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READING COMPREHENSION, VISUAL LITERACY AND PICTURE BOOK ILLUSTRATIONS

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Usually we think of teaching reading comprehension in terms of the printed word. However, it is just as important to teach many of the same skills to insure a child's level of visual literacy. Illustrations in picture books contribute to a child's sense of story and the visual clues add to the information in the text. Readers need to be aware that there is more to an illustration than meets the eye.

Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963) is a romp into the world of make-believe. What many readers fail to note is the size and impact of the illustrations. In the beginning, a small picture shows Max in a reality situation. As the fantasy develops, the illustrations take up more page space. During the "wild rumpus" scenes, double page pictures unfold and heighten the frenzy of the moment. Slowly, as reality returns, the pictures again become smaller.

Adults around the world found themselves scrutinizing the minute details in Kit Williams' Masquerade (1980). The story is about a hare attempting to deliver a jewel of the moon maiden to the sun. Intricately hidden in the text and illustrations are clues to a buried treasure. Readers were mesmerized by the art work and were wrapped up in the suspense of locating the prize which was actually claimed.

In the examples mentioned, the illustrations required readers to be alert. The pictures made a visual statement that could catch viewers unaware if they were only concerned with the surface meaning of the illustrations. Elements of importance might be overlooked if visual literacy skills of a reader are not up to par.

The books selected for this article demand close inspection of the pictures by readers of varied ages. Children and adults alike will be challenged in the investigations that will lead toward a more comprehensive understanding of illustrations and their value.

Influence of Color in Illustrations

When authors want to emphasize a word, it can be set in bold type, underlined, or put in italics. Certain ideas might be highlighted with descriptive or loaded adjectives. The color used in illustrations may be thought of in the same way. Of particular

note is the use of grey in The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher (Bang, 1980). A grey lady is being followed home by a thief. She avoids him by magically disappearing into the grey background. The merging and blending of the main character into the setting creates a fantastic visual treat.

Hyman's black and white drawings in Jane Wishing (Tobias, 1977) alternating the reality of Jane's everyday life with dreamy and colorful pictures of her fantasy world. In The Funny Little Woman (Mosel, 1972), the foreground is pictured in color while the background is in black and white; color changes emphasize the immediate setting of the action.

As the environment in The Mountain (Parnall, 1971) is being ruined, colorful illustrations give way to black and white drawings. The shift in color makes a stark statement about what humans are doing to their world. In contrast, is the addition of color to the drawings in The Seeing Stick (Yolen, 1977). A young blind girl discovers the brightness in her world through the power of communications and this is reflected in the illustrations.

Clues in Photographs

Children often select contextual clues from a passage to define a word or concept. The same idea can be reinforced by using books which contain photos that require a listing and evaluation of visual clues before readers can identify the objects shown. On an early primary level, Guess What? (Bester, 1980) contains obvious textual clues that go with the pictures. Photos of an egg and a feather are accompanied by "What has soft fluffy feathers, lays eggs that we eat and lives in a coop?" The illustration of the next page is of a hen in front of a coop.

The top half pages in Zoo City (Lewis, 1976) depict city objects that can be matched up with similar looking animals on the bottom half pages. Answers are reinforced with the names of animals printed on both left half pages. Overlay pages with circle cut-outs in Take Another Look (Hoban, 1981) cover photos of objects and animals. Readers see a portion of a tabby cat's forehead. After listing the details, a flip of the page reveals a full page photo of a kitten. Look Again (Hoban, 1971) is of the same style with square cut-outs. In What Is It? (Loss, 1974), everyday objects are shown enlarged 10 to 30 times in the photos. The blow-ups contain enough details, yet identification of some items is quite challenging.

Detecting and Selecting Details

Reading for details requires paying attention to facts, some literally stated aspects, and some inferred information. Details in illustrations are presented in a number of ways just as they are in a text. Young readers are encouraged to hone their detail detection skills in Each Peach Pear Plum (Ahlberg, 1978). On each page, viewers are told which story character is hidden in the illustration. For example, the text reads "Wicked Witch over the wood, I spy Robin Hood." (unpagged). He can be found in miniature in the top of a tree.

Children will be fascinated with how easily a basic shape

can be molded into other forms in Mari's The Magic Balloon (1967). A boy blows a bubble, it becomes a balloon, an apple, a butterfly, a flower, and finally an umbrella. While all the shapes have curves, each has its own distinctive features and details that make it a separate entity. The Turn About, Think About, Look About Book is an adventure in visual experimentation. Each design has four interpretations given by the author. One blue and green page can be viewed as a Christmas tree, a shark's bite, between two Christmas trees, and an arrow head. Children will have a great time coming up with other versions.

Truck (Crews, 1980) may seem to be a wordless book because there is no text per se but inspection of details leads readers to note traffic, destination and information signs necessary for travelers. One first grader surmised that trucks, not cars, caused pollution because they were the only ones shown spewing exhaust.

Some artists include factors that have nothing to do with the story but they heighten a reader's reaction. Yellow, Yellow (Asch, 1971) contains thousands of hilarious minute details. While a boy walks down the street, the designs on his tee shirt change constantly. A paint can has a label which reads "I want to make something beautiful. But, of course, I am only a can of paint in a storybook." (unpaged).

Reading Beyond Surface Meaning

Children giggle when they consider the two possibilities in "Is the chicken ready to eat?" (Will the chicken eat or will we eat the chicken?) Learning to comprehend beyond the literal level requires readers to make judgments and to piece together relevant information. We can explore surface and underlying meaning by examining books that contain two or more concepts being presented at the same time.

Literal and Figurative Information

Some compound words may make no sense if they are broken into literal components. Toad + stool hardly explains "toadstool". Puniddles (McMillan, 1980) provides a series of photographs that encourage children to think about words. For example, photos of a hen and a ball are used with the target words "foul ball". Photos of an ear of corn and a knee are pictured for "corny".

The literal and abstract application of figures of speech and homonyms are comically illustrated in Gwynne's The King Who Rained (1970). The text reads "Sometimes Mommy says she has a frog in her throat." The illustrations show mom with her mouth open and frog is peering out. Gwynne's Chocolate Moose for Breakfast (1976) and The Sixteen Hand Horse (1980) may also be used to explore language usage and how it influences communication. Older children will enjoy Slanguage (Carothers & Lacey, 1979) where origins of figures of speech are explained. Illustrations are literal interpretations of the text. For example, pictured for "flying colors" are five crayolas shooting through the air.

Double Details in Illustrations

In the wordless Anno's Counting Book (1977), children can

count objects pictured as well as blocks that run up the left page. Further inspection leads the viewers to note the seasons of the year, twelve calendar months, and holidays. A more sophisticated approach is contained in Anno's Britain (1982), Anno's Italy (1980), and Anno's Journey (1978). All three are wordless travel books covering parts of Europe. Anno included famous works of art, historical buildings, cities and characters such as Rapunzel, Big Bird, and Marilyn Monroe. In Anno's Italy, references are made to individuals, situations, and places in the Old and New Testaments.

Readers need some background information for the above books before they can easily detect the intricate details couched within the illustrations. For younger readers, more obvious underlying information is found in Rain (Kalan, 1978). While the surface intent is to describe weather conditions for rain, colors and objects are also included. The Grouchy Ladybug (Carle, 1977) is a bit more complicated. The surface story is about an irritable insect, but readers also learn about defense mechanisms of animals, size relationships, and the position of the sun in regard to time. Of a similar nature is The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1969). The tale is about a caterpillar with a voracious appetite but counting, days of the week, and the life cycle of a butterfly are also presented.

Two-level Stories

The artist's interpretation of the text appears to be so great that a separate, unspoken story is visible; one story is presented in the text and another in the illustrations. In John Burningham's Come Away from the Water, Shirley (1977), Shirley becomes involved in a series of escapades that are not dealt with in the text. While mom warns her about obeying rules at the beach (text), Shirley is off on an adventure with pirates (illustrations only). Thus there is a comparison between down-to-earth reality and exciting fantasy. Further fun with this character may be found in Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley (Burningham, 1978).

The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog (de-Paula, 1981) is a fanciful picture book about the nursery rhyme. The large illustrations that parallel the text are about the woman and her pet. However, what appear to be oval designs in the margins are actually wordless versions of nursery rhymes including Little Boy Blue, Robin Red Breast, and Simple Simon.

Predicting Action and Outcomes

Event and story projection involves putting together information and being able to come up with a logical outcome. Learning to anticipate action requires a sense of story (plot sequence), understanding of characterization, and a grasp of basic details. There are many picture books which are useful when teaching prediction of story events or endings from the illustrations.

For young children 1 Hunter (Hutchings, 1982) is a lot of fun. When a myopic hunter stalks his prey, he overlooks two elephants while he is walking under eight spotted legs. With the turn of the page, readers see him waltz away, oblivious to the

two giraffes. Later he misses six tigers and walks on lumpy green "rocks" which are really seven crocodiles.

In Do You Want to Be My Friend? (Carle, 1971), a mouse wanders around, first meeting the tails of animals. Children can predict what the animal will be—then turn the page to see if they are correct. A bit more complicated is Have You Seen My Cat? (Carle, 1973). A little boy goes looking for his cat and he meets a cowboy—turn the page—and he finds a bobcat. Later he comes across two women from rural Africa—turn the page—and he spies a panther. Children need to key in on setting to be able to match up the cats that are pictured in the first two pages of the book.

The die-cut wordless books by John Goodall are an excellent source for story projection. In The Adventures of Paddy Pork (1968), full page illustrations show Paddy in the store looking at the door. Flip the half page and Paddy leaves the shop. The half page hides the action that sets up the scene for the next full page.

Children should also be on the look-out for foreshadowing in the illustrations. In The Chicken's Child (Hartelius, 1975) a wordless story, an alligator is tossed off the farm while his adopted hen mother wrings her wings in despair. Lurking in the trees is a fox. Later there are two alligator eyes seen in the woods as the hen is being grabbed by the fox. Children will be able to anticipate action and predict the outcome of the story if they pick up on these clues.

Conclusion

Because we live in such a visually oriented world, comprehension beyond the printed word is becoming increasingly more important. As with the text of a story, pictures carry surface and underlying meaning. Children will delight in the books that provide an experience in literature, art, and graphic detail, leading to the understanding of and use of critical reading of illustrations. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but readers need to know what to look for and how to process the details into useful information before full comprehension and visual literacy can be attained.

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