Flora Mae. <i>One Luminaria for Antonio.</i> ** Putnam, 1966.	6
Ipcar, Dahlov. <i>The Cat Came Back.</i> Knopf, 1971.	4
Keats, Ezra Jack. <i>Apt. 3.</i> Macmillan, 1971.	3
Kitt, Tamra. <i>Jake.</i> London: Abelard-Schuman, 1969.	1
Kraus, Robert. <i>Whose Mouse Are You?</i> Macmillan, 1970.	1
Leaf, Munro. <i>Boo, Who Used to Be Scared of the Dark.</i> Random House, 1948.	5
Lexau, Joan. <i>Olaf Reads.</i> ** Dial Press, 1961.	1
Lobel, Anita. <i>King Rooster, Queen Hen.</i> ** Greenwillow, 1975.	3
MacDonald, Golden. <i>Red Light, Green Light.</i> Doubleday, 1944.	1
Marshall, James. <i>Willis.</i> Houghton Mifflin, 1974.	3
Miles, Miska. <i>Apricot ABC.</i> Little, Brown, 1969.	6
Morris, Robert A. <i>Seahorse.</i> ** Harper & Row, 1972.	2
Murdocca, Salvatore. <i>Tuttle's Shell.</i> ** Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1976.	2
Palmer, Helen Marion. <i>A Fish Out of Water.</i> Beginner Books, 1961.	1
Pinkwater, Manus. <i>Three Big Hogs.</i> Seabury Press, 1975.	4
Rand, Ann. <i>Did a Bear Just Walk There?</i> Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966.	6
Rinkoff, Barbara. <i>The Case of the Stolen Code Book.</i> Crown, 1971.	1
Sachs, Marilyn. <i>Matt's Mitt.</i> Doubleday, 1975.	4
Schlein, Miriam. <i>The Girl Who Would Rather Climb Trees.</i> Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.	3
Sendak, Maurice. <i>Some Swell Pup: or Are You Sure You Want a Dog?</i> Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.	1
Shaw, Richard. <i>Who Are You Today?</i> F. Warne, 1970.	7
Skorpen, Liesel Moak. <i>Outside My Window.</i> Harper & Row, 1968.	2
Stiles, Martha Bennett. <i>Dougal Looks for Birds.</i> Four Winds Press, 1972.	3
Thurman, Judith. <i>I'd Like to Try a Monster's Eye.</i> Atheneum, 1977.	1
Ungerer, Tomi. <i>The Mellops Go Diving for Treasure.</i> Harper, 1957.	5
Waber, Bernard. <i>Lyle and the Birthday Party.</i> Houghton Mifflin, 1966.	5
Welch, Martha McKeen. <i>Saucy.</i> Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1968.	3
Winn, Marie. <i>The Man Who Made Fine Tops.</i> ** Simon and Schuster, 1970.	3
Zaffo, George J. <i>The Giant Book of Things in Space.</i> Doubleday, 1969.	2

\*Determined by the Fry formula, 1968

\*\*Easy-to-read

with young children can increase their word banks, widen their background of experiences, extend their listening and comprehending ability, and expand their capacity to relate to the environment.

Furth (1970) pessimistically describes American elementary schools

as places in which early reading experiences fail to challenge, and discourage, rather than encourage, thinking. This need not be so. When shared by eager children and enthusiastic adults, picture books can be the medium through which youngsters are introduced to the world of

quality literature and to the love of books.

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*Hunt teaches undergraduate reading methods courses and Reuter teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in children's literature. Both are at The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.*

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#### Researchers seek teacher ideas

Researchers at The Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools are conducting a field search for examples of classroom practices that give students choices and responsibilities in academic decision making from grades 3-12. They are also interested in student decisions about nonacademic (or extracurricular) activities. The Center will use the descriptions it receives to guide further research on student decision making.

Teachers who respond will receive a copy of the total collection of examples. Send your name, address, school, grade level, subject taught, and a clear description of one or more activities that give students choice or responsibility for making decisions to Dr. Joyce L. Epstein, The Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218, U.S.A.

#### Call for Piaget papers

The Ninth Annual International Interdisciplinary Conference on Piagetian Theory and the Helping Professions will be held in Los Angeles, California, February 2-3, 1979. The emphasis of the conference will be on infancy and early childhood education. Persons desiring to present papers, films, videotapes or Piagetian demonstrations are invited to submit their contributions to conference coordinator Dr. Marie Poulsen, University Affiliated Program, Childrens Hospital of Los Angeles, P.O. Box 54700, Los Angeles, California 90054, U.S.A., not later than November 1, 1978. Papers dealing with Piagetian concepts and reading are acceptable.

#### Information on reading legislation

For a series of articles on reading program legislation in the U.S. and Canada, mandated state- and province-wide testing programs, and the advantages and disadvantages of competency based testing, see the October issue of *Journal of Reading*, IRA's journal for reading at the secondary, college, and adult levels. The contents of these articles have importance at all levels of education and possible implications for other nations concerned with ensuring the literacy of all citizens.