

The “Longer” Picturebook

Taking a Fresh Perspective

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We can become our own worst enemy by carrying around comfortable assumptions, unquestioning acceptance, and old theories. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates is portrayed as someone focused on revealing the pomposity of the “wisdom” of Athens’ leaders. His adversaries falsely accuse Socrates of corrupting youth by asking questions and encouraging people to think things through.

Libraries have much in common with this focus to get people to think. Civilization’s achievements in music, art, science, and technology have developed because individuals and communities have an innate interest in learning and growing. Libraries play a role in life-long learning, community engagement, and thinking things through.

The picturebook has become a symbol of early childhood learning and school readiness. The importance of childhood play as a key ingredient to learning can be traced back to Plato, who talked about good play.

What is “good” play? Plato recognized good play as that which leads to the good. He contrasted it to “bad play” as that which deflects the learner from this goal. We may think in terms of physical play when we talk about children’s play. However, play

involves more than a physical interaction of engaging with others or things.

Mental play stimulates the imagination and helps to teach children to pursue the good in themselves and the good in life. Picturebooks are well-suited to help children grapple with unexpected challenges and important life experiences. After all, what does a child *learn* when he or she bullies another child? Bullying behavior reinforces a selfish outlook on life. Good play should take a child beyond personal needs. The “good play” that Plato refers to teaches children to interact for the good of all.

Children who learn how to play in an ideal spirit and develop a habit of playing together in pursuit of the “good” are more likely to grow up with playful and inquisitive minds. The word “mind” stems from the Proto-Germanic derivative *manus*, meaning “to think.” Is it time to rethink the picturebook? Is the standard length of the modern picturebook—thirty-two pages—too confining for many of today’s children? Is the length of the book primarily a conventional printing decision, as opposed to encouraging all children to up their ante, learn to think things through, and develop a playful mind? Perhaps it is time to create longer picturebooks for that reason.



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Longer Stories Expand Curiosity

Can four- to six-year-olds handle listening to a fifty-six, or even ninety-six, page story in one sitting? Of course! Children are curious, patient, and are eager to experiment. When we talk about picturebooks, we are focusing on books which draw children who want to read into the text. Children have a built-in mechanism for learning. They want to read. They want to be able to read the words. They are eager to enjoy longer and more interesting stories. If given the opportunity, children will often respond.

If we stay with only shorter books, are we, in effect, censoring a child's ability to learn? The goal is to expand their curiosity and sense of discovery. Longer stories are one way to do that.

Dramatic or imaginative play in children forms the basis for their coexistence with the world as adults. This kind of play can exercise the mind. The more a child plays with ideas, the stronger his or her mind will be in adulthood. In play, a child is working out a system of methods of interaction with others and situations which they will carry with themselves for the rest of their lives. For children to be inspired by dramatic and imaginative play, these tales need three things: story, complex characters, and conflict.

If you tell children something, they will listen, and they will most likely gain some knowledge. However, if you place children in situations where they have to apply their own problem solving skills, they may not only gain knowledge, but they may also strengthen their ability to think for themselves. The more we “teach” our children, the more we encourage them to be rote learners who will tend to always look to us for the next “lesson.” Instead, we want to encourage all children to become independent learners and thinkers.

Learning is more than accumulating knowledge and experience, mastering facts and figures, increasing comprehension and skills, and becoming aware and informed. It is the deliberate study, understanding, and ability to build within our self that which is needed to ask the right questions, be innovative, and achieve worthwhile results. It is the process that transforms knowledge into wisdom.

Shorter books tend to become pre-digested “messages” for kids. Long form narratives allow children to step into a world in which they can identify with characters confronting real situations, and through that experience create their own personal “message.” Can a short book offer more than a simple message or lesson? Probably not. However, a longer narrative story can go beyond the simple message and create a dynamic learning experience.

Readers have to be able to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist and ask themselves, “Uh-oh, how am I going to get myself out of this mess!?” That’s when it gets exciting for a reader. That’s when a story starts to shine. A narrative that poses a problem or situation, where something is at stake, combined with no easy answers, leads to the discovery of what a child may lack. A child needs honesty, compassion, patience, self-control, and courage to think beyond personal needs to forgive a friend, rescue the king, or face the big bad wolf. Generating solutions to a problem and finding ways to successfully meet a challenge make a story sparkle.

The Zest for Learning

In K-12 schools, picturebooks can be used to teach reading comprehension strategies. Educators use shorter texts, such as picturebooks, that can invite children to love stories and reading. These texts can be aligned with content area curriculum, including English language arts, math, science, and social studies. Thoughtful educators carefully select titles that provide a complete set of story elements (characters, setting, problem, plot, resolution, and theme).

Picturebooks can be shared and discussed in a relatively short timeframe. They offer opportunities to model reading and to take meaning from the illustrations as well as from the print. Reading beyond a superficial level of extracting facts is important. Motivating children to love books, stories, and reading is the overarching goal. In this way, the skill of reading becomes a private kind of experience for children—and adults—to have a dialog with the author.

As Plato suggested, when children experience learning as "play," they learn more about themselves while they are learning about the world. The love of reading, the zest for learning, and the joy of curiosity can help develop a playful and mature mind.

Thinking Things Through

Many classic picturebooks offer the rich story arc that can help generate a playful mind and encourage the habit of thinking things through. Examples include *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, published in 1902 (seventy-two pages), *Curious George* by H. A. Rey from 1941 (sixty-four pages), and *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey from 1941 (seventy-two pages). Most picturebooks published today are much shorter, however, stalled at the enigmatic and puzzling threshold of thirty-two pages.

Have children become less intelligent since the 1940s? Absolutely not! A few exceptions to the standard page length can be found in popular, bestselling titles such as *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* by Mo Willems and the *Pete the Cat* series by Eric Litwin, tallying forty pages each. Do we want to stop at forty pages? Goodness no! Do we want children's attention spans and thinking skills to expand? Goodness yes! Is anyone experimenting today with longer picturebooks for younger children amounting to fifty or seventy or ninety pages? Absolutely yes!

Sheila Purdin, director at The Schiff Preschool of Temple Emanu-El in Atlanta, was intrigued by *The Good Dog*, a ninety-six page picturebook by Todd Kessler (Coralstone, 2015). She pondered whether a group of young children with differing attention spans and from a range of backgrounds could attend to the story. She experimented with two classes reading the same book to each. Purdin said, "The first class was very engaged. The children asked a lot of questions, made predictions, shared anecdotal stories relating to the story, and followed along to the very end. Although the second class was quieter, the children were able to appropriately answer any questions I asked, making it apparent they were comprehending the story. The second group asked me to read it again when I finished!"¹ Length apparently made no difference. The second group was paying attention too. If the tale is well told, it can excite the imagination of the child.

Reading long books or long stretches of text to young children can sometimes seem intimidating. We may think, erroneously, that the length causes their interest to wane. If given the chance, however, many young children will naturally stay with a longer story, waiting for it to unfold. *The Good Dog* is a cheerful

Examples of Longer Picturebooks

Geisel, Theodor Seuss, a.k.a. Dr. Seuss. *Horton Hatches the Egg*. Illus. by the author. Random House, 1940; reissued 1968, 2004. 64p.

———. *Horton Hears a Who*. Illus. by the author. Random House; Early Printing edition, 1954; reissued 1982. 72p.

———. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Illus. by the author. Random House; Early Printing edition, 1957; reissued 1965, 1985. 64p.

———. *The Lorax*. Illus. by the author. Random House; Early Printing edition, 1971; reissued 1999. 72p.

Kessler, Todd. *The Good Dog*. Illus. by Jennifer Gray Olson. Coralstone Press, 2014. 96p.

McCloskey, Robert. *One Morning in Maine*. Illus. by the author. Viking; 1st edition, 1952; reissued 1976. 64p.

Piper, Watty. *The Little Engine That Could*. Illus. by George Hauman and Doris Hauman. Platt & Munk, 1930; reissued Grosset & Dunlap, 2001. 48p.

Potter, Beatrix. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Illus. by the author. Warne, 1902; reissued 2002. 72p.

Rey, H.A. and Rey, Margret. *Curious George*. Illus. by the authors. Houghton Mifflin, 1941; reissued 1973. 64p.

Williams, Margery. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Illus. by William Nicholson. George H. Doran Company, 1922; reissued Doubleday, 2014. 48p.

reminder that a good book is always worth reading. Children deserve good books, no matter the length. ☺

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Reference

1. Sheila Purdin's Good Reads page, accessed August 8, 2016, www.goodreads.com/review/show/1468616860.