THE IMPORTANCE OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN CHILDREN’S BOOKS

By

MABEL SEGUN

A child is sensitive to pictures even before it can speak. This is not surprising if we consider that a baby easily distinguishes between its mother’s face and other familiar faces on the one hand, and strangers on the other hand. The child’s mother, sister, brother and the stranger can all be regarded as living and moving images. In the same way, a child will recognise a favourite toy or pet.

The recognition of this sensitivity to visual stimuli on the part of a child has led to the publication of folding books for babies, sometimes made of plastic to accommodate rough treatment. Each page usually contains one object, often a familiar object. It is this same recognition that has led to the publication of picture books without words for toddlers and other children of pre-school age. These picture books have a series of pictures which tell a continuous story. For children of this age, the pictorial code is a more direct means of communication than the verbal code. Such children will look at the pictures and tell the story in their own words. This helps to develop their imagination. Thus the transmission of a message is not the privilege of written language alone. Pictorial language is literature in its own right. Even when words are used in books for pre-school children and beginning readers, these children understand the language and the message better when there are many pictures. Illustration accentuates the cognitive function.

Good illustrations can contribute to the overall development of the child by stimulating his imagination, arousing his perception, developing his potential. Art can help a young child to discover his own identity and cultural heritage. This is particularly important in countries which have suffered from the effects of colonisation and cultural imperialism. Through illustrations, it is possible to convey to children very vividly events and situations in the past – the sort of clothes that children who lived long ago wore, the kinds of houses they lived in, the kinds of food they ate and the types of kitchens and utensils that produced such food, the sort of games they played, and the occupations of people in ancient times. These facts are best comprehended when suitably illustrated. For example, what kind of mental picture of akwete cloth would a child get from mere verbal description without illustration? Illustrating the cloth makes the image concrete.

In a similar manner, folktales may evoke vague images in the minds of children without illustration. For these are not only mythical events in the past but may also contain allusions to objects completely outside the child’s experience.

Good illustrations can also help to correct wrong notions. For example, they can counteract the negative effects of unwholesome advertising by the print and electronic media and through the use of billboards. Everyday, children are bombarded with television images which cannot be said to be uplifting. It is the duty of the illustrator, working closely with the author and the editor, to endeavour to give children more positive images and uplift them emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. For the best picture books are those that coalesce to convey a distinct message.
Too many Nigerian artists give illustrations unimaginative treatment. Having imbibed stereotyped ideas themselves, they perpetuate these stereotypes in their illustrations: stereotypes such as the image of old age as an age of decrepitude, which they pass on by depicting an old person in an ugly manner, with spine bent, and walking with a stick. Nigerian proverbs and riddles have helped to condition this kind of attitude. There is the riddle in which this question is put: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?” The answer to this riddle is: “Man, because he crawls on all fours as a baby, walks on two legs while in his prime and with the aid of a stick (the third “leg”) when he grows old.” This outdated riddle has not taken cognisance of the effects of modern medical care, good nutrition and positive mental attitudes on old age. Many old people are very agile and take part in energetic activities such as sports. Only recently there was a lawn tennis competition in Lagos for veterans and, included in the competition were people between the sixty-five and seventy.

Again, the artistic presentation of many Nigerian illustrators leaves much to be desired. They appear to be afraid to experiment, to present objects in a novel manner. The result is that the work of one illustrator can hardly be differentiated from that of another. There are exceptions, however. Nigerian children are thus deprived of the enjoyment derivable from variety which could have helped them to develop the reading habit. As we all know, very few Nigerian children have acquired the reading habit.

One argument put forward by Nigerian illustrators to explain their unenterprising behaviour is that Nigerian children are not sophisticated enough to understand modern presentation of illustrations. But has this been proved? The taste of the pudding is in the eating, to employ a cliché. Art is like food. While some types of food are familiar, others are an acquired taste. Nigerian illustrators should feed new and exciting material to the children for whom they illustrate. After all, today’s children are different from those of yesteryears. Urbanisation is exposing children to modern influences. Some are becoming more and more sophisticated in their tastes. They must not be repressed but encouraged to grow intellectually and emotionally through imaginative and adventurous illustrations. They must be challenged.

I shall now talk about humour in children’s books. Humorous treatment of illustrations arouses the interest of children. Who does not enjoy humour? Nigerians are traditionally known to be a happy, joyous people, easily moved to laughter and able to make others laugh. But this feature of our oral culture is hardly reflected either in the writings of our authors or illustrations by our illustrators. Why is this so? Whatever might be the reason, the situation should change for the better.

The humorous element of cartoons are what make children love them. Children’s comics make copious use of comic cartoons, hence the addiction of many children to them. Some adults frown on comics on the ground that they are not books in the strict sense of that word. But they ARE reading material which make children cultivate the reading habit very early in childhood. Most young consumers of comics do graduate to reading good books and some read both together in later life. This happens when they have been reading good comics, not the badly written and badly produced ones.
Summary

Illustrations are literature in their own right and, whether used by themselves or integrated with written texts, they sharpen the perception of children, stimulate their imagination and increase their sense of observation. The overall development of children can be aided by good illustrations.

Illustrations can give children a sense of personal identity and an awareness of their cultural heritage. Events of long ago are made alive by vivid illustrations. Illustrations can also help to eliminate stereotypes and correct wrong cultural notions.

Humour can enhance the value of illustrations in children’s books as humour increases the reader’s enjoyment of books. Nigerian illustrators should experiment and not confine their art to what the children are used to but also present to them exciting new types of illustrations, for such variety would promote the reading habit in children and expand their horizon.