



Just One More Book!! Children's Book Podcast

<http://www.justonemorebook.com/2007/03/19/putting-all-children-in-the-picture/>

Transcription of a discussion with Susan Clow, Manager of Scope's In The Picture Project Monday, 19 March 2007

Welcome to episode 115 of Just One More Book, the podcast about the children's books we love and why we love them recorded in our favourite coffee shop. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'in the picture' as a state of being fully informed or noticed. That is the goal of a project called 'In The Picture' at www.childreninthepicture.org.uk to encourage publishers, illustrators and writers to embrace diversity so that disabled children are included alongside others in illustrations and story lines in books for young readers. Our guest on this edition of Just One More Book is Susan Clow, Founder of 'In The Picture'.

Before we get started in the interview with Susan Clow, I would like to include some comments from Joyce Dunbar, who we weren't able to interview because she is deaf. Joyce is a writer and volunteer with 'In The Picture'. She writes,

"So many children's books are about unconditional love, 'Guess How Much I Love You' is the best known example, but what about the children who need reassurance more than most, that are simply not there, not visible, not even in the picture? This initiative is to make sure that they are there not necessarily as the star of the show, but incidentally, as part of the tapestry. Twenty years ago, ethnic minorities were simply disregarded, that is unthinkable now. I am deaf myself and so is my son so this is of particular concern to me. In 1985 I wrote a novel called 'Mundo and the Weather Child' about the imaginary companion of a deaf child. It was the Runner-up for the Guardian Award but is long out of print. More recently I produced 'Moon Bird' a picture book with Jane Ray.

I would like to offer some quotes from the letters I have received from deaf children:

“Because this is the first time I have read a fairy tale about a hero who is deaf, I am thrilled to bits. I don’t feel left out; it sounds like we are equally important.”

(Catherine Grimley)

“We are deaf and we only know of two books with deaf heroes. It would be nice to have lots of books.”

(Nadeem Islam)

“When I read a book with a deaf hero, I feel important as other people.”

(Pierre Francis)

Mark: I guess the great starting question is ‘Are people with disabilities being represented in children’s books in a genuine manner?’

Susan: Ah, that’s an interesting question. I think they are beginning to be and I think probably the sort of resources that we’ve got on our website, the children in the picture website, are beginning to help people to feel they can be more than tokenistic; practical resources to show them the ways to do it. I must admit that when I have been sent publishers’ entire stock of what they think is inclusive literature and it has been a tokenistic wheelchair in the corner often, but I think it is changing and we’re really buoyed up by how much it is changing, actually; even in the last 18 months since we’ve been going.

Mark: So, up until about 18 months ago, what has typically been the representation in children’s books?

Susan: Well, I think it has been mainly wheelchairs and wheelchairs that aren’t particularly well drawn or painted, mainly because people just don’t know how to include disabled children or adults. Our project is focussing on children particularly so we are trying to show the range of ways and all sorts of varied ways that you can include disabled children and not just use a wheelchair, obviously wheelchairs come into it, but actually children, very young children, which we are starting at the very beginning in this project, the very foundation of learning about life in picture books. There are so many ways to depict disability apart from wheelchairs, so I think they are beginning to creep in, they are. If you want some examples, I can tell you about Child’s Play who are beginning to show splints and hearing aids, cochlear implants, arm splints, all sorts of things in very young baby

books, books that are quite a challenge, in fact, to the book world. That's one example.

Mark: Is that within the last 18 months that it has started to come about?

Susan: Yes in the last 18 months. As part of our project we've got a bit of a consultation process that we can undertake on behalf of a publisher or illustrator or writer and several people have 'phoned us for advice and we've gone backwards and forwards with images and roughs to give advice and have gone back to other organisations to get their specialist advice about areas and it's proved to be very effective; also in terms of non-fiction I can say that we've had some really positive responses from a publisher doing a non-fiction science book in the early years wanting to reflect a bit of the diverse world in which we live and to show disabled children and non-disabled children in a photographic science series, if you like. Books their children learn about, very early science when they are only five or six and that's been a really positive experience for all concerned. We've then set up families and children to be part of a photo-shoot on two occasions now to support those books being out there. So that's another example in non-fiction as well.

Mark: Why is including diversity in disability in children's books so difficult?

Susan: Well, most people have said that they are scared of getting it wrong and offending people. So it's a genuine concern that they might do something that is wrong and one of the things that's informed us quite a lot has been a bit of research by The Booktrust through a Quentin Blake Award Project funded by the Roald Dahl Foundation which did some research with children on what they believed should be in books around disability. They talked to children who were disabled and children who weren't disabled all around the country, all around England, and discovered that they wanted humour, they wanted children to be included casually, they wanted to see themselves in stories and their views have really helped inform us enormously as well, of course, as the views of the Civil Rights Movement in a conference that took place in 1995 which really was a foundation for this project. The Civil Rights Movement of Disabled People put forward some ideas about what should happen in children's books and in advertising and so on and the ten principles which our project is based on have come out of their ideas in 1995 and have been re-invented into this new era. So, to answer your original question, people are scared of getting it wrong; and these are really helpful guidelines to give people a sort of structure and a sense of how to go about it. One of the things people don't want to see is the Poor

Michael stuff that has been around in the past, historically, a lot of the picture books that children used to consume, depict disabled people in a very negative way. The Civil Rights Movement is trying to show how that is quite deeply embedded inside us, that sort of memory of those sort of books and we want to give children a positive memory because it is obviously something that you take with you all through your lives, the sort of books you saw when you were very young which is why it is such a powerful thing to work on now and get right from the very beginning.

Mark: Do you have any examples of books that achieve this goal in portraying children with disabilities in a positive light and do it well?

Susan: Yes, recently a book has come to our notice which is called 'Dan and Diesel'. It's a lovely picture book with a boy and his dog and all sorts of adventures and things that they go through and it does appear at the very end and very casually understated that the dog is actually a guide dog. This boy is obviously over 16, because children don't have guide dogs under 16; it's very positive and a charming story, beautifully done as well, beautifully illustrated, that's one example. 'Moon Bird', Joyce Dunbar and Jane Ray's book, recently has come out; it's by Random House, I've got a quotes here from some deaf children who responded to this book: "I am thrilled to bits"; "I don't feel left out"; "It sounds like we are equally important"; "We know of two books with deaf characters, it would be nice to have lots of books". They are quotes that Joyce had sent us in response to her book.

Mark: Are these books targeted toward the community?

Susan: Yes, they are targeted to all children and that's one thing we want to get across really, we don't want this segregated; "these books are for disabled children, these books aren't" they are books for all children to love and enjoy and just come from there, they just happen to include the same characters, they just happen to be there and they are framed in exactly the same way and have just the same depth as the non-disabled children have, if that makes sense. That's another one of the principles that often in the past disabled characters when they have existed either in stories or in pictures have been one dimensional and the other characters have been larger than that and we want disabled children to be the same as their peers, and I think that's what's coming out, that's definitely coming out. I have a lovely little example that I saw the other day another reading corner type book from Franklin Watts which just has a whole range of different children going through it doing different things and one of them

happens to be a child, a very happy child playing the flute who is in a wheelchair, admittedly. They are really trying to include disabled children in those pictures and the one that everyone talks about to us is called 'Susan Laughs', another Susan, I always remember it anyway. Jean Willis and Tony Ross, a beautifully crayoned picture book by Andersen and every page shows Susan doing all sorts of things with her family; singing, laughing; she's good and bad, swims, hides, she's shy, she's loud, she's flashy, at the very end there's a very understated picture of Susan - "This is Susan through and through, just like me, just like you", and the last picture is of Susan in a wheelchair. Everyone loves that, that was before our project but that is one people always tell us about and is a good example to take everywhere.

Mark: Are books like this still very targeted and not directly targeted towards the disabled community for example but do you think that the disabled community is the primary market for these books in terms of actual dollar sales?

Susan: I don't think they are the primary market. I don't think they know how to engage with the market where disabled children are and I'm glad they don't and I don't think they should; they limit themselves, publishers do, if they actually market it as a book that says or has any reference really to disability on the back cover or any thing, I think they limit the market.

Mark: I am trying to figure out now and I'm wondering if the general public is going to the book store and picking up these books to sensitise their children or if they're overlooking the books, or if they are buying them because it is part of the fabric of society.

Susan: I don't know; I think Susan Laughs is a book, brilliantly done in its own right, beautiful drawings and it has to be a good story and disabled children want to be in a good stories obviously and therefore, you overlook it, you don't need to focus on it, it's there, and that's it, brilliant. Once you start to create something special about it, and the word special is something that will instantly raise my hackles, then you've lost it really. It's got to be something targeted fully.

Mark: Jane Ray has a great quote, it reads "But how to indicate the learning or behaviourally disabled child. The child who is autistic or Downs Syndrome, for example, without risking clumsy caricature, or as has happened to me, the attempt being so subtle that nobody notices anyway". What are the challenges for authors and illustrators to really capture that in a book?

Susan: I know exactly the book she meant as well; she had a book with princesses in it, lined up, about 10 princesses in a row and she decided that one would be a princess with Downs Syndrome and she just put her in with all the others and no one noticed, she thought, but she didn't know for sure, obviously; so it is a challenge and we are trying to tackle that on the website on the project and trying all the time to tackle that issue head on. We need to include some of the things that are around, people with invisible impairments, for instance. If a child's in school, and one of the things I would love to get out are some good, inclusive, early years, starting at school books, so that the real school environment is reflected in the book, in the pictures and lots of children with hidden impairments would have things around the classroom that you would pick up on. We are going to try to show these on the website and get examples of the sorts of bags that children use that they can pick up and the contents will give them a clue as to what's going to happen and will indicate they have a learning disability of some kind. Those sorts of background clues or some other aspects of how the environment has been adapted which have been hinted at already in our image bank, like ramps and electric doors and the height of plugs and sockets and all sorts of things that will make life easier for a person. Already, I have to say, we have influenced a book about a child going to a party for instance. This is exactly on this theme actually; an ordinary story about a boy going to a party and wanting to wear his party hat wherever he goes after that. He goes to the swimming pool and the publisher happened to see this swimming pool picture on our website which is a gloriously blue swimming pool with various people in it and on the side, the artist in this image, had put a chair which was a chair that people access the pool in. It happened to be there when she (the artist) did the picture and this new picture book has got an accessible chair and a ramp because they were so inspired by that and wanted to show that in the background at this party. No other reference to disability except it shows there was or could be a disabled child in that pool. It's just something small because sometimes the big things are too much to include in something very quick and passing by, but those sorts of references are very helpful.

Mark: Your image bank is one of the many great resource tools that are on your website and I am actually looking at the picture you described right now and so there is a whole slew of pictures or books that actually have incorporated, I really don't like the word but for the sake of consistency, disabilities in children's books and there are other resources, there are actual real life photographs of children in playgrounds that have been structured for physical handicaps as well.

Susan: Children with disabilities, sorry.

Mark: Children with disabilities - what is the proper . . .

Susan: Well, this is something we could highlight if we are going to talk about it in more detail. In England we would talk about disabled children, we certainly would not say handicapped but you might do where you are mightn't you?

Mark: I honestly don't know, I shudder every time I have to actually use a word that might offend somebody.

Susan: You are going through exactly what people are doing in terms of not knowing how they are going to put pictures in and they worry about that. That is exactly what is happening in the book world and pictures as well and I don't know what the language is in Canada or America exactly and it's not totally clear here because we still have the word special that has lingered a little bit.

Mark: We are going down a different tangent than I want to with on the picture but this is very important and interesting; what kind of fears when an author and an illustrator come to you? We've talked about a few of them but what are the other fears they talk about?

Susan: One of the things is that they have been hidebound by the idea, and it's really the medical model, I think, that has done this; on the website we talk about the medical model and the social model and the social model is where we are coming from on this project. The medical model is about being done unto and losing control of what is happening to you to some extent as a person and we are into the social model side of it where it's about society and attitudes and barriers. But what we are worried about sometimes is being the occupational therapy and physiotherapy type idea that if you have a person sitting in that chair in that way someone will come along and say that foot shouldn't be turned in like that or that leg shouldn't be like that or they shouldn't be having their arm in the air like that and that sort of idea can sometimes stop some people from doing anything and it has happened a lot, I think, over the years. That's one aspect of it, but I think you have got to jump in otherwise people are invisible, completely invisible. They are also invisible in photographs as well and I think it is better to chance it and get it wrong than be invisible. One of the presentations I do, to a group of publishers for instance, shows a big square with nothing in it because that is really how disabled children must feel, invisible, and what does it say, what

does that give you self-esteem-wise? From the very beginning that establishes that feeling so I think people have to chance it, try it out and not worry about being photographic because what we are trying to show in this project is that we do not have to do what traditionally has often been done whenever disabled people are being shown in picture books is to get it exactly right and you can do a Quentin Blake type image, which is why we were so glad to get his images in our project, to show that you can do quirky pictures and not worry about that exact foot being turned in that way.

Mark: How did this whole project come about and how did you conceptualise giving all these resources available, presumably for free, to help the community?

Susan: If I keep saying “I”, it’s because I suppose I conceived of the idea originally. My background is teaching in social work and I have an interest in the arts. Suddenly it all came together with this project. I was talking to families for four years working for Scope, the organisation that manages this project, and as part of my job I was listening to all the problems they had and the issues they were grappling with and one of the issues was that they could not find books so I thought “Ah, I’ll buy some and I’ll take them around on my travels”. I was donated £700 and I went out to get them; I came back with about four books. Four books, one of which I gave to Celine, who is on our website, a girl who was three years old and a twin, who walked with a frame and the picture book I had was a giant picture book with a cartoon picture of a child, walking with a frame. She had never seen one before and had never seen anyone with one before except old people in the street, you can imagine, and unbeknown to me she took this book with her everywhere she went, to playgroup, nursery, school, everywhere and it gave her a sort of cover story as to why she was walking with this frame, helped the schools and settings to explain disability, what was happening to her and this really proved to be the best thing that has happened to her because it gave her confidence. I started to research the whole area and I realised then that we had brand-aware three year olds. Children at three choosing a Barbie Doll over a non-Barbie Doll. Children were noticing and I researched to see whether they were picking up on prejudice, those sorts of areas. I went to see academics who were studying children’s picture books all their lives, people involved in literacy, librarians, all sorts of people, they all had different ‘fish to fry’ if you like, another viewpoint to tell me about and I went to see an illustrator, a friend actually, who said “I don’t know how to do it, I don’t know how to show disability and get it right down scale-wise; I might start big but it will go right down to a tiny picture” and I said “You can put buttons on

cuffs can't you? People can see them if they need to" and it got me thinking about the practical ways we should do it. I have always been a pragmatic person and I thought we would build images and show them, really show them that they can do it. At that very point in my research I came across the Invisible Children Conference that had taken place in 1995 that I mentioned earlier and here were the ten principles. I looked up in the Oxford Dictionary sitting in my office and came up with the title of the project and what would happen if we did not actually do it 'in the picture' being the state of being fully informed or noticed and 'out of the picture' being irrelevant and that really galvanised me. We got a Lottery award for three years on the back of, I think, I laminated a large picture book image and wrote on it "if you were an illustrator how would you include disabled children in this picture?" It was an early years first day at school picture, a lovely picture, that did not include a single disabled child, of course, and they took it along to their Lottery Committee - something really practical and tangible, I think, and we got it and that's how we started out.

Mark: One of your ten guiding principles, it really hit home with me, and that is number three, 'Images of disability should be the norm in the same way as images of different ethnicities are now the norm'. How long do you expect it will take because clearly it took a long time for the multicultural and civil rights representation to be mainstream in books? How long do you figure it will take before this project will have the same success?

Susan: Obviously there is still a way to go in terms of children from different ethnicities as well but on the whole at least publishers do say to their artists "Well, of course, I expect to see a range of ethnic diversity in the picture book you are doing". It is a more complex area in some ways, in many ways I suppose; there are many more impairments to show. Perhaps, there's a bit more to know and a bit more to learn about it and perhaps a bit more resistance, I don't know, but this not going to happen overnight; it's a start. We need to tackle a lot of things alongside as well, but you have to start somewhere. I am not saying we are going to be finished in the next 18 months by any means. I think there is always going to be a need for tools and for support and resources.

Mark: How can people get involved in your project?

Susan: We have made the project deliberately very interactive. We have the 10 Principles there and people can sign up to say that they agree with them broadly and their name will appear alongside others in a list and

it is a really helpful way to show the book world the diversity of support that there is out there. We also have a guest book which was an idea of one of our Steering Group and it has proved to be a real boon because we get some wonderful quotes about how to develop the project or an aspect that perhaps a publisher might not have thought about that suddenly has appeared and got them between the eyes if you like, so that is a really helpful thing to do as well; and generally just feedback about the project is really helpful. We have got practical resources there as well and we want people to tell us how they are using them and if they have been helpful and, of course, pass it onto other people. Also just so that we let you know, we are involving children, we have downloadable colouring pages, two of them at the moment, for children, colouring pages which, of course, put disabled children in the picture and an opportunity for children to put their own pictures in their children's gallery because all illustrators have a children's gallery and our gallery is no exception and we have several pages now where children have put themselves and their friends 'In the Picture'.

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