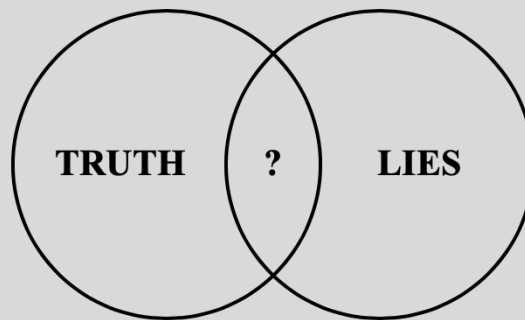


ON WONDER

By Tyler Howard with Owen Akeley

*“We all know that art is not truth.
Art is a lie that makes us realise truth.”*

– [Pablo Picasso](#)



– [Mac Barnett](#)

The Venn diagram above comes from a story told in a TED Talk by author Mac Barnett, and it lays plain a concept that is at once incredibly complex and startlingly simple. The story comes from Barnett’s days as a councillor at a camp for young kids. A girl named Riley would take the fruit her mother packed in her lunch every day and throw it into the bushes. Mac, already known around camp as a storyteller, told Riley that if she kept throwing her melon away, someday soon she would have grown a whole melon right there, in the bushes. Riley and the other kids laughed this off, and Riley kept throwing her melon. So, on the last day of camp, Mac got up early, went to the grocery store before work, and come lunchtime, told Riley to go look in the bushes. To her disbelief, there sat her melon. This is how Barnett describes her reaction:

*“Riley knew she didn't grow a melon in seven days, but she also knew that she did. And it's a weird place, but it's not just a place that kids can get to. It's anything. Art can get us to that place. She was right in that place in the middle, that place which you could call art or fiction. I'm going to call it **wonder.**”*

As an artist, Barnett’s job is to navigate between truth and untruth, and explore the spaces in between. There are many names to describe this type of space— art, fiction, the suspension of disbelief, imagination, wonder— the list goes on. The act of entering that space, exploring and immersing oneself in it, is a skill. Put more complexly, it is the ability to see beyond the binary, to step outside of standard paradigms that shape our understandings, and gain perspective on the world around us. It is in that space that novel ideas are born and innovation takes root. As Barnett knows, that skill comes most naturally to children, and he uses his art form, picture books, to reinforce it in his readers. But, as we’ll discuss, the importance of this skill is far from limited to children, just as the power of a good kids’ book can reach well beyond its intended audience. In fact, children’s literature is among the most accessible ways for anyone to enter this, the “space between.”

TOIL AND TROUBLE

Unlike most literature targeted at adults, kids' books have a direct responsibility to meet readers at their level. Their function is to convey truth, or at least truthfulness, in a way that will be easily understood, in as few words as possible, often using totally fictitious characters and worlds. This is the polar opposite of what we might associate with traditionally prestigious books. In Academia, tomes like *Moby Dick* or *War and Peace* are held in the highest esteem, and rightly so. Their books have withstood the test of time and worldwide readership. Yet, in order to read Herman Melville or Dostoyevsky or their fellow literary heavyweights, you must spend years preparing your attention span and expanding your vocabulary to be able to parse the thousands and thousands and thousands of words and ideas these books comprise. The endeavour of reading one can take weeks, months, or even years, and the endeavour of gaining any useful insight from that reading can take even longer—time few of us have.

“Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people who never knew each other, citizens of distant epochs. Books break the shackles of time. A book is proof that humans are capable of working magic.”

– [Carl Sagan](#)

To boot, the books themselves are kept inaccessible to the masses, stowed away in libraries and bound in heavy volumes. Sure, anyone can go to their local library and check those books out, or find a PDF online, but only people of a certain education level or income bracket will even know that such books exist, have adequate access to the places where they are stored, and have any real desire to undertake the ordeal of pursuing them. In this way, the esteemed knowledge of the academic world becomes inextricably tied to toil—the harder you work for something, the more important it must be. While the value of hard work is not to be overlooked, and the insights available in these volumes are not to be undervalued, the danger of this way of defining value comes when assuming, by extension, that the inverse is also true— that if something is inherently accessible, the knowledge it contains is therefore unimportant.

“Children know something that most people have forgotten.”

– [Keith Haring](#)

Children's books and their authors totally subvert the preconception of knowledge and toil. They are able to explain universal truths, teach fundamental skills, and bring readers on a journey, all while retaining an incredibly

high level of accessibility— they must fit within the attention span of a young child. As a result, they inform, but also entertain. In a way, this makes kids' books the type of literature that treats its readership with the most dignity—instead of talking down to readers, books for children are structured to build you up and, often, immerse you in the world of the in between. To use a business analogy, a well-crafted children's' book has the highest return on investment of any piece of literature, capable of transporting you into this state of wonder with the least possible toil. If you think of books as a tool for conveying knowledge, as well as submerging us in this all-important state of wonder, large tomes are actually quite inefficient tools. Their complexity and precision make them beautiful, but difficult to handle properly, and their inaccessibility means their utility will most certainly escape the average person. Picture books, though, remind us that the utility of literature as a whole, the purpose of the tool, is simply to lead us into wonder. As a result, it is not only children that can benefit from the concise wisdom of children's literature.

Before diving into specific books, think for a moment about the manner in which kids' books are often consumed. Usually, an adult reads the book aloud to a child, or somehow oversees the child reading it on their own. It is, at its core, a ritual of multi-generational bonding and sharing. And that ritual's significance requires both parties involved, the adult and the child. The information involved is not designed simply for an adult to give and children to receive, but rather for both to explore freely. For adults, once kids themselves, returning to a state of wonder is a vital part of the ritual. It not only helps the adult empathise with the child, but it helps the adult understand themselves and their own perspective in the same way the child does. Once we open ourselves up to them, these highly accessible books have a lot that they can teach us, no matter our age. And, as a result, they can benefit us in ways that no amount of toil could ever reproduce.

*“Unless someone like you
cares a whole lot, nothing is
going to get better. It's not.”*

– Dr Seuss,
The Lorax ⁱⁱ



“I SPEAK FOR THE TREES...”

... so says the title character in Dr Seuss' iconic book *The Lorax*. He is addressing The Once-ler, a mysterious and ambitious businessman who is in the process of raiding the natural resources of the world around them in order to produce Thneeds, a soft but ostensibly useless article of clothing. When the two first meet, the business is just getting off the ground. “There's no cause for alarm,” the Once-ler says. “I chopped just one tree. I'm doing no harm.” But then, he turns around and starts chopping more trees. And more trees. And more. The Lorax protests, showing how the Once-ler's actions are poisoning the land and sending all of the other creatures away in misery. Nevertheless, the factory keeps churning out Thneeds, and the Once-ler's relatives arrive to help him out. Their motto? “Business is business and business must grow.” In time, all of the natural resources are depleted. Thneed production slows to a halt. The other Once-ler relatives pack up and go. The Once-ler himself is left alone, in a barren world of his own making.

Like all Dr Seuss books, *The Lorax* is superficially rooted in the right side of the TRUTH/LIES Diagram. The world we see in the book is colourful, the creatures are fantastic, and even the words themselves are mostly made up. The real world is, by contrast, on the left side, constrained by reality as we know it. So, what lies in the space between? Where do the two overlap? Unfortunately, our real world seems to be full of Once-lers: entrepreneurs and advertisers trying to sell the next big thing, businesses building large factories that slowly convert naturally fertile land into waste for the sake of profit. While many people publish impact studies or peer-reviewed research papers or launch media campaigns against this sort of behaviour, no one need look further than *The Lorax* to understand exactly what is going on. Using only a handful of rhyming couplets, some nonsense words, and imaginary creatures, the book conveys a fundamental truth about humanity, warning us with piercing clarity about one of the realest threats to real people in the real world.

If you were to sit down in a room full of oil executives or large-scale clothes manufacturers and read them *The Lorax*, the results would be fascinating. Most of them would likely write it off out of hand—surely, they'd think, no book that can be read in so little time, with such colourful pictures and whimsical vocabulary, could possibly convey anything worth actually thinking about. Their adult concept of truth and lies makes no room for a middle, a space between that might give new meaning to either side. “*It’s more complicated than that,*” you can hear them say, crossing their arms and furrowing their brows. But it really isn’t. What’s complicated is how, over the years since their own childhood, they’ve lost the capacity for wonder.

“There are insects that protect themselves against attackers by raising a cloud of dust. Likewise man instinctively protects himself against the truth... by raising a cloud of numbers.”

– Soren Kierkegaard ⁱ

Go and read *The Lorax* to a room full of children, and see what they say. Let them draw and cut out their own Lorax moustaches, let them “speak for the trees” and “care a whole lot.” Ask if corporate profit is an adequate excuse for pollution, or if they think that money can buy happiness. Primed for the space in between, the gap between the story’s fantasy and our world’s reality, young people give us insight into truths the average adult overlooks. Accordingly, books directed at children can address this wonder head-on, without having to peel back layers and layers of hardened reality. With any luck, and maybe some prodding, some grown people in board rooms would eventually find their way back to wonder. They would see themselves in the fictional Once-ler, as he says with a straight face that he only cut down one tree, justifying that behaviour as insignificant, then turning around and cutting down more and more and more.

“We’ll buy a lot of clothes when we don’t really need em / Things we buy to cover up what’s inside / Cause they make us hate ourself and love they wealth.”

**– [Kanye West](#),
“All Falls Down”**

They would see his success like their success. And, crucially, would see him, as his family and friends leave him and his land becomes barren, for what he really is. For how *real* he really is. The toil of reading *The Lorax* isn’t wading through volumes and volumes to discern what the author is trying to say. The toil is seeing the Once-ler in yourself.

As we grow up, and become aware of the vast complexity of the world, we begin to pick and choose the truths we believe. If a truth doesn’t suit our lifestyle or purpose, we tend to ignore or suppress it. We throw it aside, relegating it to the LIES side of the Diagram, and ignore the complex middle. But, like so many things people try to ignore or suppress, that doesn’t make these truths less important. In fact, it often makes them *more*. At the heart of *The Lorax*, there is a simple, undeniable truth deeply embedded in a world of wonder. It exemplifies the power of art to take us to the places in between reality and fiction, the childish and the mature, the incredibly complex and the astonishingly simple.

“DON’T ASK ME ANY MORE QUESTIONS”

On top of helping us reflect on the world we live in, kids’ books can also teach us vital life skills. These range from basic reading comprehension or phonics literacy to much deeper, more complex emotional skills. Jon Klassen wrote a series of books that teach such things, including the award-winning *I Want My Hat Back* ⁱⁱⁱ. The story follows a bear as he looks for his missing hat. He asks around to a series of animals if they have seen his hat, and each has their own way

“Artists use lies to tell the truth. Yes, I created a lie. But because you believed it, you found something true about yourself.”

**– Alan Moore,
V for Vendetta iv**

of telling him “no.” When the bear finds a rabbit, and asks him the same question, the rabbit immediately goes on the defensive— “No... I haven’t seen it. I haven’t seen any hats anywhere. I would not steal a hat. Stop asking me questions.” All the while, the rabbit is wearing a pointy, red hat. While the reader doesn’t yet know what the bear’s hat looks like, the rabbit’s

behaviour stands out as suspicious. In fact, the idea that the hat was stolen, as opposed to missing, was absent from the book until the rabbit speaks. It takes the bear a few pages to realize that he’s been duped, then the story winds down with the bear sitting in the rabbit’s place, sporting his pointy, red hat with a contented smile. But that’s not the end— in the final pages, another critter comes up and asks the bear if he’s seen a rabbit wearing a hat. His response? “No... I haven’t seen him. I haven’t seen any rabbits anywhere. I would not eat a rabbit. Don’t ask me any more questions.”

What this story does, in only a few words, is show the complexity of guilt and the weight that wrongdoings can have on both the victim and the perpetrator. When the rabbit responds suspiciously to the bear, Klassen nudges his readers to juxtapose what is said with what they observe. This moment forces us to think critically about the information we receive, which is a vital skill for kids to develop, as it’s one they’ll use all their life. It’s a skill for when an TV or billboard advert tells you the benefits of a new product or procedure. It’s a skill for when you’re interviewing applicants for a job opening. And it’s a skill for when your favourite hat goes missing. But the lessons don’t stop there. This is not solely a book about what it feels like to be lied to. It is also a book about lying. Just after showing us how the rabbit inadvertently expressed his own guilt, Klassen has the bear mimic the rabbit’s behaviour almost exactly. This puts the onus of deciphering the story’s ending on the reader— *did the bear actually eat the rabbit? Is he justified for doing that, just because the rabbit took his hat? If the bear knows how bad it feels to be lied to, why does he turn around and lie to others?*



I Want My Hat Back, along with the rest of Jon Klassen’s books, doesn’t have an obvious moral. In fact, the bear eating the rabbit at the end of the book deliberately cancels out any chance of a simple conclusion. The roles of victim and perpetrator are blurred, reminding us that we’re all complex individuals, capable of making decisions that have consequences both for ourselves and the people around us. It also indicates our natural tendency to do unto others as is done unto us. If, in that scenario, we choose to see ourselves purely as victims, we will likely overlook the ways in which we, in turn, victimize others. The book makes clear that the bear is no hero, but is actually an excellent conduit through which we can reflect on our own instincts and behaviour. The book accomplishes all of this in fewer words than it may take a

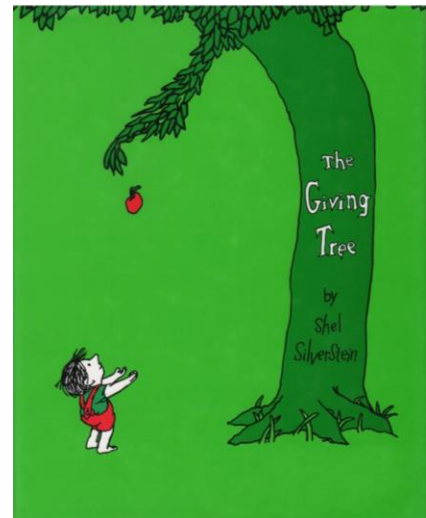
“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

– [Nelson Mandela](#)

world-renowned philosopher to write a single sentence. No amount of toil or academic rigour could make it any clearer.

GIVE AND TAKE

In the upper echelon of children's literature sits the timeless Shel Silverstein classic, *The Giving Tree*. Yet, for a book so well-known and well-loved over so many decades, with such definitively iconic illustrations, it sends a decidedly complex message. It tells the story of a tree who loves a boy. The tree shares all she has with the boy, and the boy keeps coming back to her, climbing and playing and sleeping in her shade. The two are happy together. But, as the boy grows older, he begins to spend more time away from the tree. The tree becomes lonely. When he does return, the boy is interested in material things, saying "I am too big to climb and play... I want some money. Can you give me some money?" Soon enough, the tree is giving things to the boy that she will never get back. And the boy continues with his pattern of leaving, letting the tree grow lonely, and returning only when he needs something. Yet, this book doesn't end in despair like, say, *The Lorax*. Instead, it ends with the boy, now an old man, using the stump of his beloved, once-tall tree as a place to sit and rest. It's final message? "And the tree was happy."



If you comb *The Giving Tree* for a moral, for an easy takeaway, you'll come up empty every time. The book has a breadth of metaphoric relevance like no other, from which you can draw different insights every time you read it. Give this book to any cross-section of adults, and each will be able to find meaning in their own way. Some may empathize with the tree, who gave and gave and gave until she was reduced to a stump, but still managed to find happiness. Some will see the boy in themselves, and how the distractions of growing up can drag us away from those we love and who love us. Some will chastise the tree, telling her she shouldn't have conditioned the boy to take, take, take when he was younger. Some will grow angry with the boy for so blatantly abusing the loving tree's generosity. Some will be able to see both sides, how the tree had to do what she did to find real happiness, and the boy needed to go away in order to realize where happiness lay all along. And, of course, some people will feel a complex swirl of all of these messages. This is Mac Barnett's middle. This is wonder. This is suspension of disbelief. This is a lie that causes you to realize a truth. It allows in feelings that may conflict, ideas that shouldn't coexist but do, melons that are both real and not, and asks us to consider them outside our rigid idea of reality. And, because the story is so simple, the characters so accessible, that magical middle is right there, right in front of us. All we need to access it is the book, and a willingness to let it take us there.

WONDER ON

The examples above are just a few of the books that exemplify the quality children's literature can have. If you ever want a stripped-down insight into the self-perpetuating nature of violence and war, pick up a copy of Mac Barnett's and Jon Klassen collaboration, *Triangle*. To help cope with the loss or a close friend or inspiring role model, try reading Jo Empson's *Rabbityness*. If Darwin's original writings are too daunting, *The First Slodge* by Jeanne Willis

"That a thing is unreal does not make it untrue."
—Ta-Nehisi Coates,
Black Panther^{vi}

and Jenni Desmond is a great way to conceptualise an understanding of Natural Selection and why we still fear it. A book like *Cave Baby* by Julia Donaldson & Emily Gravett has a message for both children and their parents, who might use the book to reflect on their own parenting practices or instincts. A book like *Colour Monster* by Anna Llenas helps us recognise the different emotions that exist inside all of us, how they swirl and blur together. *This Is Not My Hat* by Jon Klassen teaches us to read between the lines and not believe everything we are told. This is not to say all books written for children convey vast, significant truth. Just like with adult books, or any form of art, there are countless examples that don't quite get it right, or exist merely for the purpose of entertainment. Dr Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham* isn't quite the same thought-provoking punch as *The Lorax*, but it does serve its own purpose, encouraging us to try new things and making for a tongue-twisting, enjoyable reading experience for kids and adults alike.

“There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”

– [Ursula K. Le Guin](#)

Storytelling, the ritualized collection, retention, and passing down of stories, be they fact or fiction, is valued in nearly every human culture in history. In fact, the concept of history as we know it likely wouldn't exist without storytelling. Stories are a vehicle for passing down knowledge, morality, thoughtfulness, and so much more. Some of those stories are immense and intimidating, bound in volumes so massive they can cause even the

sturdiest bookshelves to sag. These books, and the ideas housed within them, have made invaluable contributions to our human journey and reflect some of our supreme accomplishments as a species. But where those stories can only be known by the few, other stories, some of which can fit in your pocket, give us all a chance to enter the wonder state of mind, provide endless entertainment and enlightenment for kids and adults alike, and remind us why we tell stories in the first place. What is evident is, no matter the packaging, the power of stories can't be overlooked. Just as it is important to pass down stories on to others, it is equally important to allow stories to reflect on ourselves— to allow the metaphors of fiction into our real lives, and to explore the spaces in between. We are incredibly lucky to live in a world where kids' books are not only written, but funded and published and distributed across the world. Now, the job at hand is to tap them of their true potential, realize the power they possess, and use it to better ourselves and the world we live in.

ABOUT THANDA

Thanda is a non-profit organisation based in rural Mtwalume on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Founded in 2008 as an after-school programme, the organisation has evolved to offer programmes centred around four core initiatives – Early Childhood Development, Education, Organic Farming, and Creative Learning— all designed to foster Game-changing skills in each member of our community. By exploring the magic of storybooks and their utility as learning tools with both children and adults, our Creative Learning Trainings actively strive to promote and foster wonder across our entire community. In our Early Childhood and After-school Programmes, for example, we use the story of Ada Twist, Scientist where children & youth read the book by Andrea Beaty, learn about the periodic table of elements and solar system, make 3-D models of the solar system

using clay and recycled materials, and have lively discussions around females in science careers, the importance of persistence, and whether curiosity is good or bad. Similarly, the story of The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein is used with our farmers to explore the delicate balance between giving and taking and think about the often-subtle differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, as well as the very real connection between nature's natural resources and humankind's greed.

More information on Thanda's programmes can be found at www.thanda.org

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