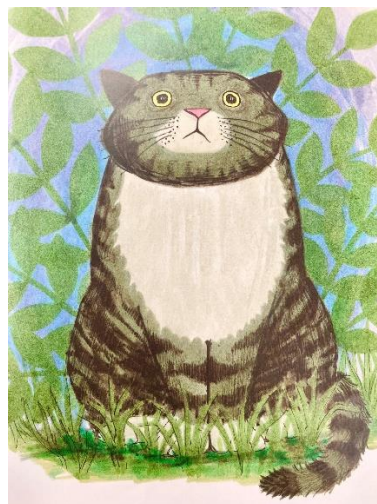




Illustration Love

I think a lot about illustration, wondering if I can combine my love of drawing with my love of writing. But can I only do that if I write for a younger audience? I love writing stories for teens and young adults and those books don't have illustration - or do they? Lately, things seem to be changing. A handful of books aimed at YA readers have been published with illustrations showing publishers are prepared to print them, encouraged perhaps by the explosion in popularity of graphic novels.

But why? Why is it necessary to have illustration in books aimed at young adults? For me, the answer lies in my own experience of reading as a child and then as a young adult, which I suspect echoes many other people's experience.



Judith Kerr's Mog the Forgetful Cat

I was a late independent reader despite loving stories. When I was very young, my favourites stories to have read to me were the two Mogs: Mog the Forgetful Cat written and illustrated by Judith Kerr, and Meg, Mog and Owl written by Helen Nicoll and illustrated by Jan Pienkowski. Unable to read the text, independent 'reading' for me, like many young children, was spending a long time *reading* the illustration. This is all very normal. It's accepted that for young people, illustration is vital to engage their minds and help decipher the text.

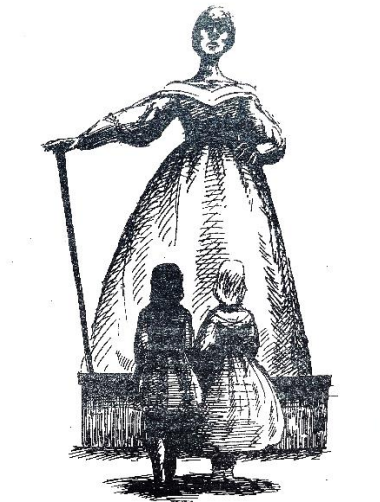


Helen Nicol's Meg and Mog, illustrated by Jan Pienkowski

So what happens as children start to read more independently? At MG (middle grade) level, the amount of text increases while the illustration remains, albeit on a smaller scale. At middle grade, I was still bewitched by story. I loved Ramona and The Worst Witch, skipping difficult words and making up any confusion with reference to the pictures. I wrote and drew story after story (appallingly spelled!) The illustrations were part of the story, not an addition. They helped me make sense of what I was writing, and they gave me ideas for where the story could go as I went along. I vividly recall hating it when the teacher 'made' us write the story first and then, if there was enough time (which there often wasn't) we were allowed to draw a picture. It's an incredibly backward way of thinking about the link between illustration and text and one that persists unfortunately, once past the picture book age.

And it gets worse, the older you get. My desire to properly read only happened when I was 11 (yep, 11!) I was in my final year at primary school and until that point, I was a hugely unconfident reader. My love of story was undiminished so this lack of enthusiasm I believe came from needing to wear glasses (which I was horribly self-conscious about) and a fear of not being able to read as well as my older siblings. But then I was 'forced' by my teacher to read and review five books by Joan Aitkin. The first few I skim read but then I found her book,

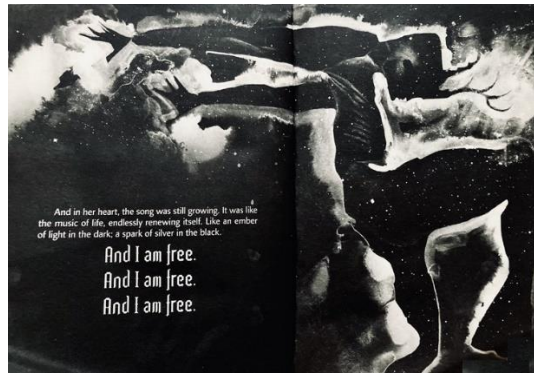
The Wolves of Willoughby Chase, and my future love of reading was sealed. Would I have been able to get so absorbed by the story without the brilliantly sinister and dark illustrations by Pat Marriott? I believe not. I reread the book as an adult and the text isn't easy. I know at the time I struggled over many of the words and their meaning but the atmosphere of both Aitkin's words and Marriott's pictures, transfixed me. It didn't matter that I couldn't read every word. And that's how illustration can help the older, less confident reader. I'd suggest they help *any* reader.



Joan Aiken's The Wolves of Willoughby Chase, illustrated by Pat Marriott

Oh, and then secondary school started, and I was thrown into 'text only' stories, many I fell for in a passionate way. But no illustrations? Why was illustration suddenly an absolute no-no? Why was it perceived as a babyish 'addition'? I didn't know and I still don't know why this perception is only just changing. Illustration is like the rising agent in the cake. It is **not** the superfluous, decorative cherry on the top! For readers like me, who find text overwhelming, off-putting, or down-right alienating, **illustration is a window to the story.**

My youngest son is dyslexic. He uses illustration, as I did, to decipher the story, to give clues as to the action, the character, the theme. I believe he'll always prefer illustrated stories. Fortunately, there are increasing numbers of older, illustrated fiction.



SF Said's Phoenix, illustrated by Dave McKean

My son and I were lucky enough to see author SF Said and illustrator Dave McKean discuss their collaborations – from Varjak Paw, to Phoenix, to Tyger. And in it, SF Said explained how he struggled to describe the gods in his book Phoenix (aimed at 10 – 13-year-olds) but that he didn't worry as he knew Dave McKean would be illustrating the story and he could do that job better. The beautiful, abstract, inky illustrations are a profound necessity. And Tinder, by Sally Gardner (who, incidentally, is dyslexic) has wonderful illustrations by David Roberts that not only add mood and setting but also break up the text and - best of all - weave their own character until you don't know what's telling the story: the words or the pictures. Of course, it's both.

There *is* a place for illustration in YA fiction. For many readers, it is an absolute must to engage them, and help make the story accessible. It is not a regression, or an embellishment. Illustration is a part of reading.



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