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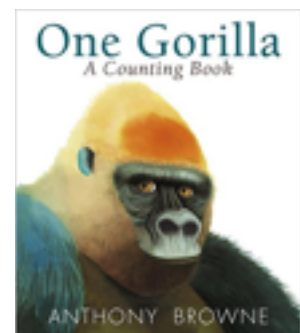
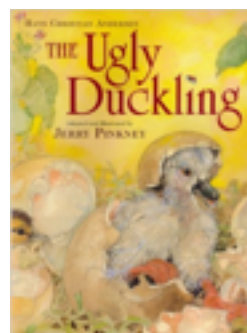
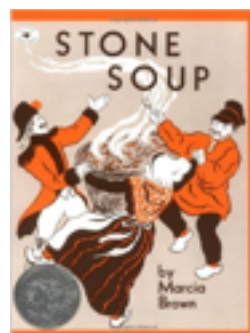
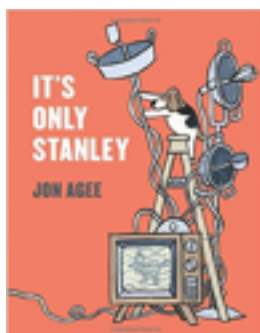
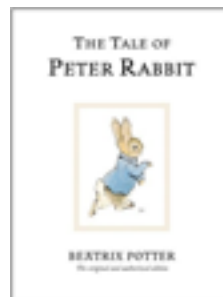
The Power of Picture Books

By Jinx Watson

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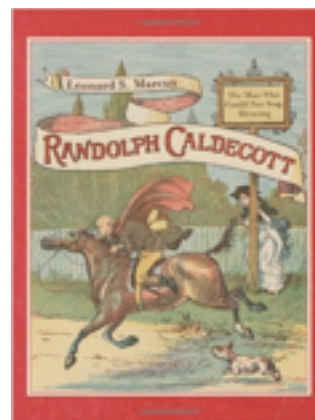
We have no toys or games on the market that do what beautifully designed picture books do! Picture books engage the cognitive capacities of the youngest infant: they offer **sounds** in words, sentences, and paragraphs. These literacy units offer all of the English sound delights, including alliteration, onomatopoeia, and subtlety.

Remember, "Max made mischief" [*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak]. Recall Peter [*Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter] hearing McGregor's hoe sounding, "scr-r-ritch, scratch, scratch, scritch . . ." "How do you expect to walk home with your loafers full of split **pea soup**?" says the wonderful friend, Martha, to George [from *George and Martha* by James Marshall]. The text in the good books we read offers all the possibilities of the rich English language. Most often, it is not the syntax we speak daily to each other: "What did you do, today?" "Nothing much." As an infant through the oldest listener hears these pages read aloud, he and she conjures up visions, pictures, scenes and worlds comparable to the one they know, or so different, that they open new worlds of possibilities. And better yet, they begin using some of the words and phrases they have heard in their books. Vocabularies expand at an exponential rate by listening to good picture books!



As listeners hear the words, they see the **visions** in the pages. At that point, they often try to slow the reading down. They soak up the art of illustrators who have used every style of painting or drawing appropriate to the text they have written or which they have been handed by the publisher. The style of expressionism can show up as cartoon, seen in Jon Agee's work, among others. Folk art is seen in Marcia Brown's work; representational or realistic work is best illustrated by the work of Jerry Pinkney. Surreal or abstract art is found with Anthony Browne. All of these artists are award-winners not only in the field of literature, but also in the field of art. Picture books offer children a museum of the finest art.

What do readers/listeners do with the richness of sound and sights in good picture books? They match what they hear to what they begin to see. They do simultaneous cognitive activities – they interpret on two levels: viewers and listeners must make a single narrative or story out of what they see in the picture with what they hear from their reader. Often, in great picture books, these narratives may be dissonant or different from each other. That is, the pictures may take on a life of their own, showing a story that is supplemental to the words of the story. In the 19th century, Randolph Caldecott, so notable that he inspired the American Librarian Association award for best-illustrated picture books, illustrated old and familiar nursery tales in much richer and fuller ways than what the simple text suggested. A wonderful question for teachers to ask students is, "What do the pictures tell us that the text does not?" And "What does the text say that the pictures do not?"



So, how do our children benefit from picture books? They learn to do two translations simultaneously: **what they hear with what they see**. It is a rich enterprise only found in being with a good picture book. No toy or game does what listening to a picture book can do for an early brain!

Often, we find 15-36 month old children wanting to have stories read over and over again. The Germans have a phrase called "function-lust" that refers to this developmental stage to want to repeat actions over and over. It is assumed that the littlest ones are practicing a mastery over the most elemental activities, whether it's listening or doing. So, children who are used to being with picture books often want to scan deeply what is before them. The child who is acclimated to being with regular reading of picture books – for at least 20 minutes a day – can begin to do those interpretations and translations, no easy task!

But, best of all, they begin to fall in love with reading and with the ancient form of entertainment -- story!

