

Books to Make You  
STOP  
Reading

reader and the child away from the book? Where is it written that a picture book has to be read from beginning to end in one sitting? I also believe that very young children are capable of an intellectual challenge. They are always connecting the dots, asking questions to establish cause-and-effect relationships from their own observations. In many respects, kids are natural scientists. Why not use the picture-book format to direct activities so that the child can construct a new meaning for a common event in his or her own world?

I then wrote a version of *I See Myself*—about why you see yourself in a mirror—and

editor didn't buy it. So I put it in a drawer for several years. Another editor asked me if I had something for very young kids.

I sent her *I See Myself*. She told me there was something there but that it needed work. I agreed to work with her on it before submitting it for publication and it went back and forth a few times. I then wrote a proposal for a three-book series with *I See Myself* in its edited form as an example. Barbara Lalicki at William Morrow bought the series plus one more, with the fourth title to be determined. And so the Science Play series was born.

But it was not an easy delivery. Before the first two scripts could go into production, William Morrow

Points  
OF  
VIEW



by Vicki Cobb

The best picture books for very young children make the reader stop reading. They invite interactivity. There is conversation about the characters and the art in the book. The young listener and adult reader get to know each other more fully through the shared experience of the book. Ever since I began writing I have wanted to create such a picture book. I finally got the opportunity when my first granddaughter, Abby, was three. An editor asked me to create something for very young children. I immediately began thinking.

Since science depends on doing something besides reading, why not create a picture book with built-in interactivity? Why not encourage activities that temporarily take the

sent the manuscript to my daughter-in-law to try out on Abby. One paragraph read: "But you need something besides a mirror to see yourself. Know what it is? Here's a hint. Take a mirror into a closet and close the door. Can you see yourself in the dark?" Abby came out of the closet all excited. She'd made a discovery. "Mom," she cried, "You need light to see!" I was convinced I was on the right track. After all, in the history of science, there was a time when people thought that the light needed to see emanated from the human eye. English sun worshippers, blinded by staring at the sun, finally convinced people that light must come from external sources.

I submitted my manuscript but the

was sold to HarperCollins. Every Morrow contract had to be reviewed by HarperCollins, and many didn't survive and were cut. Fortunately, Science Play survived, but all this took time. (Abby was already too old for these books.)



Vicki Cobb

Photo credit: Michael Gold

One person still at Harper whom I knew from the old days was art director Harriet Barton. I called her and asked her to get personally involved in these books. I wanted her to share my vision for a true picture-book design to fool people so that they wouldn't notice that the books were science books. I made an appointment to have lunch with her to discuss artists. Harriet showed me the work of only one artist, Julia Gorton. Deal! I met Julia. We were definitely on the same page.

Whenever a publishing company gets sold there is the inevitable change in personnel. My new young editor didn't understand what I was trying to do in these books, so I wrote her the following explanation as a rationale for the series:

This is a new genre of picture book where activities are scripted into the text. The reading of these books to small children is to be very interactive. Unlike many picture books where interactivity must be initiated by the child or by the reader, these books have interactivity as an integral part of the narrative. The reader reads a few pages, an activity is suggested or a question is posed that takes the reader and the child away from

the book in order to *do* something that answers a question or solves a problem. Unlike many science activity books that are collections of unrelated science activities, the activities in these books are *in context*, giving empirical evidence for scientific explanations. The *sequence* of activities leads to a conclusion where a child gains a conceptual insight into the phenomenon stated in the title of the book. "I see myself because light is perfectly reflected into my eyes off a mirror and I understand what it means to be 'perfectly reflected.'" Since there is a conclusion to each book, there is a narrative urge that makes the books work as a picture book story as well as a "directed play" series of activities.

The book also works for the adult reader, especially one who is not comfortable with science. It taps into the relationship the reader has with the child, since it can be read as one would read any picture book. In addition, the narrative unfolds as a discovery *process*, where inquiry generates activity, which leads to understanding cause-and-effect relationships (basically the way science works), a process intuitive to children and often inhibited in adults. Both the adult reader and the child will experience

the joy of discovery. As an educator I have taken this process even further and, if you're interested, you can find a detailed analysis of why I wrote each spread the way I wrote it on my Web site at <http://www.vickicobb.com/pointofview.htm>.

These books are the only ones I have ever done that exactly fit my initial vision before they were written. My only complaint is that they are cataloged in the 500s as science books. As a result, they are not shelved with the picture books in bookstores and libraries, but stuck out of the way with the science books. An artist looks at the wind and it's for a general audience. My question: Why separate the scientist's point of view on the same subject, especially when it's as accessible as any other picture book?

### **Sampling Cobb**

Science Play series. Illus. by Julia Gorton. HarperCollins. Individual books, 32p., \$15.99. Titles include *I Face the Wind*, *I Fall Down*, *I Get Wet*, and *I See Myself*. Preschool–Gr. 1.

*Vicki Cobb* is the author of more than 85 informational books. *I Face the Wind* was the only Sibert Honor Book for 2004.