

In her introduction, Warner honours Robert Irwin and his *Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994), claiming that without his work her own book would not have been possible. There is little doubt that future generations of scholars will pay tribute to *Stranger Magic*, mentioning with equal admiration and gratitude how inspiring and indispensable they have found it.

Nada Kujundžić

## Playing as a Serious Task

**Cherie Allan. 2012. *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 201 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-22786-6**

Cherie Allan's *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque* is a book in the *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature* series which publishes selected contemporary scholarship and criticism on children's and young adult literature, film and media texts. The aim of the series is to provide quality books that will stimulate further research of children's literature.

In her book, Allan deals with the ways in which postmodernism has influenced picturebooks. She discusses the recent shifts in this exciting genre and explains the coining of the term 'postmodernesque', in analogy with Mikhail Bakhtin's term 'carnavalesque'. She claims that, "[J]ust as elements of the carnivalesque were carried over into literature, postmodernesque picturebooks have emerged from the postmodern tradition and yet exhibit a sufficient shift in direction to warrant a separate designation" (24).

This study focuses in an innovative and resourceful way on the theoretical foundations needed to understand trends in recent picturebook production and on the modifications of the genre in general. The study is of high significance in the field of children's literature research and will benefit not only academics in the field of children's literature, but also teachers and students, whether to introduce them to the topic or to give a fresh perspective and encourage further debate.

Allan uses a wide range of internationally known picturebooks to support her argumentation. She also references plenty of well-known experts in the field, and their works. Has postmodernism improved the development of picturebooks, or has it made way for the consumerist lifestyle? Is postmodernism still influencing modern picturebooks, or have they gone beyond postmodernism, converting to the postmodernesque? These are some of the questions Cherie Allan asks in this book.

In the introduction, the author looks back at the origins of postmodernism, which has always been a subject of debate. The difficulty in understanding the term is largely due to the media using it overly lightly. The author proceeds by outlining the features of postmodernism. Picturebooks are described as "cultural texts which reflect the tenor of their times" (2) and, "with their dual codes of written and visual texts, are ideally located to appeal to a postmodern audience" (4). Towards the end of the introduction, Allan questions the appropriacy of the term 'post-postmodernism' used by some scholars to refer to new

literary conventions emerging as the influence of postmodernism declines. She proposes the term postmodernesque to refer to picturebooks written at the beginning of the twenty-first century that use some metafictional strategies but that also question the aspects of postmodernity.

The first chapter is entitled “Looking Beneath the Surface”. Allan starts the chapter with Molly Travis’s statement that postmodern texts show us they are not “natural, finished and seamless”, but rather “constructed, open, fragmented and plural” (27). They can be described thus since they lay bare the conventions of a classic realist text through the usage of various metacognitive strategies. Allan discusses these strategies, such as intertextuality, parody (especially the parody of fairy tales), frame-breaking and metalepsis by using focus picturebooks as examples. The second part of the chapter examines three picturebooks more closely: *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne, *Three Pigs* by David Wiesner and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. The author argues that while the first two texts do employ various metacognitive strategies, they also display liberal humanism and its conventions. On the other hand, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* resists those conventions, and is thus, as David Lewis also claimed in 2001, the only “true” postmodern picturebook (at the time).

In the second chapter, Allan takes a further step in examining various metafictional strategies found in postmodern picturebooks, with an emphasis on representation and how this is placed in the foreground. As with the previously noted strategies, the postmodern picturebook uses intertextuality, indeterminacy and polyphony to “lay bare” the established conventions, and in this way presents itself as a representation or a construct to its readers. Allan quotes Jean Baudrillard’s thought that the image has become more important than the depicted reality and points out that we live in a hyperrealist, media-dominated world. Focus picturebooks are used to illustrate this uncertainty by drawing attention to the arbitrariness of language (as in the above-mentioned *The Three Pigs* and in *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan), the use of invented languages (visible in *Baloney (Henry P.)* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith), the use of frame-breaking (in *Black and White* by David Macaulay), *mise-en-abyme* (in *Zoom* by Istvan Banyai) and the notion of the instability of identity (*The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*).

The next chapter focuses on the ways in which reality is represented in postmodern picturebooks. Allan examines how the boundaries between fictional worlds are crossed in a number of focus texts. A rabbit enters the world of grey wolves by being immersed in a book about them in *Wolves* by Emily Gravett. Because of this, “the ontological status of the wolf in relation to the rabbit changes from construct to ‘real’ and thus enables it, at that level, to pose a real threat to the rabbit” (83-84). In *Wait! No paint!* by Bruce Whatley, a parody of the traditional tale about the three little pigs, an intrusive illustrator helps the characters to become aware of their status as fictional characters. Such processes which push back the boundaries between narrative worlds, or between fictional and real worlds, show the ways in which postmodernism seeks to refuse to accept certainty or any absolute truth. As Allan states, “In questioning the conventional belief that narratives reflect the ‘real’ world, postmodern picturebooks draw attention to the fictional process of storytelling, the fictional world as construct and the text as artifact” (80).

The fourth chapter presents historiographic metafiction as a genre that has emerged from postmodern fiction. It reinforces the multiplicity of histories by denying history the 'right' to present only one truth. Picturebooks that belong to this genre show a special playfulness, although they often deal with serious topics. For instance, in *Memorial*, the authors Gary Crew and Shaun Tan deal with the unreliability of memory presented in a story about a boy who listens to older members of his family tell him about the past. The British settlement of Australia is described in *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan through an allegorical story of marsupials whose peaceful life is greatly disturbed by the arrival of the rabbits. In a very interesting way, Allan highlights some details from the book which show that, although the aim of the book is to present the Aboriginal people's view of history, the authors unintentionally reinforce some common prejudice and misconceptions. Other picturebooks examined include *A Coyote Columbus Story* by King and Monkman, an alternative view of the discovery of America, and *The Discovery of Dragons* by Graeme Base, which parodies the Age of Discovery. The author finally presents *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!*, yet another picturebook by Scieszka and Smith, as an example of fictional historiographic metafiction in which the protagonist Alexander T. Wolf (or Al, for short) takes his chance in convincing the readers that he is as innocent as a lamb.

The fifth chapter gives a postmodern view on the imposed unity and conformity found in liberal humanist discourses. Such practices are questioned with the celebrating of marginalized individuals. As Allan states, postmodern picturebooks deal with a variety of characters "who suffer social exclusion, live on the margins of society, are alienated by difference, or work to be accepted by the dominant society" (124). She gives examples of such characters found in several focus picturebooks by Toby Riddle. Four animals escape from the zoo and try to blend into society in *The Great Escape from City Zoo*, and the fox and the donkey from *Nobody Owns the Moon* have a similar desire. Colin Jenkins, once a successful businessman, finds himself rejected by society when he wakes up one day with a bird's nest on his head and decides to leave it there, in *The Singing Hat*.

The notions of ex-centricity and difference, as Allan claims, "have contributed to a growing trend whereby various fields are achieving autonomy from the label *postmodernism* by creating their own discourses" (139). The author examines the shifts that postmodern fiction experiences in the last chapter of the book entitled "Towards a Postmodernesque Picturebook". Postmodernism, as all literary trends eventually do, has reached a point of exhaustion. Allan argues that the main difference between postmodern and postmodernesque picturebooks is that while the first question the features of liberal humanism, the latter "turn their attention to the critique of the postmodern world: a globalised, mediated, hyperreal world in which, seemingly, the only way to make any sense of it is through the rampant consumption of goods, services and signs, and in which individuals construct multiple identities and learn to navigate through multiple realities" (141). It could be said that the postmodernesque picturebook is a picturebook about postmodernism. The author proceeds by examining the aspects of our postmodern world ridiculed in focus picturebooks: globalization and its effects, the influence of the mass media and consumption of goods, services and signs. Often these traces are subtle and can be seen only when reading both verbal and visual texts very closely. *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley* by Colin

Thompson and Amy Lissiat mocks consumerist society, which is visible in the quote from the picturebook that caught our attention: “People want microwave-video-dvd-sms-internet-big-car-cost-more-than-yours [...] electronic-gigabyte-fastest- [...] machines”, which, according to Allan, “suggests the haste and excessive desires that characterize the urgency to consume” (166). In *The Empty City* (by Davis Meggarity and Jonathon Oxlade) and *In the City: Our Scrapbook of Souvenirs* (by Roland Harvey), readers are drawn into globalized cities where there is a proliferation of choice, while personal interactions with people are minimal, and the notions of time and space are deconstructed. In focus picturebooks, there are clear hints of nostalgia for the simplicity and innocence of the past.

This is one of the paradoxes of postmodern picturebooks, as Allan states in the conclusion. On the one hand, they resist conventional approaches, and, on the other, they adopt them readily. The conclusion of the book offers observations instead of drawing a definitive conclusion, in the manner of the genre which the book examines. The author predicts a bright future for the genre of picturebook, and, after reading this book, we could not agree more. This genre is more exciting today than ever before; it appeals to readers of all ages and offers many possibilities to engage with the texts.

Although the book is written in a strictly scholarly manner and uses sophisticated theoretical concepts, which can make it slightly difficult to understand for students and the general reader, it can still encourage such an audience to maintain its interest in children’s literature and picturebooks, as it reveals how complex and exciting they are. Besides, it can trigger interest in those on their verge of entering the realm of theory as novice researchers in pursuing picturebook research and in further exploring various aspects of postmodernism. From the point of view of picturebook scholarship, this book gives a fresh and inspiring perspective on contemporary picturebooks, which will certainly need to be taken into account in future studies in the field.

*Mateja Latin and Dina Alexandra Pavković*

## Robinson as Children’s Reading

**Andrew O’Malley. 2012. *Children’s Literature, Popular Culture, and Robinson Crusoe*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, xii + 195 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-27270-5**

Launching the series *Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature*, the Australian editors Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford focus on “new and developing areas of children’s literature research as well as [on] bringing contemporary perspectives to historical texts”. Andrew O’Malley’s latest book dealing with historical reasons for which “*Robinson Crusoe* has featured most prominently and circulated most widely” (3) in the fields of children’s literature and popular culture certainly sheds new light on this classic work.

The book contains an introduction and five chapters (i.e. 158 pages of main text and 40 pages of notes and an index). Although it may seem that others have already said all that needs to be said about *Robinson Crusoe*, O’Malley’s particularly interesting and well argued study brings a fresh perspective to *Robinson* and gives it new impetus.