

Character-Driven Picture Books



What is a character-driven picture book?

The focus of the picture book is on the character and, in most cases, something unique that that character has/does/is.

If you want a great definition and examples of character-driven picture books see Pam Calvert's website: [WOVEN WITH PIXIE DUST](http://WOVENWITHPIXIEDUST.COM).

Why Character-Driven Picture Books?

Something that I keep seeing over and over again in agent and editor wish lists is CHARACTER-DRIVEN PICTURE BOOKS.

I have some character-driven picture books in my work-in-progress stack, but I know they are not quite there yet. So I set out to study them—what makes them character-driven and what were some of the common characteristics.

The Process

1) Look for character-driven picture books.

I narrowed my study to ONLY books that were written and illustrated by two different people because I'm a writer only. There are a ton of great character-driven picture books by author/illustrators (*Olivia* by Ian Falconer and *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* by Peter Brown are just two great examples from author/illustrators). But so much of their books are revealed through the pictures, so I knew if I wanted to study writing technique, I'd need to look at books written and illustrated by different people.

2) Read those books.

First I read them just to read them—mostly to myself or to my own kids. I made some notes about things I noticed about them as a genre.

Things that I noticed:

- ▶ Many of the character driven books are author/illustrator books.
- ▶ Girl characters outweigh boy characters by a LOT (note to self: hole in the market).
There are some boy characters, but many of them upon reading them are not about the character, they are all about action. This is not necessarily a bad thing.
- ▶ Some of them have turned into franchises or multiple book deals and branching into other areas. For example, *Fancy Nancy* has multiple books and now is in beginning readers. *Pinkalicious* has brought about *Purplicious* and many others.

▶ Many of them are stand alone titles and are really good all by themselves.

3) Pick a handful of the ones you thought worked really well.

You probably will not LOVE all of them. But really delve deeper into the ones that you wouldn't mind reading again and again.

I have provided a printable form as a guide for some of the things you might want to notice.

CHARACTER DRIVEN PICTURE BOOK
ANALYZING (OR BRAINSTORMING FOR) MY OWN BOOK

Working Title:

Who is the character?
What is his/her problem?

What makes the character unique? 

What standout quality does this picture book have?  _____

Steps to solve the problem	How is this character going to uniquely attempt this task?
Resolution	

Characteristics of this character:

—WWW.MARCIATKINS.COM—

CHARACTER DRIVEN PICTURE BOOK

MENTOR TEXT ANALYSIS

If you are a writer, find books with different author/illustrators. If you are an author/illustrator, then look at ones written by an author/illustrator. Write down the publisher for marketing research.

Title: _____
 Author: _____
 Illustrator: _____
 Publisher: _____

Who is the character?
 What is his/her problem?

Name the character and the problem.

What makes the character unique?



What standout quality does this picture have?

What makes this book really stand out in the market? Tone? Voice? Word Choice?

What makes this character unusual and one that we want to read about?

What do we learn about the main character?	How do we learn it? (Text, illustration)	Examples

What can you infer about the character from the text? Sometimes it's stated outright, sometimes, you draw the conclusion as a reader.

Give some specific examples from the text or from the pictures.

Here's one that I filled out for *Little Hoot* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal

CHARACTER DRIVEN PICTURE BOOKS

MENTOR TEXT ANALYSIS

Title: Little Hoot
 Author: Amy Krouse Rosenthal
 Illustrator: Ten Corrae
 Publisher: Chronicle Books

Who is the character?
An owl named "Little Hoot"

What is his/her problem?
He wants to go to bed early instead of stay up late "like owls are supposed" to do.

What makes the character unique?



What standout quality does this picture book have?

Humor comes with the juxtaposition of the me breaking convention.

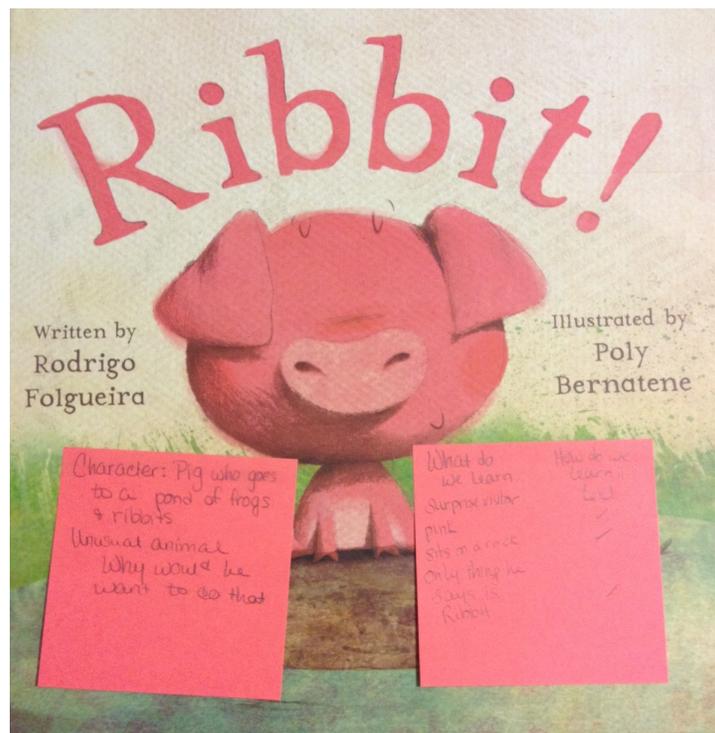
What do we learn about the main character?	How do we learn it? (Text, illustration)	Examples
<i>He's a happy owl.</i>	<i>text</i>	<i>"Little Hoot was a happy little owl."</i>
<i>He's like his friends.</i>	<i>text</i>	<i>likes school, hide-and-seek, practicing being an owl</i>
<i>wants to go to bed early like his friends</i>	<i>text/illus.</i>	<i>Text: whines Illus: bunnies, bears, raccoons</i>
<i>fighting staying up late</i>	<i>text</i>	<i>begs to stop playing, mamma owl tries to stall him w/ books, water, etc.</i>

4) Study the text in another way.

The form I created is only ONE way you could study your favorite texts.

Here are some more ideas:

- Type up the text so you can see it as a manuscript page. Remember this is for YOUR EYES ONLY and only to study the text. Highlight things you notice:
 - Character revelations
 - Ways the author shows us the character
 - Things that make the character unique—does the character have a special skill or an unusual characteristic?
- Do a story map for one of the books:
 - [Use Rob Sanders' Planning Tool](#)
 - [Planning Tool from the teaching realm](#)
- Do a quick freewrite about why this character does or does not appeal to you as a reader.
- Sticky note the text. Use sticky notes to mark your thoughts in the book.



5) Apply what you learned to your own writing

REMEMBER: This is the most important part. There are a number of ways you could apply it to your own writing, but a lot of it depends on where you are in your writing.

- **BRAINSTORMING.** If you are just thinking about a new book but haven't drafted it yet, this is a great time to brainstorm more about your character.
- **ANALYSIS OF A CURRENT DRAFT.** If you have been noodling around with a character-driven picture book draft(s), and you can't put your finger on what's working or not working, it might be time to analyze your draft to see where you can improve.

I've created a printable for you to insert your own idea or analyze your own draft.