

READING PICTURE BOOKS 101

By Robin L. Smith

1. Look at the **COVER**. Feel the cover. Turn the book over. Does the illustrations wrap around or is there something different on the back? Note that. Unless there are blurbs. I hate blurbs on picture books. I really hate the phrase “*New York Times* bestselling author.” Children don’t care.
2. Take the **paper jacket** off and see whether the board cover is different. If it’s different, why? Sometimes there’s a treat on the inside of the paper jacket. I like a surprise or two here myself.
3. Now examine the **endpapers**. Sometimes they’re decorated, sometimes not. Are the back endpapers the same as the front? If not, do the changes make sense?
4. Peruse the **title page**. Decorated? Plain? If it’s dull, I take note. Since the title page often contains a lot of white space, this is when I usually notice if the **paper choice** works well. Can you see through to the next page? (Ick.)
5. Read the book all the way through without reading the words. LOOK AT THE PICTURES VERY SLOWLY. Read from left to right, paying close attention to the **page turns, white space, and pacing**. Look at every inch of every spread. Note anything that is confusing.
6. Read the book WITH the words. Do the pictures and text play nicely together? How do line, color, texture, etc., help tell the story? Follow one character from beginning to end. Do it again with others, especially animals. Characters need to **stay consistent** from page to page.
7. Go back and check every **gutter**. Every damn one of them. Does the art match up across the gutter? Is the main character sliced in half? Does anything “get lost in the gutter”? (gulp)

THEN, AND ONLY THEN, can you read the book as it’s intended to be read: sit on the couch under a good lamp and read the whole thing, preferably aloud. If after that you want to read it again, you might just be on to something.

Robin L. Smith is a coauthor of The Horn Book’s Calling Caldecott blog. This is revised version of her post “How to Read a Picture Book, the Caldecott Edition.”