

Your Kids Aren't Too Old for Picture Books, and Neither Are You

These are the real wizards of the literary world.

Feb. 20, 2021 5 MIN READ



By Pamela Paul

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"My kid has outgrown picture books."

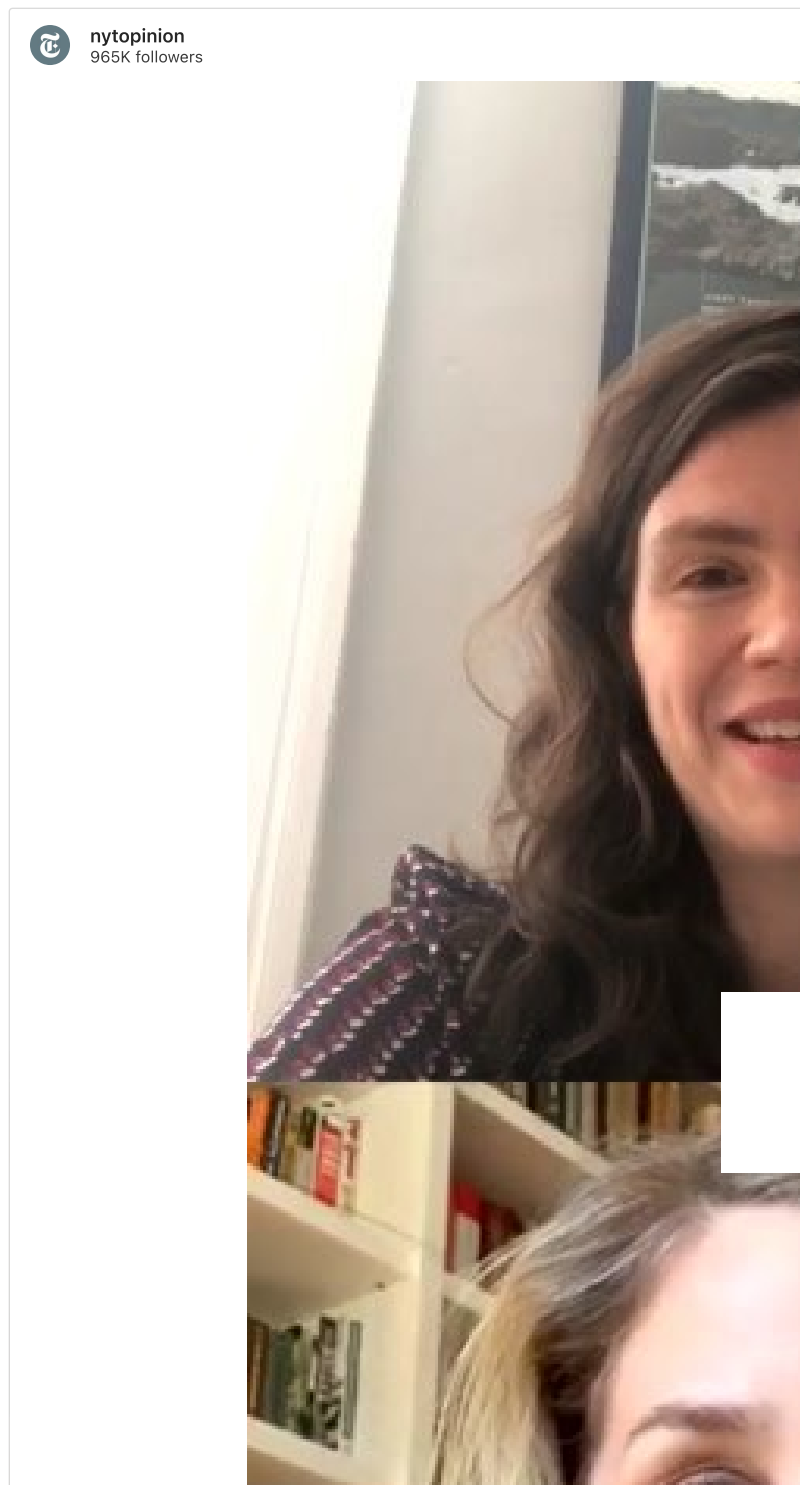
I hear this often when enthusing about a new picture book and offering to pass one along to a friend. It's the kind of thing parents will say with a certain amount of pride because of what it implies: My child is now reading independently and no longer requires the crutch of pictures. Just as he once relinquished the binky, he has moved on.

I hear this and I think, "Poor kid," and also, "Poor parent." Nobody moves on from picture books. At least, nobody should.

While children's books are, on the whole, often scorned by the literary world as not altogether serious, perhaps no format is treated with the same dismissiveness as picture books. Even board books are respected at the very least as convenient chew toys, and chapter books look enough like novels to constitute a respectable gateway to true literature. But picture books seem like a transitory phase, suitable for a sleepy bedtime read-aloud or the shushed classroom break of story time, but hardly worthy of consideration on their own.

Most picture books are recommended for kids ages 4 to 8. That's already too narrow. But picture books are tossed out even faster since many schools expect kids to read by the end of kindergarten. Because so many parents like to think of our kids as progressing and developing new skills, we allow picture books to fall away by the time kids are sounding out their Dr. Seuss.

Don't let this happen.



First, appreciate what picture books, the real wizards of the literary world, do. With remarkable economy, they excel at the twin arts of visual and textual storytelling. Anyone who has ever read a picture book to a child has witnessed this magic firsthand. You'll be reading aloud and the child will laugh, not at anything you've read but at something she has read in the pictures. While you are reading one story, told in words, she is reading another, told through art. The illustrator doesn't merely reflect the words on the page; she creates an entire narrative of her own, adding details, creating secondary story lines.

Think of that mouse making its way around the bedroom in "Goodnight Moon" or the buildings constructed out of household goods inside the dreamscape of "In the Night Kitchen." These elements tell another story, and even kids who haven't mastered the alphabet can read them, gleaning from the sequence of images how one event leads to another, discovering subplots within. This is why kids tell you not to turn the page yet, or to go back; it's why they ask for the story to be read over and over again. They learn that you have to look closely to ferret out clues and derive meaning. They are also learning to read deeply.

Educators call this “visual literacy,” and while it refers most directly to the creation and reading of images, it extends more broadly to understanding communication and interaction. We live in a highly visual culture, and if inculcating “21st-century skills” — teaching your child to communicate through a Google slide show, write code or create a video presentation — is what you’re after, then encouraging the reading of picture books serves the purpose.

Picture books also offer an accessible way for children to understand that books are for them, no matter who they are or where they’ve come from. The children depicted in contemporary picture books display the full ethnic, gender, class, religious and geographic diversity of the world. In their pages, kids visibly take public transportation, grow up in same-sex households and face physical and emotional challenges; they explore imaginary and fantastical worlds where it’s sometimes easier to work out childhood woes.

Picture books are the carrot that motivates the emerging reader, frustrated and bored silly by the phonemic progression from cat to mat. Unlike most “early readers,” picture books are vibrant and appealing in a way likely to give children who grow up swiping iPads the stimulation they’ve come to expect. Picture books also offer much more sophisticated language and storytelling, the assumption being that adults are reading those words aloud, so children needn’t struggle over them themselves.

All this sounds like a lot of work and homework, so let’s be clear: Picture books are also one of the literary world’s great pleasures.

When I say kids shouldn’t outgrow picture books, I mean ever. According to a 2019 Scholastic survey, whereas 55 percent of kids ages 6 to 8 are frequent readers, only 11 percent remain so by the time they’re between 15 and 17. At a time when we lament the state of children’s literacy, particularly reading for pleasure, surely we shouldn’t tell kids to move on from books they enjoy.

Publishers realize this. Aware of the tough competition for attention from video games and the internet, publishing companies have pushed picture books in new directions. Biographies for children, once a staid genre, are now packed with photos and illustrations. Visual encyclopedias, fact books, massive books about space are as stimulating as any app. These are picture books, too, but often explicitly for children ages 6 to 12.

Think about the explosive popularity of graphic novels — books like “Guts” and series like “Dog Man” and the “March” trilogy — and how they’ve transformed children who didn’t read at all into ones who do, and those readers into voracious readers. What are children telling us but that they want to keep looking at pictures? That they are visual readers as much as they are readers of text? And that perhaps we shouldn’t be so quick to steer them away from books that respect children’s interests and the way their minds work. These, too, are “real” books.

I still read picture books, and if you’re honest with yourself, in all likelihood, so do you. What are all those manga and graphic novels and pricey coffee-table books and online comics we’re all staring at — not to mention Instagram stories and TikTok videos — if not, in essence, picture books for grown-ups? Stories with pictures.

Recently, I bought myself a copy of “Marshmallow,” a 1942 picture book about a rabbit that intrudes upon the privileged place of the family cat. The text, which included several poems, holds up; the illustrations capture the peevishness of the cat and the placid Baby Yoda-like cuteness of the interloping bunny. Like any timeless story, it gets at an essential emotional truth — in this case, “we all need our place” — and like any timeless picture book, that story is told through a potent combination of words and artwork anyone can understand.

I insisted on reading it to my 11-year-old, otherwise busy with the latest installment of the “Keeper of the Lost Cities.” My 14-year-old, who enjoys drawing as much as he likes reading the short fiction of Etgar Keret, overheard us when he walked by. “Put that in my room when you’re done?” he said.

My kids were still willing to read my picture books. I felt relieved, and yes, a little proud.

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