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# Illustrations, Text, and the Child Reader: What are Pictures in Children's Storybooks for?

Zhihui Fang

Picture books are profusely illustrated books in which the illustrations are, to varying degrees, essential to the enjoyment and understanding of the story (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown, 1996). As the most characteristic form of children's literature (Nodelman, 1996), picture books hold a prominent place in children's literature because of the juxtaposition of pictures and words. Thanks to the public's acute awareness of the importance of childhood in human development, to professional critical evaluation of children's literature, as well as to the advances in printing technology and art reproduction, children's literature has witnessed a dramatic increase in well-illustrated picture books.

Despite the popularity of picture books, the relationships of illustration to print and to the child reader remain little understood (Elster and Simons, 1985; Schallert, 1980). As Margaret Meek (1991) notes, "The relation of pictures to stories and the nature of the reader's interaction with both are an important aspect of literacy too little regarded and even less understood" (cited in Johnson, 1993, p. 20).

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to delineate the main functions of illustrations in relation to the text in picture books and to examine the significance of illustrations to the child reader. While there are many kinds of picture books (e.g., alphabet books, counting books, concept books, wordless picture books, and picture storybooks), this article will focus on picture storybooks because they are most common among young children. Any reference to "print" or "text" throughout this paper denotes the linguistic text.

### Illustrations and the text

According to Bodmer (1992), illustrations serve to "expand, explain, interpret, or decorate a written text" (p. 72). They perform certain functions that may differ from those of gallery paintings. Art work in picture books is most often concerned with storytelling. Therefore, illustrations in picture books may function in one or more of the following ways.

Establish setting. In picture books, as in all literature, setting is used to establish a story's location in time and place, create a mood, clarify historical background if necessary, provide an antagonist, or emphasize symbolic meaning (Norton, 1987). Picture storybooks, however, strongly or sometimes completely rely on illustrations to serve these functions of a setting. For example, time periods in historical stories or distant cultural settings can be brought to life through illustrations in ways words cannot do. Ronald Himler's illustrations for Byrd Baylor's *The Best Town in the World* (1983) show how important illustrations are for illuminating time and place in picture storybooks. While the brief poetic text alone tells little about the turn-of-the-century general store, the pictures help describe the many activities associated with a picnic celebration in the days when a picnic was a major social event.

Likewise, in *Boundless Grace* (1995), Caroline Binch presents to readers vivid pictures of many aspects of people's daily lives at Gambia. The house, the marketplace, the cloth stall, the food and the animals are so full of African spirits that readers can easily identify the setting of the story just by viewing the pictures. The illustrator effectively uses pictures to guide readers through this fascinating arm chair travel to Africa.

Illustrations are also extremely effective in determining the mood of a picture book. In Van Allsburg's award winning book, *The Polar Express* (1985), the author-illustrator, instead of employing a bright and cheery palette typically associated with merry Christmas, uses dull reds and blues and even pallid yellows along with plenty of black and brown to create a mysterious, gloomy, and somewhat scary mood. These dark colors help create and maintain an eerie feeling as a young boy watches a magical train steam its way into his front yard late Christmas eve, into dark forests filled with wolves, and to the North Pole.

Define and develop characters. The characters in picture books must have specific traits that make them appealing to the child reader and that meet the demands of the short format. Since a short story does not normally allow for more fully developed characters, illustrations help develop the characters by depicting situations and emotions immediately familiar and credible to the children. In wordless picture books the depiction and development of characters completely rely on illustrations. In picture storybooks, illustrations can supplement characterization in the text by showing the characters' actions and reactions to one another or giving characters an extra fleshing out. For example, in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) Maurice Sendak uses few words to describe Max, the wild things, or the rumpus that takes place

between them. His illustrations, however, show these effectively. Paul Goble's *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* (1993) is also an excellent example of using pictures to define and develop the traits of the main character in the story. Readers can identify with the Indian girl's true love for horses when they see the many pictures in which the girl stays around the horses under different circumstances. As a result, children will not feel surprised when they get to know at the end of the story that the girl transforms into a horse.

In yet another example, the illustrations in *Ira Sleeps Over* (Waber, 1972) allow readers to learn much about Ira's parents that is not revealed in words. Readers can see his parents' interesting and somewhat unorthodox lifestyle, especially for the time when the book was published.

Extend or develop plot. The brevity of text in picture books often severely constrains the development of story plot. Thus, the plot of a story is often advanced by illustrations. In wordless picture books, the whole plot is unfolded through pictures. In picture storybooks the plot can be extended or rounded a little by illustrations. For example, in the first three pages of *Where the Wild Things Are*, readers know that the mother sends Max to confinement without supper because of his mischievous deeds. Even though the words used thus far do not say what has gone wrong with Max, the pictures explain his problem. Readers see him standing on books, hammering nails into the wall, and chasing the dog with a fork. The plot is further developed as Max's imagination goes wilder and wilder. Although words alone tell little about what happens between the time Max leaves the wild things and returns home, the pictures compensate for such lack of details; the illustrations grow larger and larger as the story drama develops and then become smaller again as Max returns to his mundane life.

In *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1985), the illustrator, Stephen Gammell, uses pictures to unfold the plot. Although Rylant's words say nothing about Dad's driving skills, the illustrations make it abundantly clear: Dad levels the mailbox on the driveway, loses suitcases, careens around mountain curves and destroys their relatives' fence upon arrival. Here we start seeing the humor inherent in an understated text that is elaborated in detail by pictures. Similarly, in *Boundless Grace*, the author displays Grace's conflict mentality by presenting a picture in which Jatou, Grace's African stepmother, is standing behind Grace and holding a plate of benachin in her hands while Grace is reading a book of fairy tales. Here the plot is greatly extended beyond the meaning of the accompanying text in that the pictures explain effectively why Grace feels cross with her stepmother. Readers can clearly infer from the picture that Grace's stereotyping of her stepmother may have come from fairy tales such as Snow White or Cinderella.

Provide a different viewpoint. Whether intended or not, illustrations sometimes tell a slightly different or even contradictory story than the text. It seems that the greater proportion of illustration to text, the greater the influence illustrations have in the creation of story (Lukens, 1990). In *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchin, 1968), the text says that Rosie, the hen, takes a peaceful stroll around the farm and gets "back in time for dinner." However, the illustrations relate another tale; a menacing fox lurks behind Rosie, ready to make the hen its dinner. It is as if Rosie (the printed text) is unaware of the fox (the pictured text).

Peter Spier's *Oh, Were They Ever Happy* (1978) is also a good example of words and illustrations that are humorously in opposition to one another. Children, who were

inadvertently left alone for the day because the babysitter has her days confused and doesn't show up, decide to do something nice for their parents — paint the house. Although the words say "Neat job!" and "Pretty color!" the pictures depict a terrible mess the children have been making. They paint the bricks and window panes, they finish one color of paint and take up with another. In Arthur Yorinks' *Hey Al* (1986), the illustrator, Richard Egielski, uses pictures to convey a contradictory message about the truth of the heaven. Through the pictures, readers can instantly tell from Al's facial expressions and his deformed figure that the heaven is not what it is supposed to be in Al's imagination.

Contribute to textual coherence. Coherence refers to the extent to which the sequencing or ordering of ideas in a text makes sense to its implied readers and the extent to which the language used in discussing those ideas make the nature of ideas and their relationships apparent (Tannen, 1984). Illustrations can contribute to textual coherence when well-integrated with print or through providing referential cues for the text. For example, the illustrations in *Where the Wild Things Are* play a crucial role in providing coherence to the story. When Max is banished to his room for bad behavior, the room gradually becomes the kingdom of the wild things, with trees growing naturally out of the bedposts and the shag rug turning into grass. As the plot progresses, the illustrations cover more and more of the page edging out print and when Max becomes king of the wild things, six pages of illustrations are uninterrupted by text.

In stories where personal and demonstrative pronouns (e.g., I, we, them, it, this, that) as well as location words (e.g., here, there) are used without clear referents in the prior text, the rendition of these expressions depend entirely on illustrations. In Keith Baker's *Who Is the Beast* (1990), for

example, the author begins the story with the line "The beast, the beast! I hurry on." Only by looking at the picture in the story book will the reader be able to figure out who "I" is — a flying bird. Here, by helping create textual cohesion, the pictures also provide a visual/social context for spoken language, thus bridging what Elster and Simons (1985) call "the gap between spoken and written language" (p. 149).

Reinforce text. In certain instances, the primary function of picture book illustrations is to reinforce, rather than to extend or amplify, the text. Nonfiction picture books often fall into this category, with the illustrations and diagrams providing a visual restatement of the words. Russell Freedman's *Children of the Wild West* (1983) is a case in point.

However, illustrations in a picture storybook may also function primarily to reinforce the story. In Robert McCloskey's (1948) *Blueberries for Sal*, for example, readers see what the countryside in Maine looks like as well as the characters who are out picking the blueberries, but no major extensions to the text are evident. In *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (Friedman, 1984), the pictures, depicting in detail the way Japanese eat and the way westerners eat, reinforce the text and help readers gain a better understanding of the differences between the oriental and occidental cultures.

### **Illustrations and the child reader.**

Not only are illustrations integral to the text in picture books, they are also important to the child reader in a number of ways. Despite reasonable concerns among some literacy educators (Chall, 1967/83, Elster, 1995) that illustrious pictures may distract children's attention from print, thus hindering their word identification and acquisition of written language,



the contributions of pictures to the overall development of children's literate behavior seem to be overwhelmingly greater than its potential dangers. First, illustrations in picture books entice children to read and interact with text. They motivate young readers to find/name hidden objects/characters or to predict what is going to happen next. Young children love to play hide-'n-seek and look for hidden objects in pictures. As Perry Nodelman comments, "The excitement of a good picture book is the constant tension between the moments isolated by the pictures and the flow of words that join these moments together."

The jumpy rhythm of picture books is quite different from the gradually intensifying flow of stories told by words themselves" (quoted in Lukens, 1990, p. 217). For example, the illustrations in Keith Baker's *Who is the Beast* encourage young children to search for and identify the hidden beast. The artist has camouflaged the beast so well that children must carefully look for it. Children would miss a great deal of potential enjoyment if an adult reads the 206 words of the text without encouraging the children to find and identify the animal in the pictures. Tana Hoban's *Take Another Look* (1981) encourages children to make predictions. This fascinating book allows the child reader to peek through a hole and see a portion of the photograph found on the following page. Children can relate what they think the picture is, and why, before turning the page to see if their prediction was correct.

Second and somewhat related to the above point, picture books can serve as an effective tool to stimulate and promote children's creativity. By reading picture books without too much linguistic text, children learn to use their active imagination to interpret and (re)create a mental representation of the story. Children often associate pictures with their life experiences or familiar images, construct meaning based on

their existing schemas or schemata. Children often come up with unique and creative interpretation of the plot, settings, and characters when they read picture books. For example, the child reader and the adult reader may like David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (1991) for different reasons. In this book, Wiesner uses a very limited number of words to provide readers a time frame.

Other than that, the reader has to use their own imagination and judgment to predict and interpret what is going on in the story. For example, the book has a picture of pigs floating in the air without any accompanying text. Here the reader is invited to use their own imagination to predict future adventures of the pigs. This encourages the child reader to create their own stories based on their imagination and creativity.

Third, illustrations are important in that they provide mental scaffolds for the child reader, thus facilitate their understanding of the written text. The short attention spans of the young child, coupled with their limited vocabulary, syntax and world knowledge, place special demands on illustrations to help develop plots and characters so that fewer words and less complex syntax can be used. Reading comprehension has been characterized as a constructive process in which the reader uses what is already known to help interpret the new information in the text (Anderson and Pearson, 1984).

As first-order symbols, pictures represent relatively concrete, familiar experience, something young readers can easily identify with. As second-order symbols, words are more abstract and detached from immediate experience. Thus, by juxtaposing the more familiar and concrete with the more abstract semiotic symbols, picture books maximize text comprehensibility. Without pictures, the text is decontextualized.

Further, illustrations in picture books prompt an active elaboration of the printed text, thus facilitating learning by inducing the child reader to form mental images of the information (Schallert, 1980). As Nodelman (1996) speculates, young children need pictures in books "because they find them easier to understand than words and need pictorial information to guide their response to verbal information" (p. 216).

Fourth, illustrations in picture books foster children's aesthetic appreciation of art and beauty. According to Broudy (1977), aesthetic sensitivity to art and beauty is important because "it is a primary source of experience on which all cognition, judgment, and action depend. It furnishes the raw material for concepts and ideas, for creating a world of possibility" (p. 636). In the same token, Johnson (1993) considers aesthetic experiences a basic in children's education and calls for fostering both children's linguistic and visual literacy.

Aesthetic appreciation can be developed in part by consistent exposure to a wide variety of art works that are coupled with pleasing stories in today's picture books. As "a perfect vehicle for opening a child's eyes to the beauty and power of art" (Jacobs and Tunnell, 1996, p. 34), illustrations in picture books allow young readers not only to become aware of the variety of artistic styles and media that artists employ but also develop a sense of judging quality. Many parents and teachers take the opportunity to comment on the art work as they share picture books with children (Dickinson and Keebler, 1989; Elster, 1995; Snow and Ninio, 1986). Their comments range from what they like about an illustration to calling attention to how artistic styles in different picture books vary and which of the varying styles the children prefer and why. Children's taste and appreciation can be cultivated and expanded as they are exposed to more picture books.

Fifth, illustrations in picture books foster children's language and literacy development. The combination of intriguing text, art, and topics found in picture books feed children ideas, stimulates their imagination and curiosity, and provides them with a rich vocabulary to use in book-related questions and discussions (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown, 1996). In addition, through such reading and responding (e.g., drawing and writing) to picture books, children hone their speaking and writing skills. Johnson (1993) noted that in picture books the child reader enters the dual-meaning environment and extracts from it an enhanced understanding of linguistic language. For example, Robert McCloskey's *Time of Wonder* (1957) describes a family's experiences on an island in Maine. The story's natural setting (established through illustrations) establishes a context that helps children better understand concepts such as porpoise, gull, barnacle, bay, island and driftwood, thus encouraging them to expand their vocabularies. The story's vivid language and figures of speech, coupled with illustrations, acquaint children with new ways of experiencing and describing what they see and hear in the world around them: rustling leaves, heavy stillness, slamming rain, and gentle wind soft as a lullaby. As choppy waves indicate the approaching storm, McCloskey affords the child reader many opportunities to observe the sharp contrasts in nature (Nodelman, 1996).

## Conclusion

In summary, illustrations in picture books are meant to delight, to capture attention, to amplify or tell a story, to teach a concept, and to develop appreciation and awareness in children. Given the important role illustrations play in children's picture books and in children's language and literacy development, it is imperative that teachers, textbook writers and illustrators become more sensitive to the information

conveyed through the delicate interplay of print, pictures, and the child reader.

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