

Father of the Modern Picture Book Honoured

Robert J. Desmarais
University of Alberta
Bruce Peel Special Collections Library

In June 2006, the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections Library launched an exhibit and catalogue entitled *Randolph Caldecott: His Books and Illustrations for Young Readers*.

Randolph Caldecott (1846–1886) was a seminal figure in Victorian artistic circles, and he created coloured picture books for children that set a new standard for design and inventiveness. Several hundred people attended the four-month exhibit, which showed how Caldecott communicated with the reading public, and especially how his sixteen famous *Picture Books* signalled a new attitude toward visual print culture for children.

My work as a curator for the exhibit was especially rewarding because the books on display came from my own collection. For an important reason, I join a growing number of admirers of Caldecott's work for children.

Quite simply, he awakened the child's imagination to a highly visual narrative form, characterized not by crude drawings and an incongruous application of colours, but instead by a harmonious spirit of animation and artistry. When Caldecott's *Picture Books* appeared at the dawn of the Arts and Crafts movement, many parents were eager to purchase beautiful books for their children because books were increasingly appreciated as objects of art.

The *Picture Books* also struck a chord with people who yearned for a simpler life in the English countryside. Caldecott spent considerable time in the meadows and fresh air, and these relaxing sojourns inspired his depictions of simple village life.

Because his landscapes lacked the conspicuous symbols of the Industrial Revolution, such as railroads, tunnels and factories, his drawings had enormous appeal with readers who had concerns and anxieties about the ugliness of industrialized culture.

Caldecott drew beautiful agrarian settings, and within these landscapes he established the child as the central protagonist. He allowed children to make discoveries

and set out on adventures without the encumbrances of narrowly defined social roles, instructive themes, and a condescending moral tone.

I can easily recall my first experiences of reading Caldecott's *Picture Books* as a boy, and being attracted to the way he indulged the pleasures of children with spellbinding adventures and magical characters. Caldecott was a pioneer in the movement to create beautifully illustrated books for children, and he left us with a rich legacy that continues to inspire artists around the world.

Contemporary children's artists are constantly experimenting with the relations between pictures and words, but they have inherited Caldecott's pictorial expressions of drama, movement, spontaneity and humour.

The measure of Caldecott's success was evident in the enormous print runs for his *Picture Books*, which continued to be reprinted well into the second half of the twentieth century. Every year we are reminded of Caldecott's legacy when the winning title is announced for the Caldecott Medal, awarded to the illustrator of the most remarkable American picture book, and these books are readily purchased by parents seeking quality books for the nursery.

While many are familiar with the Caldecott Medal, far fewer know much about the man behind the medal. The exhibit at the Bruce Peel Library provided an ideal opportunity to show how Caldecott's work gave birth to a strong tradition of picture book illustration. His direct influence may best be seen in modern successors such as Maurice Sendak (1928–), whose books do a splendid job of reviving Caldecott's playful storytelling style, where children are encouraged to be impulsive and curious.

Caldecott had great appeal for his successors, for he was a gifted and prolific illustrator, and he achieved solid canonical standing in the history of children's book illustration. F

or those who wish to know more about Caldecott and the exhibit, *Randolph Caldecott: His Books and Illustrations for Young Readers* is available for purchase at the online stores of the University of Alberta Press, Amazon.ca, and Chapters.