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Betty L. Criscoe
University of Houston

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A PLEASANT REMINDER: THERE IS AN ESTABLISHED CRITERIA FOR WRITING ALPHABET BOOKS

BETTY L. CRISCOE

University of Houston, Texas

Since alphabet books are usually entertaining, as well as colorful, they continue to be favorites of young children. Teachers select them to develop language and to teach sound-symbol relationships.

Illustrators and authors of alphabet books, however, continue to violate the criteria for these books established by Huck and Kuhn. According to Huck and Kuhn, a good alphabet book should have:

1. One or two easily identifiable objects--objects meaningful for the age level of the child for whom the book was written--should be presented on a page.
2. Objects such as rabbit, having several correct names, should be avoided.
3. The common sounds of the letters rather than the blends, digraphs, and silent letters should be utilized.

During the month of January, the Caldecott Committee named the winners for 1987. Suse MacDonald's alphabet book, Alphabatics, was named a Caldecott Honor Book. The fly sheet on the cover aptly depicts the book as "An imaginative and energetic romp through the alphabet . . . which introduces an original and exciting way of looking at the world. Suse MacDonald shrinks, expands, and manipulates each letter of the alphabet, changing it into something entirely new; the letter A becomes ark, C a clown's grin, S a swan." While MacDonald's book is indeed beautifully, boldly, and cleverly illustrated, it falls short, like so many other published alphabet books, of Huck and Kuhn's established criteria.

Huck and Kuhn's first criterion states that all objects

must be easily identifiable and meaningful to the child. MacDonald used insect as the symbol to represent I, but she boldly printed a large, beautiful, yellow flower on the page with the insect. After identifying the I, one five-year old child said, "Flower!" A kite is the symbol used to represent the K in MacDonald's book; however, the five year-old thought the kite was a butterfly; the kite looks like a butterfly. MacDonald cleverly turns the P into a plane. The five-year-old yelled, "Airplane", a fine example of confused symbol choice since airplane begins with an a, and the letter being represented was p.

The second criterion states objects having several correct names should be avoided. MacDonald chose to represent Q with a quail. When shown the quail, the five-year-old said "Bird", and he wasn't wrong, only confused by the illustrator's work. Numerous vegetables were used to represent v; there are beets and dominant, large drawn carrots on the page. The first thing the five-year-old saw were the carrots; so he made the association of v and carrots. The yak was used to teach the y letter, he identified it as a buffalo.

The last criterion may have been considered by Huck and Kuhn to be the most important. It states: "The sounds of the letters rather than the blends, digraphs, and silent letters should be utilized." Unfortunately, MacDonald has violated this rule six times in her Caldecott Honor Book:

C is represented by the blend in clown;
D, by the blend in dragon;
P, by the blend in plane;
S, by the blend in swan;
T, by the blend in tree;
W by the digraph in whale.

In addition, other phonic principles have been violated. A is represented by the word ark; a poor choice since the r following the a makes the a sound neither long nor short. The e is represented by the word elephant; another poor choice since the sound heard is l and not e. The o is represented by the diphthong ow in owl. Teachers and authors of reading textbooks would select key words to represent the vowel sounds -- a, e, i, o, u -- that begin with short vowel sounds as a in apple, i in inchworm, o in octopus, u in umbrella.

Far too many children have trouble establishing directionality of letters. MacDonald's book further encourages such errors by playfully turning the n of nest upside down so that it looks like a u

This article is not meant to be a scathing review of an obviously talented author/illustrator's work nor of Caldecott Committee's selection; it was written for constructive purposes. Our children deserve the best! This includes correctly written alphabet books. There are established rules for representing the sounds and symbols in the English language. Please, let us adhere to them when writing and illustrating an alphabet book.

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Huck, Charlotte S. and Kuhn, Doris Y., Children's Literature in the Elementary School, 2nd ed., NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1968.

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