

Thoughts from Pat Graham on representation in picture books (March 2019):

Whether aged 3 or 103, most people like books - and for all sorts of reasons. It could be that you're looking for adventure, drama, romance, escapism, knowledge or maybe just a good laugh. One thing that we all have in common though is that in the books we read we look for someone or something that is within our own experience. It doesn't really matter that characters might be involved in weird or exotic stories, we still expect them to be just a bit like us.

My own family loves books, and picture books in particular. This is because although we enjoy lots of different types of books, we have never grown out of picture books. I have two daughters; Jenna is an artist and illustrator and Lauren, even though she is an adult with a severe learning disability, absolutely loves picture books. She can't speak and doesn't understand many of the words but loves the pictures, the rhythm and repetition of the language, and the sensory experience of turning (and often tearing) the pages. We all particularly enjoy picture books translated into Scots dialect such as *The Gruffalo's Wean*. Everyone who knows Lauren is aware that they have to be prepared not only to read books to her, but also to make animal noises, create different voices, sing when the story demands it and sometimes even to speak in Scots vernacular.

Lauren may not be able to go to exciting, fantastical places but her picture books are her window on the world so that that she can travel anywhere and everywhere. She can see illustrations of all sorts of creatures and characters and people but sadly she is unlikely to encounter in her picture books any people like herself. Throughout the more than 30 years that I have been reading picture books to my children, I have found that there are very few black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) characters, almost no physically disabled characters and even fewer characters with a learning disability. It occurred to me that I should perhaps contact publishers to ask why this should be. After all, there is a demand for books by people with a learning disability because they will continue to love and cherish them long after picture books have been abandoned by children who don't have a learning disability. For someone like Lauren, picture books will be a lifetime source of pleasure, fun and education.

I decided that before haranguing publishers about the lack of books for and about people with learning disabilities, I should carry out some preliminary research to challenge my own assumptions. So for the last few years I've been looking for picture books about learning disability - and even books where there is a character who is a wheelchair user - because many people with a learning disability are either wheelchair users or spend time with friends who are. My approach hasn't been particularly scientific. I scour the internet and social media and I

stand in bookshops and libraries flicking through books until I get a bit embarrassed and have to leave. If I find anything interesting, I sometimes take photographs but more often than not I buy the books that I find. They can be old, new, wonderful or dreadful but always fascinating.

After all my searching and researching, I have tracked down only 29 picture books where there is a character with a learning disability and 43 picture books with a character who is a wheelchair user. Around two thirds of both types of book were published in the last 10 years. I've also found, with much furtive flicking and browsing in bookshops, 26 books where there is a wheelchair user somewhere in the background, almost all of which were published very recently.

A quick search of the internet shows that in the UK around 10,000 new children's titles are published every year with sales of around £400 million. A further search tells you that an incredible 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability, 800,000 of whom are children. People with a learning disability love books too. Where are the books for these people? Maybe it's time for publishers to recognise that there is a large group of people who are being very poorly served by their industry and who would provide a huge market that publishers are missing out on.

The statistics and indeed my own picture book-strewn house would suggest that more books are needed and wanted by both children and adults with a learning disability. It's difficult to imagine any reason why they wouldn't be. And yet, there still seems to be a reluctance on the part of publishers to fulfil that demand, or am I being unfair to publishers? Maybe writers, illustrators, booksellers are also unaware of this demand or perhaps they just don't know the best way to go about it. It would be a lamentable outcome if book producers were discouraged from trying because of the fear of being politically incorrect. Perhaps we should be more imaginative in asking people with learning disabilities what kinds of books they already like and what they would like to see more of.

Although I haven't found many picture books for people with a learning disability, I have been enormously heartened to find that some authors, illustrators, publishers and booksellers have managed to overcome the hurdles, hesitations and preconceptions surrounding picture books about disability. Steve Antony's book *Amazing*, published in January 2019, is a wonderful example. The hero in this book is a wheelchair user who has fun with his pet dragon. Steve wanted the inclusion of his main character's wheelchair to be entirely incidental. When this book was first shown to a publisher it was dismissed as being too niche and wasn't published until Steve was an established author a number of years later.

Quentin Blake's *The Five of Us* tells the story of a group of children, each of whom has an unusual ability, who come to the rescue of their bus driver, despite having a range of disabilities, including a character who has a learning disability. Quentin Blake stressed that he is no expert in disability issues but nurtured an idea over a period of years which resulted in a

delightful book that is a celebration of teamwork and friendship. His view was that this is a book for everyone and that it is important not to mention the characters' disadvantages, just their amazing abilities.

Rebecca Elliott's series of five picture books about her daughter Clemmie and her little brothers breaks the mould in terms of portraying people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) in picture books. PMLD covers a wide spectrum of learning disability, mobility and health problems, so it is perhaps not surprising that people with PMLD are not often portrayed in picture books. Rebecca's achievement is to portray Clemmie and her brothers in an engaging and sensitive manner while reflecting the close bond between siblings in families like ours. They are also incredibly funny and entertaining.

Hot off the press is *Leo and the Lightning Dragons* by Gill White and Gilli B, smashing all the myths and misconceptions about whether it is possible, or even desirable, to show people with PMLD in picture books. This book was written by Gill for her son Leo who suffers from Ohtahara Syndrome, an extremely rare form of epilepsy. In the book, Leo is a brave knight who battles against the fearsome dragons inside his head, which are his epilepsy. I attended one of the book launches which was oversubscribed many times by families both with and without disabilities. I understand that other book launches have been the same.

If there is any doubt about how well these books have been received then a quick look at the reviews on their Amazon sites will dispel those illusions. In particular, *Leo and the Lightning Dragons* which was only published on 30 January 2019, already has an incredible 36 reviews with an average rating of 5 stars. What this book and the others mentioned above demonstrate is that if you have a great story, wonderful illustrations, appealing characters and well chosen words then it is possible to produce subtle, funny, entertaining and engaging picture books about characters with disabilities who don't have to be confined to a small wheelchair in the background of a street scene.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival took an enormous leap of faith in 2018 when it introduced its first ever events for people with PMLD. They consulted with PAMIS, ARC Scotland and the National Involvement Network, organisations which support and involve people with learning disabilities, about making the festival more inclusive. As a result of these discussions, many adjustments were made to ensure that all people with disabilities would feel more included at the Book Festival and would derive the pleasure that all Festival visitors have come to expect and appreciate. This meant that my daughter and her peers were able to attend multi-sensory events specifically designed for them. They all had a wonderful time, not only at the sell-out events but also in the cafes and the bookshops. For the first time ever, Lauren was able to choose her own picture books in the front-facing displays in the spacious bookshop. There was even a Changing Place toilet for those who needed it. This groundbreaking work which continues into 2019 demonstrates that people with learning disabilities are interested in literature and culture. I hope that other festivals will take their lead from this success.

In an ideal world, what kind of picture books might there be about and for people with a learning disability? I would like there to be all the things that make other picture books great. I don't want to see people with disabilities portrayed as objects of sympathy or as victims or to be the subject of lessons on empathy. They shouldn't be constantly described as 'special' as this only serves to emphasise their differences. They can be heroes but only occasionally superheroes. If we remember that the person with the disability might be in our family, one of our friends, a school or workmate, or maybe even ourselves, then surely we can't go too far wrong.