

# Make Way for Stories

There's a good reason why people are passing up picture books

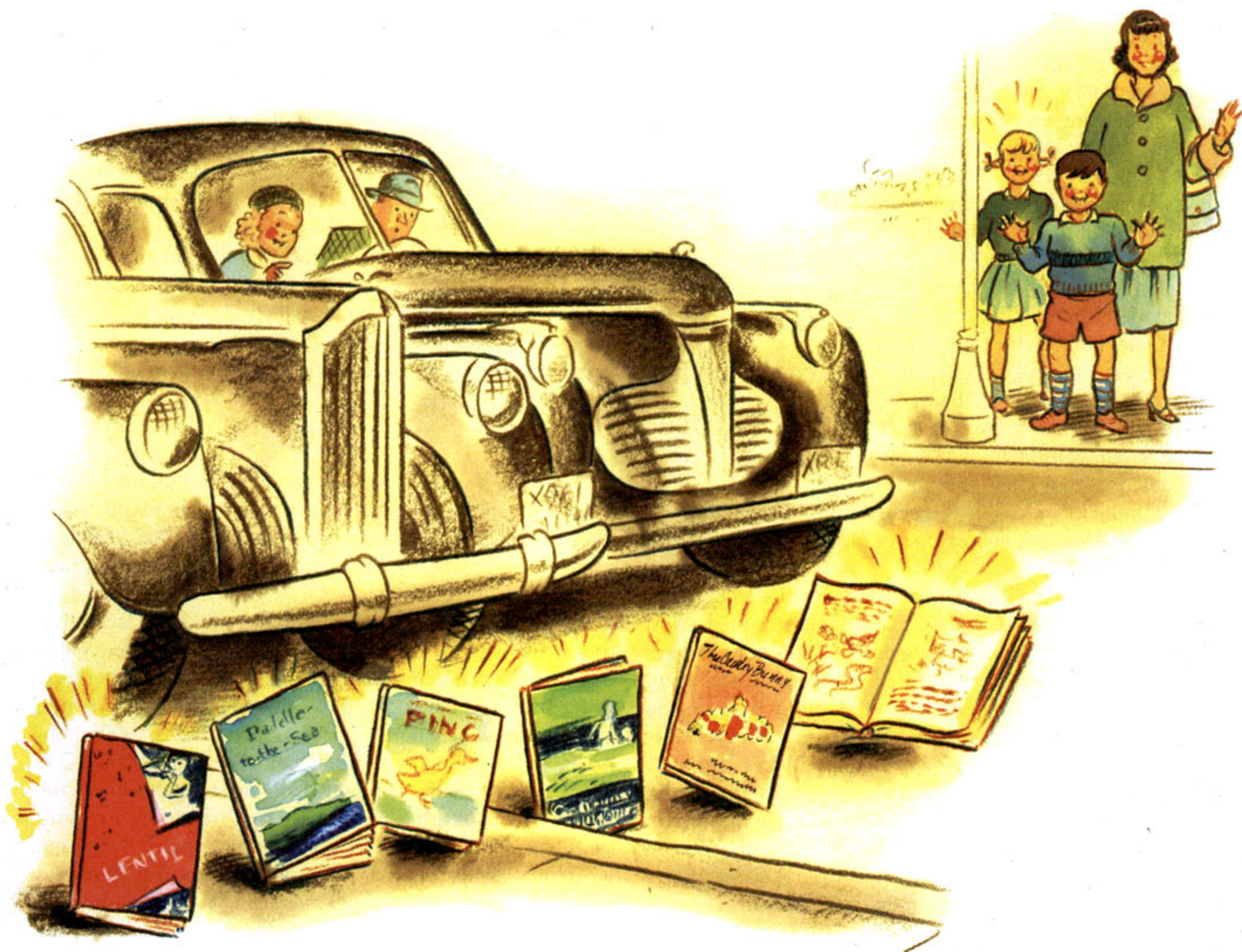


ast October the *New York Times* featured an article by Julie Bosman, “Picture Books No Longer a Staple for Children,” which outlined the fate of most new picture books: they tend to “die a sad little death” on booksellers’ shelves as more parents abandon them and push their preschoolers to read chapter books. As someone tackling publishing issues from the outside, Bosman missed the mark a few times, sometimes misrepresenting those she interviewed. Not surprisingly, industry insiders responded in droves, writing articles and sending emails, defending the picture book and its important place in children’s reading development. The most charming response arrived on April 13, 2011, when the *Times* received a scroll created by students from Birch Lane Elementary School, in Davis, CA, proclaiming their love of picture books: 60 kids devoted an entire month to the form and read 4,590 of them!

I must admit, I’ve grown quite weary over the last few years of the all-too-predictable response from adults who champion children’s and teen books: attack anyone who makes critical comments about them. They tend to “kill the messenger”—rather than looking at the mess. All too often the writer of a critical piece is labeled a charlatan, even if what is said is basically true.

**By Anita Silvey**

Illustration by Ross MacDonald with apologies to Robert McCloskey.



The basic premise of the *New York Times* article—that new picture books are increasingly ignored in today’s marketplace—seems completely sound to me. During the 1990s and into the 21st century, picture books brought in about 33 to 35 percent of the revenue of any major publishing house’s list. As Houghton Mifflin’s publisher in the late ’90s, I observed years when picture books made up more than 40 percent of sales. But today that number has slipped to a mere 10 to 11 percent for most publishers. As articles like “Top 20 Picture Book Agents,” in the August 2010 issue of *Publishers Marketplace*, reveal, only a few picture books are being placed with publishers. As a result, authors and illustrators dedicated to providing quality content in this area have faced financial worries—with some even questioning whether they can afford to go on. These are hard times for picture books, and they have been for a few years.

But why? Personally, I love no form more than the American Picture Book. In the United States we’ve developed a concept for these books that relies on the subtle interplay between text and art—a trapeze act, as it were, between writer

and artist. I love reading picture books and using them with children; I teach a graduate-level course in picture books; I think they’re the perfect form to move children from what they have—visual acuity—to what they lack, verbal acuity.

So outside of obvious demographics (the big teen bubble and adults who now read YA books), why has this magnificent genre fallen on hard times? It’s certainly not because children don’t need or want picture books. In fact, kids today appear happiest when the combination of art and text extends into chapter books like Jeff Kinney’s “Diary of a Wimpy Kid” series and even novels like Brian Selznick’s *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.

For a time, I had no answer to this question. Then in March I picked up *Publishers Weekly*’s list of last year’s best sellers. Until that glorious day, when we’re given nationwide library circulation figures for children’s and teen books, sales stats remain the only number we have to evaluate what’s happening in a complex industry. I was shocked to see how few picture books made the new hardcover best-seller list, aside from Jane O’Connor’s “Fancy Nancy” books and titles such

as Lane Smith's *It's a Book*. Looking at the list, it's easy to understand the pressures on editors who love to create picture books. Any bottom-line-driven publishing executive looking at what's selling in America would order them to hunt for more werewolves, zombies, and vampires. (I've grown weary of these creatures. But I digress.)

Then I looked at the hardcover backlist best sellers. Yikes. Almost all of them were picture books. In fact, the classics still sell like hot cakes. Parents still want them; libraries still replace them; a lot of people seem willing to part with their dollars to buy them. So possibly the problem isn't with the genre itself, but what's happened to it. How are contemporary picture books different from the classics?

Recently, Sally Anderson, the founder and executive director of the Vermont Center for the Book, summed up in an interview what she most longed for in current picture books: "Books with good stories that you want to read again and again." I, too, bemoan the lack of picture storybooks. So much of what we see, no matter how clever it is, can be described as a joke book. Some are very good jokes, but once you've read the text, you don't really need to read it hundreds of times. Words have been pared down to a bare minimum; writers sometimes are told to use no more than 500. You can tell a great story with less than 500 words—think of *Where the Wild Things Are* (338 words) and *The Carrot Seed* (101 words)—but you may have to be a genius to do so! And there's probably a limit on the number of stories that can be told well in under 1,000 words. During this time, by the way, informational picture books have retained longer texts. Novels have gotten wordier. But in the picture book arena, the prevailing wisdom is to shackle writers and get them to be as creative as possible with very few words.

While noodling on this problem, I prepared some essays for the Children's Book-A-Day Almanac ([childrensbookalmanac.com](http://childrensbookalmanac.com)), a site where I review a new book that relates to the events of the day. What do completely different books like *Jumanji*, *Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes*, *Pink and Say*, and *One Morning in Maine* have in common? A long narrative, in which the writer feels he has all the time in the world to develop a story. Because these sagas are so extensive, you can read these books again and again, gaining a different appreciation of the content each time. More important, if you're a parent, teacher, or librarian, you're exposing kids to complex language and sentences. With long texts, often over 2,000 words, a parent only has to read one bedtime story. At 500 words a book, the same parent might have to read four contemporary picture books to get the same satisfaction—or even get the child to nod off. So is it any wonder that parents



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have started to veer away from contemporary picture books when their children are four or five? If they want a long story, they're forced to move to chapter books and older material. These parents may not be as wrong-headed as everyone responding to the *Times* article assumed they were.

Even if I take my own reason for loving picture books—they move from what children already know to what they need to learn—I'd have to argue that a basic diet of picture books with an anemic amount of text doesn't really do the trick. And I suspect that parents, whether they understand this or not, take a look

at these short texts and feel the book a bit slight for purchase. Or a librarian conducting a storytime knows that he or she needs a longer text to fill storyhour—rather than just a nice story minute.

It's difficult, of course, to understand why some trends entrench themselves in publishing. During the last few years, publishers began to maintain that adults wanted shorter texts to read to children—because of the demands on their time and young readers' shorter attention spans. In the 1990s, publishers believed that kids didn't want novels longer than 200 pages—until J. K. Rowling set everyone straight. One of my mentors in publishing used to say that trends are like sunspots: they come and go with no earthly reason. But Susan Hirschman, who founded Greenwillow Books in 1974, always insisted that publishing trends operate more like pendulums. Things swing one way for a period, but then the industry becomes poised to go another.

If I could chart a course to rescue picture books, I'd suggest that we establish the writer again as half of the equation. We need real stories, and long stories, that can be read more than once. I, by the way, don't believe that critics change books. I believe geniuses—like Wanda Gag, Virginia Lee Burton, Robert McCloskey, Margaret Wise Brown, Maurice Sendak, Ruth Krauss, Chris Van Allsburg, and more recently Shaun Tan—reinvent the form. Someone who creates contemporary picture books is probably working right now on a title that'll revitalize our understanding of and ideas about picture books.

Our children need picture books—all kinds of picture books. I can't imagine a children's book world without this glorious form. We're demographically moving into a new baby boom; already this year publishers are reporting more robust picture book sales than expected on new titles. And, in terms of quality, it's been a particularly good year for new picture books. The optimist in me believes that the pendulum is already swinging back the other way.

*Kids' book author and expert Anita Silvey is the creator of the Children's Book-A-Day Almanac.*