Now my medium is the picture book. And the medium is unlike any other. Although the picture book may look like a typical book--paper pages, between two pieces of cardboard--it’s unique in many ways. A picture book is not just a container for text and illustrations. When you make a picture book, you use words, images, and the book form--the book’s shape and heft and physical quality--to suggest the reader’s path of movement through the story: right to left, up and down, in and out, page to page. If a painting is two-dimensional and a sculpture is three-dimensional, then a book brings in a fourth dimension--time. The picture book is a sequence of moments that move through time.

The picture book is a physical object--the reader holds the book in her hands, she turns the pages, forward and backward, as fast or slow as she wants. Reading a picture book involves the eye, the mind, and the hand. When you turn the pages, your imagination--your thinking, feeling mind--fills the moments between page one and page two. Imagine a boy holding a paintbrush and a can of green paint. Behind him stands an elephant. If the image is well made and the story is well told, the reader is curious, anticipating and wondering what’s next. Turn the page and you see the boy standing beside an unhappy, dripping, green elephant...The reader fills those spaces, and the story is told, not only by the person who’s made the book but also by the reader.

The story is incomplete without the reader, and therefore making a picture book isn’t only about what you put in, but also about what you leave out. Making a book is a collaborative act. At some point you have to trust the child reading the book.

The other day I was reading about the universe in the newspaper. What I discovered, to my astonishment, is that the scientific community has been able to identify only four percent of what the universe consists of. Think of it! Ninety-six percent of the universe is as yet unknown. They call it dark matter.

That extraordinary fact reminded me of something I once heard the writer Donald Hall say. He was trying to explain--by way of metaphor--what it is that a writer does, how writing works. It is a concept that, from the moment I heard it, I have charted.

The writer (he said), in his writing, tries to create the letter O. But he does so by writing the letter C. Which is to say there is a gap. Where there is nothing. Dark matter, perhaps. The writer’s words on the page create structure, character, and voice--but there are the gaps, the dark matter, the unknown, and the not written. It is the reader who fills this gap.

If the gap is too large, the reader cannot fill it. If the gap is too small, the reader need not fill it. But if the gap is just right, the reader fills it with--self. And the circle is complete. Thus--writer and reader have joined together to make the writing whole. In other words, by surrounding what is not written by what is written, the writer enables readers to see, feel, experience some dimension of their own lives--in the text.

How does the writer create this dark matter? As I once heard Paula Fox express it, he imagines the truth. Truth is always the harshest reality, even as it is the more liberating one. For the paradox of writing is this: the greater the writing, the more it reveals--the ordinary. That is to say, great writing reveals what we know--but never noticed before. Great writing identifies that most elusive of all things--that which we have seen but had not noticed, that did not seem to exist until it was named. Nowhere is this done better than with children’s books.