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As told to Kate Silzer, 1769 words.

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On the stories we tell throughout our lives

Claudia Zoe Bedrick, publisher, editor, and art director of Enchanted Lion Books discusses fostering a sense of wonder for children, creating picture books for adults, and working in translation.

One thing that I love about Enchanted Lion's books is that it feels like you're treating children as "adult" enough to deal with really serious topics, but on the flip side, also giving teens and adults permission to enjoy the levity and the joy of a picture book as well, which I think is a really rare perspective.

I like how you put that. We definitely respect kids and their complexity as human beings enough to give them really rich fare, but we also understand that human beings need to play and express themselves in all kinds of open and free ways throughout their lives.

I'm interested in what your philosophy is on the stories we tell, and read, and listen to over the course of our lives, and how that evolves, and how you think it should evolve.

That is something we talk a lot about in this office and as a collective. We have a working philosophy of child development that frames our ideas around children and childhood that acknowledges that while children are obviously fully fledged human beings, they are in no way capable of adult understanding. So when we think about telling stories to children, we think about reaching them where they are. If you're seven years old, you've been on the planet for 84 months, and that's not a very long time. And so you don't have all these programmed-in ideas as to what a good story is, or what a suitable subject matter is, or what good content is.

As adults, we can get all hung up and think, "Is this a good book for kids?" Or, "Oh, it's such an unusual style of illustration." But kids aren't thinking that way because everything is new to them, and they're just full of wonder about stuff. And if they like it, they like it, and if they don't, they don't.

I think children have to be given a sense of the goodness of the world, because that is what makes us want to claim our autonomy and become actors in the world. If from the youngest age you're fed problems, and the world seems to be a place that is dark and limiting and problematic, I don't actually believe that's how you become an activist. I think kids need a huge supply of beauty and wonder and engagement. They need to be invited into curiosity, and invited into ethical frameworks where they can begin to sort out what is good and what isn't good, and how we judge that, and how we negotiate feelings we have about things that are different or unfamiliar. And if kids do that over the first many years of their life, they will become positive actors in the world. But I would say as a publisher, we really try to envelop kids in beautiful books and in ideas that are not just programmatic or pedantic about the role they should be playing in the world, but that are about being curious and open and expressive.

Whereas for adults, as in our Unruly books, we offer material in a way that reaches the kind of experiences we've had by the time we're in our teens or twenties—with broken hearts and love affairs, and maybe even a confrontation with the deep darkness of existence.

What benefit do you see in offering a picture book format to older audiences?

The question of Unruly is, if we're given so much rich fare to read as adults, why do we need illustrated books? And our contention is that stories told in part through pictures engage us in a completely different way. When we're given a story that invites us into a visual narrative, we will engage with it in a way that is much more emotionally toned, much more intuitive—we can't settle on our interpretation quite

as quickly. And every time we go back to the book, we may look at that image and actually have another feeling or idea about it, and that's going to then inform our reading of the story. We're immediately caught up in nuance and ambiguity. And life is a lot like that, where you can't always string things together. You're living in the presence of all kinds of things that you maybe can't make immediate sense of, and yet they're presented to you in a way that makes you feel something. When we stop engaging with images in that way, we are actually cutting ourselves off from something that speaks to us in a whole other language. I think adults need that material to play with and engage with, so that we can move along some different feeling paths and creative paths in our own lives.

What is the most unexpected or challenging part of making content for children?

That's a really good question. I think the most challenging part is working with the creators of the books. We all are blocked in certain ways and we're all open in certain ways, and sometimes I might see some shape to a story, but the author or the illustrator doesn't see it the same way.

It really does become a deep question as to, well, what is our idea of children and childhood? What do we think it is to make a book for kid readers? What is your philosophy of life? And it's completely fascinating and always eye-opening. My role is to make space for those who are creating the books. I don't try to legislate or over art direct. But to negotiate all of that complex material can be very challenging sometimes. And sometimes it's possible to end up working with someone incredibly talented, and someone who has a wonderful vision, but their sense of what it is to tell a story to children, and our sense as a team in this office might depart from each other. And that's something that we then have to really try to mine and navigate, and then embrace. It's always a journey of discovery, and it can get complicated at times.

How do you choose which writers and illustrators to collaborate with?

For many of the early years of Enchanted Lion, we were doing a lot of books in translation, acquiring books that were already made in other countries and languages. I would go to the Bologna Book Fair, or the Frankfurt Book Fair, or look at publisher catalogs, look online, and do research. And in a way, that was a matter of my own taste and curiosity. And then through that, slowly but surely, people began to submit stuff to us, and agents started contacting us, and we started originating books.

Our door is pretty open, and we're always looking to do books that are suitably complex and nuanced for kids. We also have a very strong point of view on the physical book and its materiality, and not making books to be—as part of our vast consumer society—just consumed and lost and destroyed. We make books that manifest the kind of material qualities that we think add value to the reading experience, and benefit the art and the story.

Can you talk a little bit more about how that materiality influences the reading experience, and what kinds of things you're thinking about when you're dealing with the physical size, shape, and paper for a book?

I think if you have a book that's not tactile and doesn't really assert itself as a material object that you're curious about in its own right, then I don't think you're going to engage with it as thoughtfully or with as much pleasure. I'm not saying that kids need that to love a book, but we're not just doing it for the kid reader; I think it also communicates to all of the adults—the book buyers at independent bookstores, the parents, the caretakers, the teachers, the librarians, and the society at large—that books are valuable, that books are precious, that books are something that should be cared for. And that actually we should be thoughtful about the materials that make them and maybe not make endless numbers of them, and that we should have some regard for the materials from our very beautiful world that we're using to make these books.

You mentioned books in translation and I know you publish books from around the world. How does that impact the types of stories you tell?

By publishing books in translation and from other countries, we actually end up offering different ideas to kids because the narrative conventions and the picture book conventions that we have here are not the conventions of many other countries. For example, in Mexico or France, you'll see that the narrative tradition is not our beginning, middle, and end. They tend to tell much more open-ended stories for kids, where it's just moving through experience and observation, but it doesn't have a dramatic moment. It doesn't open and close in the way a story here typically would. Other countries will also take up topics such as death and loss, or abandonment, or migration, or homelessness in ways that we don't.

It's not that kids need to even know, "oh, this is a book in translation." Even if that's not shared with the child reader, they will still be getting a different kind of narrative structure, and often a very different kind of visual mark making and composition than they would be getting if their entire experience were around mainstream American picture books.

Claudia Bedrock Recommends:

Walking: I walk everyday; walk in all weathers; walk when I'm tired and when I'm not; I walk without my phone; I pay attention, but also allow myself to go blank. The motion sets my mind free and stuff flows.

I give myself over to thinking about complexity. When I remember how complex I am, and how true that is for every other person alive and for the world as a whole, it becomes almost impossible to be reactive, reductive, and flattening.

Poetry! **Rilke, Elizabeth Alexander, Paul Celan, Mary Oliver.** I love starting the day with a poem. The ritual is a shower that's very hot, then very, very cold, then dark, strong coffee and a poem, and this keeps me on course even when trouble abounds.

Beethoven's late work **is** so incredible and so out there, it's always astonishing. The blues! So many different voices and people. Why do so many of the things that break our hearts remind us of joy?

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Fact

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