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Planet App: Kids' book apps are everywhere. But are they any good

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By Elizabeth Bird

January 1, 2011

Judging apps is difficult, especially when you've only got a tenuous grasp on what the darned things are. Having grown up back in the day when technology-centric libraries circulated Teddy Ruxpin tapes (check your local library, because someone, somewhere, is bound to have some sitting on their shelves), all these newfangled doodads and whizbangs are confusing to the old noggin. That said, it's easy enough to get your hands on an app. You just whip out your iPhone or iPad (or another suitable device) and visit an online app store. You purchase an app. You enjoy it at your leisure. Couldn't be simpler.

That was all well and good back when the most popular apps allowed you to shake fake ice cubes in a glass or produce a fart. Then in 2010, apps had to get all bookish on us, and suddenly they became the unforeseen love child of the video game generation and the literary world. Atomic Antelope introduced an app for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in April 2010 and soon everyone was trying to figure out where to take things from there. At the moment, picture book apps are still an untamed wilderness waiting to be explored. Half the time publishers aren't entirely certain how to use them or, for that matter, what content or features to include.

I should clarify right off the bat that when I call something a "picture book app," I'm not referring to an application that takes well-known book characters and throws them into a series of kids' games, like the *Curious George Coloring Book* app. A proper picture book app lets a parent and child read, listen to, or explore a book in a fun and interactive manner. Typical options offered in these apps include turning off the sound (so that a parent or child can read on their own), changing from one language to another, and small interactive features, such as making the characters move.

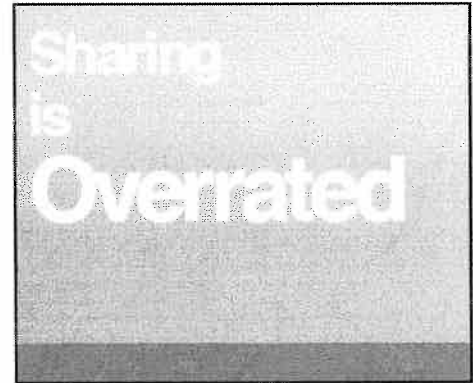


Illustration by Andy Ward

As for using such apps, there are two distinct camps. Some folks see them as yet another opportunity for parent-child interaction. In this scenario, the child would sit cozily on the reader's lap, and the two would go through the book together. But others see apps as a way to entertain kids while they're standing in the grocery line or stuck at an airport—without having to resort to a video game. That's because some apps are

every bit as entertaining as a video game. But an app can also teach kids about

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the joy of turning a page and maybe tell them a story, such as a classic tale that they might be reluctant to explore on their own (particularly if they haven't yet learned to read). On the one hand, an app is viewed as a convenient parenting tool to amuse a child. On the other, isn't it preferable to having a parent hand a child a smartphone with Angry Birds, one of the world's top-selling apps, on it?

Yet how does one judge an app? For you see, we live in a world in which there's no model that currently lets us evaluate them. Coming upon them as collection specialists, we librarians must take our existing set of selection criteria and build upon it. To review an app fairly, it helps to have a smattering of knowledge about video games and children's literature. You also want to be able to take into account how well the software works on your device, while at the same time determining if the child is actually getting a story or merely a series of pretty bells and whistles.

With all this in mind, I'd like to introduce a set of potential criteria for selecting picture book apps. The following questions should be asked when figuring out whether one app or another is the best possible selection for that child sitting on your lap:

Consider an app the same way you'd consider a picture book. For example, **how well is the art integrated with the text?** Now consider how well it's integrated with the app's interactive features. If a child can move around chirping birds, does that action serve the story? Even if it doesn't, does it actively distract a child from enjoying the story? Would a kid be inclined to just move around birds all day, entirely forgetting the story being told, or would they be inclined to continue reading or listening to it?

If a picture book app has its own narrator, **how well does this reader convey the story?** It's a sad but true fact that unlike with audiobooks or traditional picture books that come with accompanying CDs, narrators of picture book apps are almost never identified by name. Indeed, the only times that I've found them properly credited is when they're celebrities, acting as the app's primary draw. Understanding that the narrator is bound to be anonymous, how well do they read the story? Do they seem interested in it? You'll also want to pay attention to whether the narrator is an adult or a child. Sometimes kids' voices make for the best narrations.

Can you skip to different parts of the book with ease? If your app is reading you the story and you wish to navigate to the end, can you do so without any difficulty? Or does the app make you slog through the entire story, albeit with quickie page turns? Some apps provide understated pull tabs that enable you to easily access any portion of the story you might wish to find. What are your options here?

Can you turn off the narration? This is an important option. A picture book app that insists on reading to you at all times can play second fiddle to an app that has a function that lets a parent read the same book to their child in their own familiar voice. And if you don't much care for how a particular narrator sounds, it's incredibly annoying if you can't silence their voice. Most devices have volume controls that allow you to adjust or turn off the narration, but sometimes it's nice to still hear the background music as you read.

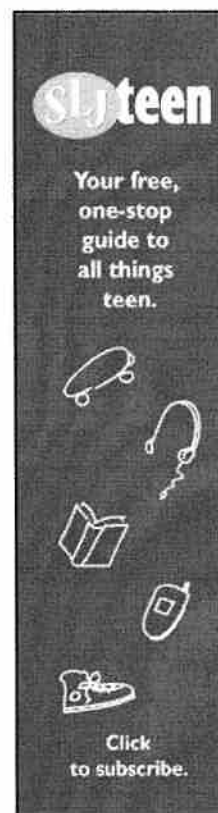
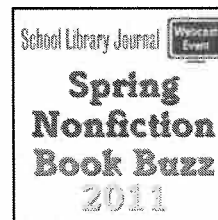
What does the app provide that a simple lapsit with a print book and an adult does not? In other words, what separates this app from a print picture book (aside from the price, of course)? What advantages does it have? We're already aware of some of the distinct disadvantages (size, for one), but is there anything this app can do that's a real leg up on an everyday book? Can the app help a child learn how to read individual words? Play games? Record their own voice reading the story? Most important, does the app encourage a kid to participate actively in the narrative or are they treated like passive spectators?

Can you select different languages? There's much to be said for an app that lets you hear words pronounced in English as well as in other languages. Not only does that option enrich the experience, but it also offers a language-learning experience of which many parents would gladly take advantage.

How is this app best used? With an adult present or alone in the back of the car on a long trip? And do you like the idea of your child using this app independently, or would you prefer to be present at all times when they look at it?

Would you read it again? Once you've read the app for the first time, are you

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inclined to pick it up again? Is this a story you'd want to revisit? When you're finished, do children cry, "Read it again!" or do they put it away and forget about it?

With these basic guidelines in place, let's consider a small cross-section of the kids' book apps available today. Apps that, for one reason or another, may have advantages over their print brethren, may complement them, or may be distinctly less impressive in comparison.

Winged Chariot Press



The Red Apple, written and illustrated by Feridun Oral.

A rabbit, a mouse, a fox, and a bear all strive to reach a bright red apple, but discover they can't do it on their own. Together they get the piece of fruit, share it equally, and settle in for hibernation. In terms of the story itself, it's similar to books like Margie Palatini's *Lousy Stinkin' Grapes* but doesn't contain much

conflict aside from the animals' mutual desire and frustration to reach the apple. To my mind, the art and the app's features are the real lures here, while the plot you can take or leave.

One does appreciate this app's limited number of special effects. The snow falls with the same mesmerizing effect you get when you've been driving for too long on the highway in February. It's unfortunate that, at least in English, the narrator's voice is so strangely subdued. He speaks in hardly more than a murmur, as if trying desperately not to wake the kids. This app may be of particular interest to those parents who wish to teach their children other languages. There's an option to hear each story and see the words in English, Spanish, Turkish, Dutch, German, Japanese, Chinese, French, Polish, and Italian. Alas, like most apps from Winged Chariot Press, there's no way to turn off the various narrators and read the story on your own. But you can get around that by turning off the sound on your electronic device.

Scruffy Kitty by Michael Slack.

An ambitious alley cat leads a seemingly happy life outdoors. It's clear, however, that the cat wants nothing more than to be inside with the nice family it sees there. The cat is taken in, cleaned up, and miraculously transformed from Scruffy Kitty to Fluffy Kitty. While *The Red Apple* offers some mild animation, *Scruffy Kitty* is far more interactive. Touch anything that pulses, like *Scruffy Kitty* itself, and you can hear and see the results of your interaction. The reader is distinctly involved in moving the plot forward. The art is quite pleasing to the eye, though *Scruffy Kitty*'s voice will undoubtedly grate on a parent's nerves after more than one reading. And for the language-curious, this book comes in Dutch, French, Spanish, and Japanese.



The Birthday by Sylvia van Ommen and Maurice van der Bij.

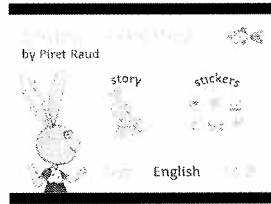
Here's a book that would make a rather good companion piece to Allan Ahlberg's *The Jolly Postman*. With the help of the reader, a little postal mouse spends the day delivering the mail (mostly yellow envelopes) to friends on her birthday. We know that she's delivering letters for her own birthday party, but she only

discovers this at the end of the tale. There's a great deal of variety in this app. Although some pages are very static, others require that you help the little mouse "deliver the post." In terms of the narration, there are many voices—not just one or two—and each is unique. The chameleon, for instance, sounds like a Spanish Peter Lorre. And the mouse appears to have a mild Welsh accent. I admit it. I'm charmed. Maybe it's the Briticisms. Maybe it's the odd details. The art really is rather nice, which isn't surprising since Sylvia van Ommen, the great Dutch children's book artist-author, is behind it all. She even manages to work in little hidden details, like the fact that the Zebra can just barely be seen reading one of van Ommen's own books, *The Surprise* (the title, amusingly, is in the original Dutch). The app also avoids the audible annoyance factor. For example, when a stork plays some music, the riff repeats quickly twice then

stops. Grateful parents will give a thankful sigh of relief.

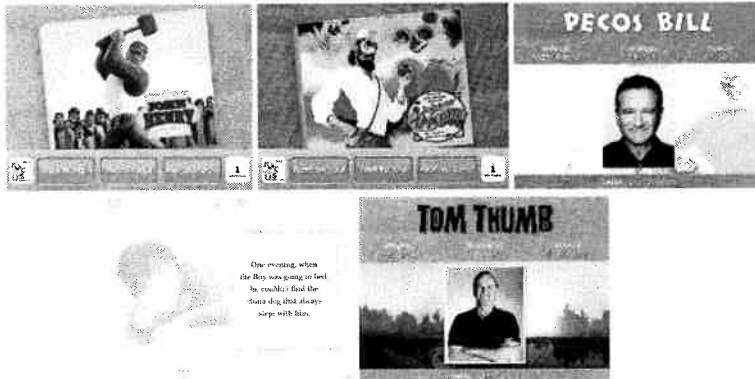
Emma Loves Pink by Piret Raud.

Emma the "little hare" wants everything to be pink. Not just everything she wears and uses but the entire world. For her birthday party, she designs everything in pink. When her friend Ferdinand the frog arrives, he gives her a wrapped circular present. But instead of finding something pink inside, she finds a green cabbage. Being a rabbit, Emma tries a bit of it and is delighted to discover that it's delicious. Ferdinand is rewarded with a kiss on the cheek, which turns him (you guessed it) a delightful shade of... pink! Sort of the English (Estonian?) version of *Pinkalicious* (except, y'know, the art is actually good).



Americans are particularly susceptible to children with foreign accents. We have a hard time resisting them. This book is narrated by a small British girl, which instantly makes the story adorable to our ears. The child, as it happens, is a very good reader. Better than some of the story's adult readers, actually. And I almost begin to think that child narrators make a lot more sense than adult ones for a lot of these apps. The design makes use of black words on a lot of white space, which is a format that works very well for this sort of app. It's a bit strange for a girl who's obsessed with pink to wear a red dress throughout most of the book. Go figure. Readers can turn the app's pages, but they can't move anything on them. Nor for that matter can you read the book to yourself without turning off the sound. Still, from a picture book standpoint, the story and art are a cut above the rest.

Ruckus Mobile Media



John Henry by Brad Kessler, illustrated by Barry Jackson, read by Denzel Washington, music by B. B. King from Rabbit Ears Entertainment.

Johnny Appleseed by James Howard Kunstler, illustrated Stan Olson, read by Garrison Keillor, music by Mark O'Connor.

Pecos Bill by Brian Gleeson, illustrated by Tim Raglin, read by Robin Williams, music by Ry Cooder.

The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams, illustrated by David Jorgensen, read by Meryl Streep, music by George Winston.

Tom Thumb and the Knights of the Round Table by Brad Kessler, illustrated by Tim Gabor, read by John Cleese, music by Elvis Costello.

Years ago, the Rabbit Ears Storybook Collection acquired a series of children's books and adapted them into DVDs, where celebrities read various tall tales, folktales, fairy tales, and religious stories. Eventually, some smart soul at Ruckus realized that there were audiobooks and DVDs out there with music and celebs already in place and that they could turn them into apps with a minimum of fuss or fuss. The result is this new series with hip narrators, hip music, and beautiful images. Each app contains a long opening sequence that introduces Ruckus Mobile Media and Rabbit Ears Entertainment. After that, the reader is

given three options: "Play the Video," "Read the Book," or "Read and Record." "Play the Video" means just that. Rather than engage the reader like most apps, the reader is simply shown a video, where you can't do so much as turn a page. If you would like to "Read the Book" the audio narration is gone, and the app acts like a book app once more. Still, they've split up the pictures and the words in odd ways. Sometimes you've just a "page" of text. Other times just a "page" of illustration. The end result is almost more ebook than app in a lot of ways. And while you can sometimes move the text, the pictures are static and don't respond to the touch.

The best thing these apps have to offer (aside from celebs) is the fascinating "Read and Record" option, which allows a person (perhaps an absent parent) to record the story for their child so that they can hear a familiar voice read it to them when that parent is far away. For all of this app's static qualities, this is a valuable option, and one that almost justifies the lazy adaptation of the DVDs to the app market.

Loud Crow Interactive



PopOut! The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter.

This is perhaps the most professional and beautiful app you're likely to find. Based on Potter's classic tale, it pays true homage to her work. Rather than seeking to distract you from the text, the app does everything correctly in drawing you deeper into the story. Readers

have the option of reading the book themselves or having the story read by a narrator. If they select the latter, the words on the page are highlighted. When the narrator ends a page, you may select any word and hear her voice pronounce it. A small transparent semicircle also lets you hear the page once again. There's also a virtual silk ribbon at the top of each page that, when pulled, gives the reader the option of skipping from one page to another.

Even the look of this app is class incarnate. After the app's creators are very briefly mentioned, you're transported to a faux desktop. On it rests the book, and some photographs and a letter. Throughout the reading soft piano music plays and subtly changes to match the mood of the story. As for the book itself, it really acts like a pop-up book, albeit one that little hands can't smash. There are little tabs to pull and little hinges here and there. Readers can make almost anything on a page rustle or make a sound or movement. There's a strange pleasure that comes in turning the wheel that makes it look like Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail are eating. Best of all, these elements serve the story and don't detract from it. Of all the apps I've seen, this is perhaps the one that got the most things right. Add some language options, and you'd have yourself the perfect app.

Minedition

What Does My Teddy Bear Do All Day? by Bruno Hachler and Birte Muller.



This is one of the most interactive apps out there, giving readers options on every single page. In this story, a girl is convinced that her teddy bear lives an exciting life in her absence. One day she stays home from school to try to catch him in the act of moving—to the repeated mantra of "I'm gonna catch you." Alas, the teddy is too cunning to be caught, until a ploy with a honey jar reveals his secret weakness. Small details make this the kind of app where you'll notice different details on multiple readings. For example, if the teddy bear sees that the screen isn't upright, he'll tilt his head to teach you the correct way to position it.

Observant kids will spot hidden options on each page that aren't immediately apparent (to adults anyway) on a first read. Often this is fun, though sometimes you'll find yourself caught, as when the teddy bear "paints" the reader's entire screen, making it difficult to access the next page. One also wonders if some of the play options (a puzzle, coloring mat, etc.) distract kids from the original text. The narrator is the voice of a girl, which is pleasant, though unfortunately there's no option to read the book without her voice. While the story is fairly

amusing (kids will enjoy the solution to catching the bear unaware), the real draws here are the many animations, games, and extras hidden on each page, not the tale itself. Also, there's no option for skipping a page while you're reading the text.

Curious Puppy



Freight Train by Donald Crews.

HarperCollins is one of the few major publishers of children's books in America to create its own imprint for apps and apps alone. Through Curious Puppy, it's also taken a very hands-on approach to adapting Donald Crews's 1978 classic, *Freight Train*, for the app world.

With the feedback and approval of the author-illustrator himself, this app is ideal for those legions of train lovers. Playing public domain songs ("I've Been Working on the Railroad," "John Henry," "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain") that manage to be catchy without causing the user to reach for earplugs, the app reads you the book in which a freight train is described and then goes on a little trip. Touch the train's cars and a whole range of choices presents itself. You can see what all the men who work on the train do. You can see cows or chickens inside certain cars. Best of all, these interior views weren't made for the app, but come directly from Crews's follow-up title, *Inside Freight Train*.

The app lets viewers listen to the story in Spanish as well as in English, though sadly it doesn't offer an option where readers can read the book to themselves without the narrator's voice (unless they turn the sound off, of course). They also can't skip to another part of the book with ease, but the app does make a clever connection at the end of the story, providing readers with an easy online link to the real books and a chance to purchase them as well. Even when it adds bells and whistles, this app remembers to keep the original story in mind.

One Hundred Robots

The Night Before Christmas by Clement Clarke Moore, illustrated by Bill Ledger.

An interesting mix of unexpected and nonexistent options accompanies this jolly tale. In this adaptation of Moore's classic poem, the reader is offered, right at the beginning, the option of reading the book alone or being read to by a narrator. If you select the narrator, you'll be treated to a brief smattering of Charlie Brown-like Christmas piano music. Once the story starts, however, the jazzy music disappears, and all you hear is the voice of a British narrator who sounds a bit like Michael Caine.



The images are amusing computer animations, but they have a two-dimensional, cut-paper feel to them. It's fortunate that the designers chose to include a "Menu" button on each page that lets you go to whichever page you prefer. Excellent! Unfortunately, the app offers a strangely passive experience. Although you can read each page, you can't affect the characters by touching the screen. Indeed, contrary to most apps, the characters either move or don't move on their own, making the reading experience very booklike in the old-fashioned sense. That quibble aside, this is a rather nice handling of a classic tale, and a keen way to introduce it to kids.

Author Information

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Reader Comments (12)

Thanks so much for this post! I have a loaner iPad to play with for a time with

my students, and I want to gain a clear sense of what apps are going to be worth spending money on.

Posted by Anne-Marie Gordon on January 1, 2011 11:52:33AM

This article is a great service, a gift, Betsy; thank you!

Posted by Rasco from RIF on January 1, 2011 02:54:26PM

What an excellent article! Thanks so much.

Posted by Karen Maurer on January 4, 2011 03:25:28PM

Now I have a better feel for what an app is and can do. Thanks Betsy!

Posted by Joan on January 4, 2011 03:28:21PM

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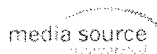
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