MAKING SENSE of the randomness of human existence, stories present an adult perspective as to how best we can conduct ourselves. Nearly all children’s books carry the message that society must be accommodated and that there is a way of behaving that will allow that to happen. These seven picture books tell a story and supply visual images to reinforce the telling. (Bruce Whatley’s is slightly different, a lesson in natural history that follows a successful hatchling to its adult destination.) In four of them, the pictures are expressionistic revelations of the emotions informing the text. The other three present a more complex visual vocabulary, from the dark painterly scenes of Whatley’s Galapagos to the stark childish representations of the two Dreaming narratives.

Conduct is based on our position in the social structure. Take Dancing Night, Tonight. In an apparently affluent household, where soft light illuminates a richly decorated room, we meet a nervous child who calls her mother and father Mama and Papa — a key to experience in itself. Every Tuesday, Mama goes dancing and Papa puts Millie to bed. Millie’s fear is that Mama will never return. What dark experiences have
made this child so frightened? A large amount of reassurance is necessary, and Pignataro’s images of mother and child in glittering, gossamer robes provide a swirling background to the parting, with Papa dancing with Millie before bedtime. Mollified, Millie accepts her mother’s absence, and then Mama returns. This is visual comfort food for those children who fear that their mothers will go missing.

There is no mother–child connection in Whatley’s account of the strange land dragons that lay their eggs inside the volcano. From the egg, the baby dragon is on its own. When the hatching emerges, she must climb out of the volcano, running the gauntlet of hawks and pythons before entering the soft vegetation and sheltering cave. It’s a hard and dangerous life — all instinct — and Whatley’s brooding colours (midnight blue, sienna, umber, smoky grey) explore the terrain and its strange inhabitants, wild remnants of the past, through the vision of the dragon. At times, the close-ups are so intense they lose form, and a reader may fail to see what is happening. Is that python winding its way around one small dragon and just missing our hero? These are animals without speech or humanity — no anthropomorphism here.

Chester the crocodile, on the other hand, in *Hooray for Chester*, defies animal nature, suffering like a human being who is sneered at and rejected. He lives in Greenbush Swamp, a Kakadu-like wetland awash with rainbow lorikeets, black-necked storks, possums, bats and catfish, depicted in multi-coloured glory. Chester has an inkling he might be able to do the wonderful things the other animals can, and, when it comes to the test, he does. *Hooray for Chester* displays Australia with wry humour, while providing an object lesson in self-confidence and persistence.

Margaret Balderson also strikes a lighter note in *Junkyard Dogs*, where dogs behave like dogs but have the power of speech. In the city where this tale happens, class differences are clearly seen in its suburbs. Businessman Hall’s four dogs live in a big house on the hill where they are groomed and pampered, but their fine garden and fancy conditions are really a prison where they are expected to stay clean. Their release comes when they meet Jim’s two dogs from the wrong side of town, who have the run of the neighbourhood. Together the Junkyard Brigade finds its particular pleasure in the Tip, an experience made permanent by Businessman Hall’s fall from the corporate ladder. So money isn’t everything: for a dog, it just might entail a dog’s life. The clever illustrations of lolloping dogs add fun to Balderson’s witty verse.

*Cat and Fish* also promotes the concept of cooperation. While the Balderson dogs are almost dogs, the animals in this tale don’t behave at all like a fish and a cat. Instead of the fish providing a meal for the cat, the two build a friendship, show each other their favourite haunts in water and on land, and compromise on a final home. In the arresting pen-and-ink pictures, fish and cat mimic human appearances as they dance on two feet (or tail) above the treetops and row their boat through a black-and-white river. This is a postmodern homage to artists like Durer and Escher, even to Aesop’s tales. *Cat and Fish* a beautifully designed and illustrated book.

More modestly produced than any of the above, the two Aboriginal stories diverge from expectation, neither fairy tales nor fables. Fairy tales take a social and moral position: Cinderella’s foot fits the slipper; when Hansel and Gretel push the witch into the oven, that’s just what she deserves. The fable also suggests a way of life: the tortoise has persistence; the fox overreaches himself. Both have modern resonances. In either of these forms, if two attentive sons look after their cheating father, you might expect some sort of reward for them.

Not so in these two Dreaming narratives. They are also guides for the young on how to behave, but they clearly rely on the circumstances of Aboriginal life before the invasion. In *The Magic Fire at Warlukurlangu*, Father pretends to be blind. Sons play tricks on him in the food department. So deception occurs on each side of the relationship. But it is the sons who pay the ultimate price. *The Spotted Cat* (not the domestic cat, but the native quoll) is a more forgiving tale, as the cat defeats the rampaging monster through superior intelligence. But the story’s significance to its audience lies more in how the cat makes reparations to the monster’s victims by ensuring their proper funerary rites. Killing the monster was necessary, but order could not be restored to the land until the dead had been given due respect. These are stories from a highly complex and differentiated culture, located in a known landscape, showing a precise knowledge of the topography of the Yuendumu region. The children’s illustrations are naive, but traditional motifs dominate. They are openly didactic, instilling a sense of duty and order in a society where the struggle for survival demands that rules be maintained despite any catastrophe, monster or deception.

From these books, it seems that whether you are a cat, dog, fish, dragon or crocodile, or just a small human being living in either desert or suburbia, when you do the right thing life can be shaped into a happy ending.