



BOOK REVIEW

Seeing Sense: Visual Literacy as a Tool for Libraries, Learning and Reader Development

Jake Hope

London: Facet Publishing (2020) paperback £39.95

ISBN: 978-1-78330-441-7

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The term 'visual literacy', coined in the 1960s by John Debes from Eastman Kodak, has received renewed attention recently, as the development of increasingly sophisticated and affordable digital technologies have transformed the ways that we think about literate activity. At the turn of the century Gunther Kress, James Paul Gee and others were arguing that being literate involved understanding much more than words and text and that meaning and knowledge were built up through multiple modes of representation. As part of this multi-modal turn, it is widely accepted now that images no longer exist primarily to illustrate and entertain: they are central to meaning making. Jake Hope's new book puts the visual right at the heart of our rapidly developing understanding of literacy in the 21st Century.

The stimulus for the book originated in Hope's personal experiences of working as Reading and Learning Development Manager for Lancashire Libraries. During a yearlong promotion of exhibitions featuring visual assets and displays with visual literacy as the focus, Hope discovered a sense of uncertainty among library staff and education practitioners as to the meaning and purpose of visual literacy. The book is designed to address such a gap in the knowledge of those in these key groups and is described variously in other reviews in the preface as 'an invaluable addition to any librarian or teacher's CPD library', 'a very rich resource', 'replete with information and insights' and 'a hugely valuable resource for librarians, teachers and all those passionate about inspiring young readers'. It is thus aimed, not so much at an academic audience, but rather at the practitioner reader. As such, it would be a good starter text for those in librarianship or in teaching who are taking their first steps in discovering the fascinating richness of the picturebook – the term he uses to encompass 'the idea of text, illustration and design coming together holistically to provide a single creative unit' (p3).

The scope of the book is wide and ambitious; as Hope himself explains on P2, 'visual literacy is a broad topic spanning numerous areas of practice'. Throughout the 8 chapters, and over 170 pages, he covers a vast range of topics from a historical account of the origins of visual texts in primitive cave paintings

(chapter 1) to an assessment of visual texts in supporting inclusivity through representations of social diversity (chapter 5) ; from providing a glossary of terminology to support understanding of the mechanics of illustrated narratives (chapter 2), to a reflection on the role of Book Awards and Prizes as a means of raising the profile of visual literacy (chapter 6); from exploring the emergent stages of children's reading development (chapter 3), to an examination of ways of creating reading and library spaces to encourage and inspire reader passion around picturebooks (chapter 8). It is a veritable smorgasbord to delight the palette of the target audience and would be well received by those who may have responsibility in schools or libraries for developing children's enthusiasm for visual media.

The most interesting and powerful moments in the book unquestionably come in the case studies that permeate the text and where the reader is given a fascinating insight into the working processes of writers and illustrators, very often in the words of the creative writers and artists themselves via interviews that Hope conducted with a range of well-known figures such as Jackie Morris and Robert Macfarlane. At these points in the book, the text truly comes alive for the reader, helping to compensate for other moments when 'knowledge telling' tends to predominate and information is presented more to facilitate the aim of broad content coverage rather than in support of a coherent argument about the nature and purposes of visual texts. However, there is little point in criticising a book for what it wasn't seeking to achieve. It is a well written book that opens up wonderful insights at key moments with the illustrative case studies and would be a welcome addition for those in the world of libraries or schools with an interest in 21st century literacies.