



# The Wild Idea of Riding a Bike

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## Abstract

While the depiction of automobiles remains ubiquitous in popular media, one of the few places bicycles are celebrated is within the pages of many children's picturebooks. These stories demonstrate ways in which bicycles can help facilitate an approach to living that is good for both people and the environment. The picturebooks introduced in this article demonstrate many convivial features of bicycles including their benefits for community building, personal empowerment, and defying social norms. They are also shown as easy to operate, versatile, and practically beneficial in various cultural contexts. By celebrating cycling's conviviality, these picturebooks encourage young readers to embrace an orientation toward life that values human connection, creativity, and sustainability over industrial efficiency.

## Keywords

Conviviality, bicycles, picturebooks, autonomy, lifestyle

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the generous support of the Gloria and Henry Nyi Foundation that helped fund the presentation of this research at the 2023 Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRCL): Ecologies of Childhood at the University of California, Santa Barbara, August 12-17, 2023.

## Introduction

David Shannon's *Duck on a Bike* (2002) begins when Duck gets a wild idea: "'I bet I could ride a bike!' he thought." This inspiration may be even better than Duck imagines. According to the World Health Organization, cycling combats several global problems, including physical inactivity, air pollution, and global temperature increase (2022). In contrast, automobiles, despite being identified as the leading net contributor to global climate change (Unger et al., 2010), remain ubiquitous in popular media, while cycling is rarely shown as viable transport. Zack Furness laments, "One of the major obstacles preventing a more rigorous analysis of the future of transportation is the virtual invisibility of non-motorized technologies as a real alternative among even the most critical thinkers who write on the politics of oil, environmentalism, and/or climate change (2010, p. 205). One site where bicycles are not just visible but actively celebrated is within the pages of many children's picturebooks. These stories demonstrate ways in which bicycles help facilitate an approach to living that is good for both people and the planet.

## Conviviality

The idea of bicycles as convivial tools as theorized by Ivan Illich in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) and *Energy and Equity* (1974) reveals many benefits of cycling for individuals and society. Rather than valuing a technology according to its apparent convenience, Illich believed tools should be judged according to how well they support living well or conviviality, a way of life that emphasizes human connection, creativity, equality, and self-determination. Illich distinguishes convivial tools from industrial tools which he believes dehumanize society. Industrial tools (like cars) dictate how they are to be used, hamper creativity, increase inequality, and are unsustainable. Convivial tools (like bicycles) do exactly the opposite.

Tools foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user. The use of such tools by one person does not restrain another from using them equally. They do not require previous certification of the user. Their existence does not impose any obligation to use them. They allow the user to express his [or her] meaning in action (Illich, 1973, p. 34). For Illich, bicycles are a kind of tool that helps individuals and communities thrive by extending the power of individuals instead of replacing it with other, potentially harmful, energy sources.

The selected picturebooks demonstrate several ways in which bicycle conviviality is portrayed for young readers. These stories adhere to three trends that

parallel three approaches to representing childhood in picturebooks described by Nina Christiansen (2017):

- 1) prescriptive, showing bicycling as the kind of activity children are encouraged to do
- 2) generally retrospective, depicting cycling in protected environments with other forms of technology and transport nearly or completely absent, and
- 3) often parodic, humorous, or absurd in ways that temporarily empower the protagonists (pp. 365-66).

This final mode of representation also relates to the tendency for cycling to be portrayed as transgressive and defiant.

### **Bicycling Joy**

*Duck on a Bike* exposes common attitudes toward cycling while celebrating it as unsanctioned, convivial transgression. At first, Cow thinks Duck looks silly riding a bike. Sheep views the activity as dangerous. Dog sees it as a neat trick, while Cat finds it to be a waste of time. Horse's competitive spirit is pricked by the bike's speed. Chicken is afraid of being run over. Goat wants to consume the bike. Pig considers Duck a showoff, and Mouse envies Duck's ability. However, when the farm animals encounter several unattended bikes, they seize the opportunity and are won over: "Now all the animals had bikes! They rode around and around the barnyard. 'This is fun!' They all said. 'Good idea, Duck!'" (n.p.). They discover that Duck's wild idea is a GOOD idea. The diverse and previously alienated animals unite around their new shared experience. Each animal rides a bike appropriate to their size, shape, and ability. They go nowhere, but experience their familiar barnyard creatively, allowing for individual differences and excluding no one.

In the final scene after the bikes have been returned to their places, Duck smirks with satisfaction knowing the illicit escapade has been undetected. The animals' ridiculous and bold behavior champions conviviality through absurd humor, a practice Illich encouraged. "Poets and clowns have always risen up against the oppression of creative thought by dogma," Illich wrote. "They expose literal-mindedness with metaphor. They demonstrate the follies of seriousness in a framework of humor. Their intimate wonder dissolves certainties, banishes fears, and undoes paralysis" (1993, p. 83). The joy the barnyard animals find in their self-propelled movement exposes the folly of their former fears. In the sequel, however, *Duck on a Tractor* (Shannon, 2016), Duck drives a much less sustainable tractor. The animals must adapt to the machine,

rather than the machine (which runs out of gas) working for them. The absurd humor remains, but the animals are more constrained and feel less joy.

Bicycling also gives Astrid Lindgren's Lotta, in *Lotta's Bike* (1980) the opportunity to transgress and enjoy cycling with others. In this case, Lotta's defiance combined with her naivety leads to both humour and success. After not receiving a bicycle for her fifth birthday, she follows Duck's example to surreptitiously borrow another's bike. Unlike Duck, she is not able to control the bike, which is too large, and she crashes, gets hurt, and feels humiliated. Later in the day, however, after her father breaks his own rule by giving her a bicycle one year earlier than planned, she gets the hang of this appropriately sized bicycle quickly and cycles happily on the street in front of her house with her siblings. Her defiant attitude has been rewarded, and it continues. Upon seeing her brother, Jonas, ride with no hands, she tries to do the same, falls, and hurts her elbow. Although she loudly blames Jonas for doing what is forbidden, she simultaneously aspires to do the same. Lotta's transgression is discovered and rewarded. She is comforted instead of corrected, given her own bike, and demonstrates that she is more capable than expected.

## **Bicycle Versatility**

H. A. Rey's *Curious George Rides a Bike* (1952) demonstrates bicycling conviviality by showing a wide variety of bicycle uses. The man with the yellow hat gives George a new bicycle and naively tells him to stay close to home. Of course, George disobeys, and he subsequently uses the bike to do tricks, work, explore, meditate, crash, problem-solve, make new friends, become a hero, and star in the big animal show. Without adult approval and against orders, George has used the bicycle to expand his horizons, develop his autonomy, and increase his social network. But his cycling agency, like Duck's, is short-lived.

George's final, climactic act on the bicycle is a performance staged for others' amusement under adult supervision, reducing the bicycle to a mere trick machine and obscuring its more practical purposes. Sadder still, after the show, George surrenders his independence and joins the Man with the Yellow Hat in a fossil-fuel powered car. He moves from autonomous energy producer to dependent energy consumer, complicit with the waste the car generates.

The story follows the familiar pattern of ending with a return to home and apparent security. As a child, George is defined by his ignorance and therefore in need of adult protection (Nodelman, 2008, p. 35). But whereas George under his own power travels by bicycle, the supposedly wiser and protective adult relies on a car to cover the same distance thereby contributing to future (climate) insecurity.

## Bicycle Competency

Neither George, Duck, nor the barnyard animals have any trouble learning to ride, and even Lotta catches on quickly. An aspect of bicycles' conviviality is that they can be ridden by nearly anyone. Furthermore, as Lotta shows, simply learning to ride can be an act of liberating defiance. Journalist Jody Rosen describes it like this: "The first ride enacts the flight from the clutches of adult caretakers, when the kid pedals away from the grown-up who has been steadying the bike with a grip on the underside of the saddle" (2022, p. 252). Developing cycling skills is one of the most common topics in bicycling picturebooks and can reflect growth with other competencies, often in defiance of societal norm or expectations.

*In Born to Ride: A Story about Bicycle Face* (Theule, 2019), set at the end of the 19th century, Louisa Belinda Bellflower's struggle to ride a bike parallels her mother's toils on behalf of female suffrage. She also contends with opposition to female cycling. Contrary to her family doctor's assertion that cycling will cause her physical harm, she finds the experience, once mastered, both joyful and liberating.

The bicycle in *Joseph's Big Ride* (Farish, 2016) facilitates Joseph's transition from a Kenyan refugee camp to an American city. He had been wanting to bike since he was in the camp, so his learning to ride in America, with the help of a new friend and much effort, connects his past with his future as he learns to fit in. The fact that convivial mobility is key to this immigrant's ability to establish a new home is significant, especially given the major role industrial transport and technology play in mass migration, displacement, and alienation (Kivisto, 2011, p. 146).

## Practical Use

Not only are bicycles accessible to children through their ease of operation and simplicity, but they can also offer practical value to whoever rides one. A person on a bike "can go three or four times faster than the pedestrian but uses five times less energy in the process" (Illich, 1974, p. 44). Despite the value of bicycles for transport, this is seldom on display in North American bicycling picturebooks. An exception is Dav Pilkey's *Paperboy* (1996) in which the protagonist delivers newspapers in the early morning. The bicycle facilitates the paperboy's autonomy, allowing him to work on his own, in the safety of car-less streets and at a speed with which his dog can keep him company. His connection to the landscape, the weather, and the moment are visceral and personal.

Picturebooks that feature bicycles as tools for work or transport are often set in other countries. *The Red Bicycle: The Extraordinary Story of One Ordinary Bicycle*

(Isabella, 2020), follows a donated bicycle sent to Burkina Faso. For a time, a teenage girl uses it to transport Sorghum, and later another owner adds a trailer and operates it as an ambulance. *In a Cloud of Dust* (Fullerton, 2015), set in Tanzania, shows children appreciatively borrowing bicycles from a “bicycle library” to travel long distances to school. In both stories the increased but moderately paced mobility helps foster social interaction while dramatically increasing efficiency. Supplementary pages expound on the benefits bicycles offer in these settings due to such convivial features as their versatility, affordability, and durability.

## Conclusion: A Convivial Orientation to Life

In these stories, the bicycle has been a positive force for creative self-expression and agency. They demonstrate ways in which bicycles benefit their young riders while continuing to quietly protest against authoritarian control. These stories can encourage readers to consider not just bicycles, but other ways in which living according to principles of conviviality can lead to personal agency and satisfaction in everyday life. If riding a bicycle supports lifestyles that privilege human connection, creativity, equality, and self-determination over speed, convenience, and presumed efficiency, then maybe Duck’s wild idea really is worth considering; not just riding a bike, but the orientation toward living that riding a bike embodies.

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