

Creating Energy and Movement in Children's Book Illustration

A Workshop With Wendy Watson



A decorative static illustration is no better, per se, than a more dynamic one. One style is simply different from the other. Both have their place in children's book illustration. The image on the left is purely decorative, and was designed as a frame to surround the text of a poem. It embodies balance, symmetry, stasis. There is no storytelling involved in this illustration, and the image is intended to be simply a quiet background accompaniment to the text.

More often the illustrator of children's books is called upon to create images that amplify and even go beyond the text. The image on the right was made for a four-line verse, mostly gibberish, from Mother Goose. Though the verse is nonsense, and by itself would be of little interest to the reader, the image fleshes it out with characters, a setting, and a suspenseful situation. What will happen? This is storytelling. And storytelling demands asymmetry, unbalance, movement, energy---the opposite of stasis.



There are many elements and tools available during the picture-making process that children book illustrators can employ in order to create this movement and energy---this asymmetry and unbalance---in their illustrations. Illustrators have various options to choose from as they pose and choreograph figures; compose and depict backgrounds; compose jackets, pages, and spreads; choose and manipulate media; manipulate shape, line, color, and value. Each one of these steps offers an opportunity to enliven and invigorate the image.

Further reading: (the first two titles include extensive bibliographies):

Writing With Pictures, by Uri Shulevitz
Illustrating Children's Books, by Martin Salisbury
Picture This, by Molly Bang

