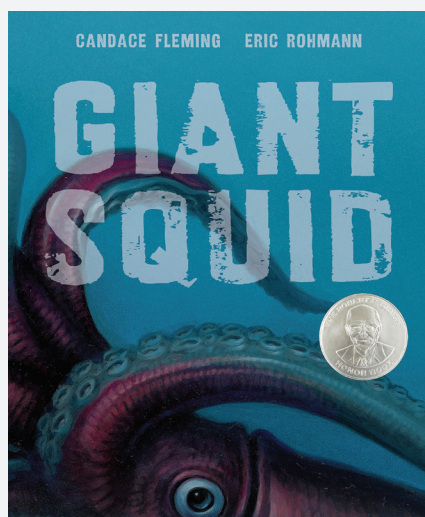


First Opinion: A Deep-Ocean Odyssey Envisioning *Giant Squid* through Multimodal Nonfiction Poetry

Fleming, Candace. *Giant Squid*. Illustrated by
Eric Rohmann, Roaring Brook Press, 2016.

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In this creative nonfiction picture book, *Giant Squid*, Fleming and Rohmann make this elusive sea creature visible through illustration, poetry, a scientific diagram, and facts. Readers examine each mode of information, just as scientists examine the clues washed up on shore or found within the belly of a sperm whale. They glimpse the giant squid; however, as everyone who has experienced the giant squid knows, any sighting and understanding can only ever be partial and temporary.

Rohmann's illustrations form the backdrop for the poetry and emphasize the mystery surrounding this deep-ocean creature. His style is realistic, although the visible brushstrokes communicate that this is painted matter and not photography, which is fitting for a species that has largely avoided the scrutiny of a camera lens. The colors are dark hued, and the edges of the giant squid's body blur into the surrounding murky depths. Through full-bleed illustrations, Rohmann's artistic blending of creature and environment highlights the giant squid's ability to exist almost invisible to the world above.

The illustrations slowly reveal the squid's known body parts—curling tips of tentacles, a close-up of an eye, the beak. The image sequence builds toward two gatefold pages on the penultimate double-spread. Folded, the pages show a giant squid making itself invisible behind

an ink cloud, its red color barely visible through the murk. Unfolded, readers step through the ink to view the giant squid almost at its full length. The body spans the width of all four pages, effectively communicating the squid's enormity. Upon seeing the whole creature instead of just its components, readers comprehend the giant squid's beautiful strangeness.

In terms of compositional space, this picture book showcases an integrated layout. The words are overlaid onto the image, or subsumed, creating "the strongest fusion between words and picture, guiding the reader to view the two as an integral whole" (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 100). This reflects the connection between the visual clues that led scientists to discover the giant squid and the words that communicate the knowledge gleaned.

Fleming's poetic narrative mirrors the illustrations and unfolds slowly to reveal giant squids as mythical beasts, not unlike those encountered in Homeric adventures, using the language of mythology: "baffling beasts," creatures, "giants of the dark seas." The giant squid's sheer size, "some as large as buses"; the violent efficiency of its survival, "suckers ringed with sawlike teeth / that rip into skin"; and the horror of its beak, "rotating from side to side," are the stuff of nightmares (Fleming unpagged). Visually, the poem also parallels the way the giant squid moves, sometimes creeping down along the page at an angle, pausing at each word to maximize the magnificence of this mythical monster.

The narrative is presented in three parts. The poem begins several pages prior to the title page, which typically appears before the official narrative. Although readers might be disconcerted by the picture book's immediate start, the physical organization mimics the unexpectedness and mystery of the giant squid. This introduction maps out the unanswered questions and guesswork involved in understanding these creatures of the deep.

Following the title page, the second section presents the giant squid as hunter as its body parts work in unison to fuel its gargantuan body. This section ends with the image of its gaping beak while the third opens with its eye appearing to be looking at us, which offers a different kind of understanding: the giant squid, too, is hunted by predators. Suddenly, the hunter becomes the hunted and readers witness its survival methods. The narration, until this point, has utilized an omniscient third-person perspective, distant from the giant squid undulating through the ocean's depths. However, the voice and perspective alters for a moment: "Watch out for that barracuda! Quick!" (Fleming unpagged). The accompanying image shows "teensy, tiny baby giant squid," and readers find themselves willing their survival. When once we recoiled in horror at the sight of the beak, we now hope that the giant squid can avoid doom.

Giant Squid lends itself well to classroom practice. The book ends with a diagram of the giant squid with captions and descriptions of each body part and a narrative describing how scientists construct working knowledge from its bits and pieces. A bibliography follows, with additional online and print resources for those interested in doing more research. Teachers and students could examine the poem, illustrations, and scientific facts individually and interactionally, exploring multimodal composition and designing texts that combine image and

language. Likewise, a lesson on the scientific method would pair well with practical research using the additional resources, along with a vocabulary lesson blending scientific and descriptive terms drawn from the rich language in the text.

Although the recommended audience for this picture book is ages six through ten, readers of all ages would appreciate learning about giant squid through this fantastic multimodal text.

Work Cited

Painter, Clare, et al. *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books*. Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2014.

About the Authors

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