

Picture Books No Longer a Staple for Children



Drew Angerer/The New York Times

Sophia Coudenhove read a picture book on Wednesday to her 14-month-old daughter, Anna, perhaps too young for a chapter one.

By JULIE BOSMAN
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Picture books are so unpopular these days at the [Children's Book Shop](#) in Brookline, Mass., that employees there are used to placing new copies on the shelves, watching them languish and then returning them to the publisher.

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Drew Angerer/The New York Times

The picture books section at Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington. Even some best-selling authors feel the pinch.

"So many of them just die a sad little death, and we never see them again," said Terri Schmitz, the owner.

The shop has plenty of company. The picture book, a mainstay of children's literature with its lavish illustrations, cheerful colors and large print wrapped in a glossy jacket, has been fading. It is not going away — perennials like the Sendaks and Seusses still sell well — but publishers have scaled back the number of titles they have released in the last several years, and booksellers across the country say sales have been suffering.

The economic downturn is certainly a major factor, but

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many in the industry see an additional reason for the slump. Parents have begun pressing their kindergartners and first graders to leave the picture book behind and move on to more text-heavy chapter books. Publishers cite pressures from parents who are mindful of increasingly rigorous standardized testing in schools.

“Parents are saying, ‘My kid doesn’t need books with pictures anymore,’” said Justin Chanda, the publisher of Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. “There’s a real push with parents and schools to have kids start reading big-kid books earlier. We’ve accelerated the graduation rate out of picture books.”

Booksellers see this shift too.

“They’re 4 years old, and their parents are getting them ‘Stuart Little,’” said Dara La Porte, the manager of the children’s department at the Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington. “I see children pick up picture books, and then the parents say, ‘You can do better than this, you can do more than this.’ It’s a terrible pressure parents are feeling — that somehow, I shouldn’t let my child have this picture book because she won’t get into Harvard.”

Literacy experts are quick to say that picture books are not for dummies. Publishers praise the picture book for the particular way it can develop a child’s critical thinking skills.

“To some degree, picture books force an analog way of thinking,” said Karen Lotz, the publisher of Candlewick Press in Somerville, Mass. “From picture to picture, as the reader interacts with the book, their imagination is filling in the missing themes.”

Many parents overlook the fact that chapter books, even though they have more text, full paragraphs and fewer pictures, are not necessarily more complex.

“Some of the vocabulary in a picture book is much more challenging than in a chapter book,” said Kris Vreeland, a book buyer for Vroman’s Bookstore in Pasadena, Calif., where sales of picture books have been down. “The words themselves, and the concepts, can be very sophisticated in a picture book.”

They can, for example, be written with Swiftian satire, like “Monsters Eat Whiny Children” by Bruce Eric Kaplan, a new book about children who are nearly devoured as a result of bad behavior.

Each year, the coveted Randolph Caldecott Medal goes to the most distinguished picture book published in the United States. (This year it went to “The Lion and the Mouse” by Jerry Pinkney, an adaptation of the Aesop’s fable with luminous images and no words at all.)

Still, many publishers have gradually reduced the number of picture books they produce for a market that had seen a glut of them, and in an age when very young children, like everyone else, have more options, a lot of them digital, to fill their entertainment hours.

At Scholastic, 5 percent to 10 percent fewer hardcover picture books have been published over the last three years. Don Weisberg, the president of the Penguin Young Readers Group, said that two and a half years ago, the company began publishing fewer titles but that it had devoted more attention to marketing and promoting the ones that remain. Of all the children’s books published by Simon & Schuster, about 20 percent are picture books, down from 35 percent a few years ago.

Classic books like “Goodnight Moon” and the “Eloise” series still sell steadily, alongside more modern popular titles like the “Fancy Nancy” books and “The Three Little Dassies” by Jan Brett, but even some best-selling authors are feeling the pinch. Jon Scieszka, who wrote “Robot Zot,” said his royalty checks had been shrinking, especially in the last year.

“We see the stores displaying less picture books, and publishers are getting a little more cautious about signing up new projects,” Mr. Scieszka said. “You can feel that everyone’s worried.”

Readers’ Comments

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Borders, noticing the sluggish sales, has tried to encourage publishers to lower the list prices, which can be as high as \$18. Mary Amicucci, the vice president of children’s books for Barnes & Noble, said sales began a slow, steady decline about a year ago.

Since then, the stores have rearranged display space so that some picture books are enticingly paired with toys and games.

Other retailers have cut shelf space devoted to picture books while expanding their booming young-adult sections, full of dystopic fiction, graphic novels and “Twilight”-inspired paranormal romances.

“Young adult fiction has been universally the growing genre,” said Ms. Lotz of Candlewick, “and so as retailers adapt to what customers are buying, they are giving more space to that and less space to picture books.”

Some parents say they just want to advance their children’s skills. Amanda Gignac, a stay-at-home mother in San Antonio who writes *The Zen Leaf*, a book blog, said her youngest son, Laurence, started reading chapter books when he was 4.

Now Laurence is 6 ½, and while he regularly tackles 80-page chapter books, he is still a “reluctant reader,” Ms. Gignac said.

Sometimes, she said, he tries to go back to picture books.

“He would still read picture books now if we let him, because he doesn’t want to work to read,” she said, adding that she and her husband have kept him reading chapter books.

Still, many children are getting the message. At Winnona Park Elementary School in Decatur, Ga., a recent book fair was dominated by chapter books, said Ilene Zeff, who organized the fair.

I’ve been getting fewer and fewer picture books because they just don’t sell, Ms. Zeff said. “By first grade, when the kids go to pick out their books, they ask where the chapter books are. They’re just drawn to them.”

On a recent discussion board on Urbanbaby.com, a Web site for parents, one commenter asked for recommendations for chapter books to read to a 5-year-old, and was answered with suggestions like the 272-page “Phantom Tollbooth” by Norton Juster and “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” by L. Frank Baum — books generally considered more appropriate for children 9 to 11.

Jen Haller, the vice president and associate publisher of the Penguin Young Readers Group, said that while some children were progressing to chapter books earlier, they were still reading picture books occasionally. “Picture books have a real comfort element to them,” Ms. Haller said. “It’s not like this door closes and they never go back to picture books again.”

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