

Window On A Changing World



Window is a groundbreaking work which points to one possible direction for books in the future – the wordless picture book. It also has a serious purpose, to give children an understanding of how growth affects the world we live in. Mark Butler tracked Jeannie down in her sun-drenched house in Sydney and discussed Window with her.

Window is a simple book with deep resonances. (While it has no text, it does not lack words; what words there are, are incorporated into the visual images; some of the scenes are 'immersed' in print.) The central image is a window. Each of the thirteen double-page spreads shows the window frame and the view outside the window – the reader is always standing inside, looking out.

In the first panel a woman stands at the window, holding a baby, looking out at bush teeming with bird life and plants, with wooded hills beyond. The double-page spreads follow the view from the window as the baby grows up. And as he grows, the landscape seen through his window changes, reflecting the impact of the expanding community.

The trees and birds gradually disappear, to be replaced by houses, roads and supermarkets. The last panel, showing the grown-up baby holding his newborn child as he looks through a different window at a pristine piece of bush set aside for a housing estate, brings the 'story' back to the beginning.

For the double-page spreads Jeannie constructed thirteen small windows, shallow-relief collages backlit to simulate sunlight, which were then photographed. The result is a cumulative sequence of images of great depth and fantastic detail.

The lack of a narrative text does not hinder understanding, because there are many visual and literal clues embedded in the images which help to propel the narrative: a birthday card on the windowsill tells how old the boy is, his name, and so on. But its lack of text is bound to make the book something of a talking point.

A child's view of growth

While the initial reactions to Window from US and UK critics have been very favourable, Jeannie knows that its lack of a narrative text, combined with its unashamedly committed environmental perspective, is likely to stimulate some negative responses among critics. But she expects that children will accept the book, in much the same way they accept most new things.



'A very young child will probably be interested in it because of the changes it can see from page to page, and hopefully be interested because it can see that the child in the book is growing, and identify with that, and maybe even see themselves in the child in some way. But a slightly older child would hopefully begin to see the things in the book which are my reasons for doing it.' She told Classroom.

Which are?

'To sum it up in two words, it's about exponential change, accelerating change. The book is really a metaphor for the changes that are happening in the world, including Australia. In my head, it's set in the suburbs of Sydney, somewhere like Campbelltown, at the foot of the Blue Mountains. All the birds and vegetation shown in the book can be found at Campbelltown.'

'I try to show in the book that we're all part of the changes that are happening in Australia and in the world as a whole. Each of us might make very small changes like, perhaps, digging up the native plants in our backyard. But if enough people make changes like that, those small changes together in fact make one big change. So it's trying to get that concept across, how we all do play a part in it.'

'The child in the story is making changes in his own backyard, and you can see, in the end, the small changes together making quite big changes in his backyard.'

Patterns of change

It may not be stretching things too far to suggest that Jeannie Baker believes she can change the world through her work. Perhaps that's what motivates most great artists.

'When I began this book, by a conservative estimate we were losing one species every hour. Two years later, by the time I'd finished the book, we were losing two species every hour. The projected rate, if we continue exponentially changing the world, is by the year 2000 we'll be losing ten species an hour!'

So, Window is your poetic statement about that process?

'In a sense, listening to information like that is something that everyone, I think, feels disturbed by, but it's easy to think, 'I don't play a part in this.' I'm trying to show exponential change, which is a concept many adults find difficult to understand, in a simplified way so that it can be understood. All the changes in the book have a pattern – all the natural things in the world, like birds, animals, trees, decrease exponentially alongside the manmade changes.'

Windows took nearly three years to complete. Did she expect such a simple concept to take that long?



'Yes, it's a very simple concept, but once I really started thinking about it, it wasn't so simple at all! Every tiny change that happened made me think about things. Even things that stay the same still change with age, and the population might increase, but the time is different at the beginning of the book to the end, so there are social changes – in people's clothing, hairstyle, the sort of cars that people drive'

A 'picture poem'

I suggested that rather than describing *Window* as a narrative, a better description for the book would be as a picture poem.

'That's a really nice way of expressing it. In a sense, it is a narrative, but the viewer finds their own narrative. One person said to me it was about how the average male is conditioned to dominate and control the world! It had never occurred to me, but that was the narrative she saw in it.'

Do you expect children to read it many times, to extract all the resonances?

'I hope so. What I'm hoping is that readers will feel a responsibility, that the way each one of us lives our lives, counts. But I also hope they'll have an understanding of the way everything is related, how once you destroy the native vegetation of a place, the native birds aren't going to come there anymore, the native animals aren't going to come there anymore, even the insects.'

'I'm not saying that all changes are bad, and we have to live, but I think we should be more careful about the way we live.'

Given that Jeannie is projecting one very strong idea, which by implication urges sustainable growth, it is likely she will be accused of producing propaganda. Is *Window* propaganda?

'I'm sure some people will call it that. It's not intended as propaganda. What I'm hoping is that it'll raise a lot of discussion, and a lot of questions.'

Are there other wordless picture books on her drawing board?

'I see each project as different. For what I was trying to express in this, a wordless picture book seemed right. There was never any point at which I thought that I'm going to need words to say what I want to say here. In fact, I feel the opposite – if I'd used words, it would have come across as a very moralising book, and I would have had a lot of problems with it, whereas I can imply things using pictures. The viewers supply their own words.'

Classroom Magazine