The Lyrical Voice in Non-Fiction: *Think of an Eel*, by Karen Wallace and Mike Bostock

by Margaret Mallett

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Think of an eel. 
He swims like a fish.  
He slides like a snake  
(Page 6, *Think of an Eel*, 1993)¹

**Introduction: Non-Fiction texts for children**

A significant breakthrough in children’s non-fiction came in the 1990s when Walker Books published the ‘Read and Wonder’ series. These titles, information picturebooks for the five to seven year old age range, communicate information of quality and depth. But, unusually for a series of information books each one is written from the author’s personal standpoint and each is therefore unique in approach and design. One of the earliest in the series, *A Ruined House²* shares the author’s childhood experience of finding an old house in the countryside and exploring the creatures and plants that have taken up residence within the decaying rooms and walls. The exciting narrative and the detailed labelled drawings make this book a good resource for projects about plants, flowers and wildlife. *Spider Watching³* tells of a child afraid of spiders but who, after careful observation of the creatures and their webs, comes to realize how fascinating they are. The cross section of the spider’s body is clear and accessible and teachers find the book a helpful introduction to that favourite ‘early years’ topic – mini beasts. The narrative organization of many of the ‘Read and Wonder’ titles draws in young readers, helping them find connections with the new ideas and information. The illustrations are newly created and when combined with the poetic tone of the language give the books a lyrical quality.

It is the lyrical nature of the titles in the ‘Read and Wonder’ series that I want to explore with attention to how this quality helps children learn and think. I shall do so with special reference to one title *Think of an Eel*, published in 1993. I have read this to children between the ages of five and eight years, talked about it to student teachers and savoured it as a model of excellence. It is an illustrated account of the eel’s life cycle providing much information in words and pictures with considerable imaginative insight.

**The Author and I Illustrator**

*Think of an Eel* has both an author and an illustrator who have worked together to achieve an overall harmony between words and pictures. The author, Karen Wallace, grew up in rural Quebec. She is a prolific writer of different genres ranging from nature books for young children to fiction for teenagers. *Think of an Eel*, like her other naturebooks, draws on her early exploration of the woods and rivers near her childhood home.⁴ It was years later when she had left Canada for England that she began to write for children. The ‘Read and Wonder’ series provided the perfect opportunity for Karen to share her knowledge and love of the natural world. She tells us about the personal interest which inspired the book. ‘Eels have always fascinated me and this was my first picturebook. It really launched my career’.⁵ In addition to her skills and sensitivity as a naturalist, Karen brings something else of importance to her books for young children, something which makes them particularly inspiring to read.

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aloud. She is able to communicate information through rhythmic language. The strong internal rhythms of the Anglo Saxon poems she studied as a student of English Literature in London came back when she was writing picturebook text.

The illustrator, Mike Bostock, studied painting and illustration at the Bath Academy of Art and, like Karen Wallace, has a special interest in animals and plants in their varied environments. His illustrations for children's books, based on his scientific understanding, have enormous visual appeal. In *Think of an Eel* he complements Karen’s poetic text with luminous pictures of the eels, showing their changing colours and indicating with a light yet firm line their sinuous movement through the water. The special ‘chemistry’ between words and pictures achieved by Wallace and Bostock gives the book a ‘lyrical’ texture and it is this quality that engages children’s interest.

**The Text: Think of an Eel**

Three qualities would seem to allow us to describe a non-fiction book as lyrical. First, it should appeal passionately and directly to hearts as well as to minds. Second, it needs to communicate thoughts and feelings by employing poetic devices: rhythm, alliteration and imagery devices which are more often associated with stories and poems. Thirdly, the illustrations should embody the distinctive ‘line’, ‘hue’ and ‘tone’ to be found in paintings or picturebook illustrations. Where these three qualities combine, young learners are energized and encouraged to imagine and reflect. *Think of an Eel* seems to embody these lyrical features in particularly good measure.

**The appeal to heart and mind**

The appeal to heart and mind, and what Margaret Meek called the ‘poetic riches’ of *Think of an Eel* are evident as soon as a child explores the cover. Here the eel’s long body and huge round eye, swimming in luminous blue and green waters, grabs the attention. And then the reader is drawn to a poetic invitation written in waving hand lettering:

Listen to the story of a long long journey...
Imagine you could find your way
To a place you’d never been before...
Learn about an underwater world...

The lettering and the words beguile and give a personality to the facts soon to be introduced. The words offer a powerful invitation to share in a special journey: a journey from the Sargasso sea where eels are born, across thousands of miles of ocean to the very rivers from which their parents came. So the cover has both aesthetic appeal and the promise of a book which will give much more than a formulaic recital of ‘the facts’. The book’s narrative organization - round a journey and a life cycle - will involve and sustain the interest of young readers who have been drawn in by the cover. They will see and learn about the changing waters and conditions through which the eels swim, and they will, hopefully, marvel at the dramatic physical transformations in the eel as it grows and develops. The story invites readers to care about the eels on their epic journey with its dangers and challenges.

Lyrical writers and illustrators also aim to nourish a young reader’s understanding by passionate attention to the accuracy and depth of the information they offer. In *Think of an Eel* the authorial voice invites rather than commands; young readers are asked to share in what has been discovered and there is a willingness to admit there are still some mysteries. In the case of eels these mysteries are about egg laying and egg hatching. Minds are
exercised and expanded by the best lyrical non-fiction not least because, in my experience, the books are the fruits of tireless research.

**Poetic devices**

As with other books in the ‘Read and Wonder’ series, there are two kinds of text in *Think of an Eel*. The main narrative, telling the story of the journey, is in large standard print whilst the more conventional information book facts are in italic hand lettering. Thus, there is in hand lettering ‘*Eels navigate by instinct*’ and the following lyrical lines in the main narrative:

- He wriggles up rapids,
- Climbs rocks
- Around waterfalls.
- River banks guide him.
- Nothing will stop him  (page 14)

The main narrative is undoubtedly poetic, but the hand lettered facts also offer something personal and intimate. Thus the hand lettered ‘fact’ - ‘*Eels feed mostly at night*’ (page 18) - swirls round an atmospheric picture of an eel emerging from the water onto a moonlit riverbank.

The rhythmic language of the main text matches the relentless drive of the eel’s life cycle from egg to elver to eel to egg. So the glass elver’s energetic progress through the water is described thus:

- Into the river
- He swims like a mad thing (page 14)

The choice of vocabulary helps too. Words associated with water spill through the text ‘weedy’, ‘soup’, ‘warm weedy sea’ - as do those communicating the character of the eels’ movement - ‘swimming’, ‘navigating’, ‘wriggling through the water’ and sometimes ‘sinking through the sea’. There are onomatopoeic words like ‘ooze’ and a wonderfully alliterative abstract simile: silver eel ‘squirms like a secret from seabird and sailor’. Even the very sound of the name of the sea, ‘Sargasso’, is romantic and evocative. Compound words - ‘there’s eel-tomb and eel cradle’ - provide original and memorable images. Scientific words ‘egg batch’, ‘elver’, silver eels, yellow eels and ‘fertilize’, ‘migrate’ and ‘navigation by instinct’ complement poetic ones.

Exciting images are another hallmark of a lyrical writer: here there are verbal images appealing to the senses of sight, touch, taste and smell which dance with the pictures: the young eel is like a ‘shoelace made out of glass’. Later his long winding body ‘turns silver and black’ and ‘eyes like blackcurrants bulge into headlamps’ (page 11). Finally the eel becomes large and yellow ‘and thick like a snake’ (page 18). But the image long remembered by a particular group of eight year olds who had enjoyed hearing the book read aloud is of the eel sinking through the sea ‘like a used silver wrapper’, its purpose now fulfilled (page 26). The ‘scissor like beaks of the seagulls’ snapping up the elvers appeals to the sense of touch and the sense of smell is evoked when we read that Spring warms the shoreline and the ‘smell of fresh water excites the glass elver’ (page 14). There is an appeal to taste and touch on page 8 when the sea is described as ‘salt and soupy’. Aural images are few although we are offered the aural image of the silver eels ‘swimming silently back to the Sargasso Sea’ on page 25. Thus in lyrical non-fiction writers draw on their linguistic resources to ignite the reader’s senses and to entice them to bring to bear on the narrative all their knowledge, experience and intuition.

**Lyrical illustrations**

The ‘line’, ‘hue’ and ‘tone’ of the pictures in *Think of an Eel* come together to show the very spirit of the eel as it is transformed from something like a tiny transparent leaf to a creature which is thick and green and brown. A light but crisp line is used to communicate energy and purpose as the creatures ‘navigate by instinct’ but always seem to know where they are going
(page 14/15). The eels’ bodies are shown intertwining elegantly whether moving through the water with a rhythmic force or waiting together for a dark moonless night to make the journey home.

The use of colour or ‘hue’ is used to reveal the sheer beauty and the luminosity of the eels during their elver and silver stages. The restricted palette on the double spread (pages 22 and 23) shows maturing eels tangled in a ball in shades of blue, grey and silver, and this appeals to young children’s aesthetic sense. Subtle, modulated green, grey and blue tonalities create a mysterious ocean.

These lyrical illustrations tell about the appearance of the eels, the way they move and the changes in environment they encounter in the course of their journey. In my experience the effect of all this is to make young readers care about the creatures. Without encouraging inappropriate anthropomorphism the pictures make it possible for children to empathize with the resilience of the eels as they make their journey, even though their efforts are born of instinct.

More conventional information books use diagrams and, as such, the end pages in Think of an Eel summarize the changing appearance of the creature in illustrations that function as diagrams while retaining the lyrical quality of the illustrations in the body of the book. The eels are shown in luminous blue and green waters with light shining through.

As well as dramatic double spreads, smaller illustrations or ‘vignettes’ will satisfy most children’s search for information in this book - the actual size of a baby eel is indicated in this way on page 8. Other vignettes show location - for example a map on page 8 shows clearly that the Sargasso sea is to be found to the south of Bermuda in the Caribbean. Then there are vignettes picking out and enlarging detail from main illustrations, such as the eel’s large eyes that allow it to see in the dark (page 25). Another shows a detailed aspect of a mudhole (page 16) on the river bed which provides a home for eels. On two occasions a series of vignettes show time passing: snow gradually dwindling on a mountain and the cycle of the moon going from light to dark. These small pictures are often annotated with hand lettering which ‘whispers the facts and ideas’ to young readers. In this book writing and illustrations work together to give a special coherence and unity to the child’s reading experience. As Karen Davies herself writes on her website, she and Mike Bostock aim to achieve a ‘chemistry’ between words and pictures.

Classroom Contexts

Think of an Eel has remained in print since it was first published in 1993 and is found in many classrooms in both big and small book format. Why, it could be asked, is it so well liked in the primary school? Partly, I think, because teachers and children find it a useful text to support science lessons and a poetic narrative to be appreciated in English lessons.

Science

This book fits perfectly with work in Key Stage 1 on ‘Life processes and living things’. It can be read aloud by the teacher to the whole class as an introduction to how creatures move, feed and grow. There are perhaps three insights about the natural world which arise from this book that can be highlighted by the teacher and talked about with the children. First it shows the sheer generosity of nature in producing so many young eels. We are told this in words ‘imagine this eel-leaf and millions just like him’, and in pictures of the tiny translucent creatures. Children come to realize that this is an insurance against predators and mishaps. Second, the driving narrative and pictures of the purposeful eels shows the relentless effects of instinct on behaviour. Third, children are shown the eternal flow of the life-cycle as each new generation of eels is born, journeys, reproduces and dies. Scientific words – ‘fertilize’, ‘egg batch’ and ‘migrate’ identify the book with science. But teachers can also explain how the use of literary language, the powerful images of the young eel like a ‘glass shoelace’ and the dying eel reduced to something like ‘used wrapping paper’, actually give us a very precise picture of what the eel looks like at different points in its life cycle.
Concentrating as it does on one creature’s journey through its life cycle the book seems to encourage children’s curiosity, questions and comments. This reflection or ‘wondering’ is the prelude to the kind of learning that goes beyond the superficial, beyond the apprehension of interesting but miscellaneous facts. To ‘wonder’ you have to both know something about a topic and also to care about it. So much non-fiction sets out information in ways which mean that young readers could scarcely be blamed for thinking ‘So what?’ However, *Think of an Eel* connects with young readers from the cover. In the introduction we are told about an intriguing secret: ‘Even now no one has ever seen a wild eel lay eggs or an eel egg hatch’ (frontispiece). This is the sort of mystery that will interest children and encourages informed speculation, not so far away from the thinking of mature scientists. A student teacher once told me of the interesting talk and writing of her seven year old class about how and where they imagined the young eels would hatch. A question or comment from the teacher can often be a starting point for lively discussion with the class or a group. The illustrations too can inspire children’s work: the vignettes in particular are good models for children’s own attempts at producing annotated drawings of plants and animals.

*English*

*Think of an Eel* (in its big book format) is often used in the literacy hour, and outside it, as an example of an informational narrative and of a text in which quality information can be imparted in chronological sequence. Children can discuss why this particular body of information, built round a life cycle, lends itself so well to narrative form.

The earlier analysis has shown how rich the language and imagery are. Children enjoy being invited to select a favourite image or description and to read it out loud and say why it has such impact. This keeps children close to the text, although discussion will range further when children share their anecdotes and comments. There are excellent opportunities for both reading and writing in independent groups. Children enjoy collecting and talking about vocabulary to do with the movement of the creatures in the water - ‘wriggles’, ‘slips’ and ‘climbs’. The poetic devices like imagery help us understand scientific facts, for example, at one stage, the elver has ‘teeth like a sawblade’ because it needs to eat to grow (page 9). The illustrations are evocative and detailed and children like to use them as a starting point for their own short poems. They can also be helped to appreciate that the kind of non-fiction we call ‘lyrical’ shares with fiction the value given to feelings as well as thoughts about phenomena, situations and events. Who can be indifferent to this word picture of the eel’s death?

> After eighty days’ swimming,  
> not eating, not sleeping,  
> eel’s long, winding body is worn out and wasted.  
> He spills the new life  
> carried deep in his belly,  
> then sinks through the sea  
> like a used silver wrapper (page 26)

Probably all teachers need to do is read this aloud and wait for children’s comments.

*Coda*

For some children, non-fiction fires the imagination and helps to make them enthusiastic and critical readers. However we need writers and illustrators with a passionate commitment to bringing the phenomena of the real world into exciting focus, those who have the courage to be innovative and daring. If those writers also bring a lyrical eye and ear to their work then they will make a special contribution to helping children forge the important connections between what they read and personal experience as well as feelings, ideas and thoughts. And, in an electronic age, the print information book will continue to be cherished if it has something distinctive to nourish children’s learning.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES


5. See website: www.karenwallace.co.uk


7. See article in *English 4-11*, Summer 2006

8. Many authors of lyrical non-fiction organize their books chronologically; see for example Meredith Hooper’s book *River Story*, illustrator Bee Willey, Walker Books 2000, 0744528933, £9.99. This book is used often in early years classrooms as part of geography work and lends itself to reading aloud. However, there is no reason why lyrical books should not have a non-narrative organization, see for example: *Kingdom of the Sun: A Book of Animal Constellations*, by Jacqueline Mitton and Christine Balit (illustrator) Frances Lincoln, 1999, 0711213194, £5.99. This is a non-chronologically organized lyrical book with poetic accounts of the planets alongside fine maps and radiant illustrations. The following extract is a dramatic and poetic utterance of the Sun God:

   A MASSIVE BALL OF GLOWING FLAME, I am so sovereign over nine planets....And I sit unmoved at the heart of my kingdom, the Solar System. Meanwhile Earth spins and circles round me.

   The lyrical aspects of the text and illustrations based on the ancient Greeks’ personification of the planets serve the informative function of the book. As well as communicating useful factual information, this book feeds the imagination and can be a fine starting point for children’s stories and paintings.

   Another example of an author illustrator producing non-fiction as art is David Macaulay, see for example his information picturebooks *Castlè, Pyramid* and *Mosque*.


10. Readers interested in the history of illustration in children’s non-fiction might appreciate the article on Mick Manning and Brita Granstrom in *English 4-11*, Number 27, Summer 2006. In this article the author quotes Manning and Granstrom’s comments to do with the inspiration they have found in Alan Sorrel’s ‘atmospheric scribbly history drawings and the black and white drawings of Charles Keeping’ (page 6). They also admire Tunnicliffe’s infinite capacity to take pains over his pictures of birds and animals for Ladybird’s non fiction series in the 1960s. There is evidence of the influence of Sorrel and Tunnicliffe in Manning and Granstrom’s work, for example: *Stone Age, Bone Age!* 0749658649, £5.99, Franklin Watts, Wonderwise.

11. ‘Wondering’ is the word Margaret Meek Spencer (*Information and book learning*, Thimble Press, 1996, page 100) uses to refer to a special quality of concentration and reflection children can bring to their reading.

12. At the conference, ‘Adventures in the Real World’, Swansea Festival October 2005, non-
fiction books of boundary breaking authors like Nicholas Allan, Nicola Davies and Stephen Biesty were discussed and celebrated. Geraldine Brennan has written about the conference on the TES website: www.tes.co.uk

Some other books by Karen Wallace and Mike Bostock


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Think of an Eel. written by Karen Wallace; illustrated by Mike Bostock. "Think of an eel. He swims like a fish. He slides like a snake." The title/first line of Karen Wallace and Mike Bostock's book is aptly chosen. Until a book of non-fiction comes along and makes you think, you don't realize how many don't. Of facts, we have plenty. The series titles that have tumbled off the presses over the last decade demonstrate, by default, an important point: information is power only when it's presented in a powerful way. Karen Wallace, Mike Bostock (Goodreads Author) (Illustrator), Alison Bartlett (Illustrator). Think of an Eel A great resource for teachers! Read and Wonder books tell stories, take children on adventures, and reveal how big and WONDER-full the natural world really is. Full description. This is a beautiful addition to Walker's 90s 'Read and Wonder' series whose function was to explore non-fiction texts for LKS2 yet, I think, this book does far more and is far greater than a simple factual recount of the lifecycle of an eel. Wallace, a keen nature explorer in her writing, writes a deeply poetic recount of an eel's journey which is accompanied throughout with Bostock's wonderful illustrations (a narrative in themselves) and a series of factual tidbits which flows alongside the images.