

Bottoms, bodies and blood

Elizabeth Newbery and Rachel Hamdi have won Best Museum Publication 2005 for *Tower Power*, a children's guide to the Tower of London. They are especially pleased since it was up amongst all the mainstream guides and usually children's publications are ignored.

Here, Elizabeth as writer, and Rachel as designer, discuss how they put museum and gallery guides for children together.

Challenges

We are usually commissioned by museums, galleries, historic sites or environmental attractions to develop creative ideas for interpreting sites or events such as special exhibitions for children. Within that we have to juggle the needs of curators, educationalists, parents, marketing departments – and children.

Curators want nothing less than 100% accuracy. Educationalists want to squeeze in as many links to the national curriculum as possible. Parents want something 'educational' to occupy their children on site. Marketing departments need something that sells. And of course children want none of that - they want funny illustrations, minimal text and as many disgusting details about lavatories, bodies and blood as possible. So how do we meet these needs, without watering it all down to some common denominator that satisfies everyone but no one in particular?

Striking the balance

First there is the content. Working with heritage organisations enables us to have access to expertise, the latest research and first class images. It means we can include the most up-to-date information, have a chance to put right misconceptions that are often slow to filter down to children's books and have access to images that may not be available to commercial publishers. This enables us to put a different slant on familiar subjects. The downside is the standard of accuracy required sometimes makes upbeat text for children difficult. For instance, 'probably the largest, fine-cut diamond in the world' doesn't cut it like 'THE BIGGEST, SPARKLY DIAMOND IN THE WORLD'.

Then there is the design. The design of the book has to take account of all these interests and needs. All non-school based publications should stand alone, but budget restrictions usually require them to be aimed at 7-10 year-olds, the largest single group of children making visits to sites. Of course educationalists want something that has as many links to the curriculum as possible, but they also look for reading levels, a variety of skills-based activities, word count and visual appeal, accurately geared to the abilities of that target group.

And finally the kids...

Our first priority is to make the place, subject or event come alive. One way to do this is to link it to good stories – not a problem when writing for the Tower of London for instance, but more difficult when writing about industrial buildings perhaps.

Another is to use characters, real or imagined, to guide children round a site. A series of trails we have recently devised for Historic Scotland uses an alien to collect facts. But the device has to have a purpose: the alien has to have a reason for landing (a wonky time-machine), a reason for collecting facts (vital data needs collecting so that it can relaunch), and a way of consolidating of new information, vocabulary and terminology (new words have to be 'punched' into 'central command database' via a word search).

Yet another way of engaging children is interactive text. You can get children to speculate on emotions, possible outcomes and accuracy by posing questions such as: Do you think the artist felt sorry for him/her/it? What do you think happened next? Do you think the story is true? Children like as little text as possible so if you can sum up an event or concept in a funny drawing, the point is made instantly and with humour. Equally, if you can organise the spreads so that children who don't or won't read can absorb information in some way, so much the better. *Tower Power* is organised so that the lower half of each spread uses lively illustrations and short captions to support the main text so that children can absorb information even though they may not be inclined to read the main text.

Writer and designer

So how do writer and designer work together?

Ideally, the writer and designer should be joined at the hip: the writer delivers the text to the designer who then roughs out the first layouts to work out how the text, images and illustrations all fit together. Back it goes to the writer who adds or cuts bits to fit (while not compromising on historical accuracy, storylines or educational outcomes!). Back it goes to the designer who then makes the necessary adjustments and commissions the illustrator.

One of the most important considerations is the feel of a book. It should invite the reader to open it like a present. It should feel comfortable to hold, so the size, the number of pages and the weight of paper are critical. The cover has to be eye-catching and has to grab children's attention with a visually exciting image that also informs about the content.

Strong colour throughout is important and unsurprisingly, evaluation for Historic Scotland showed that 100% of children consulted wanted full colour publications – boring old black and white or two-colour simply won't do.

The illustration brief also has to strike a balance. The illustrator must be sensitive to the specifics of the topic and historically accurate, yet we have to give the illustrator opportunity for interpretation and creativity. We choose illustrators for different reasons. Sometimes we need realistic illustrations to show something we cannot get a picture of, more often we're looking for an illustrator who can depict a scene with accurate detail and humour.

The illustrator sends in ideas in pencil – and if we laugh out loud we know we're on the right lines. Then it all goes off to the client for approval with fingers crossed that they get the jokes too.

Elizabeth and Rachel are currently working on a children's book about Nelson to accompany the exhibition to mark the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar, due to open in July at the National Maritime Museum, London.

