

From the cover of *The house that Jack built* by Gavin Bishop

Cross-Continental Readings of Visual Narratives: An analysis of six books in the New Zealand Picture Book Collection

Penni Cotton and Nicola Daly

This article argues that, by analyzing the ways in which illustrators use certain visual codes, we can learn much about a country's history/culture and demonstrates this by analyzing the visual narratives of six picturebooks from the New Zealand Picture Book Collection (NZPBC). Emphasis is placed on how the front covers—which introduce both the stories and the new culture to young readers—are used to facilitate cultural understanding by focusing on intercultural stimuli/cultural exchanges; respecting beliefs/values; observing cultural lifestyles, sharing visual imagery and discussing the interplay between text and image.

For many years, researchers have been expressing the importance of visual narratives as facilitators of cultural understanding (see articles by, for instance, Judith Graham; Stuart Marriott; Carol Carpenter). However if picturebooks are well chosen, children may not only be able to find out about their own cultures but could also have the opportunity to learn about others. More recently, Jack Zipes suggests that “transformations in children’s literature have affected the representation and socialisation of children” (xxiii), and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer points out that picturebooks today are “distinguished by a variety of conceptual demands which comprise semiotic, material, and cultural phenomena”

(4). Dolan takes this idea further when she suggests teaching approaches for promoting intercultural understanding through carefully selected picturebooks.

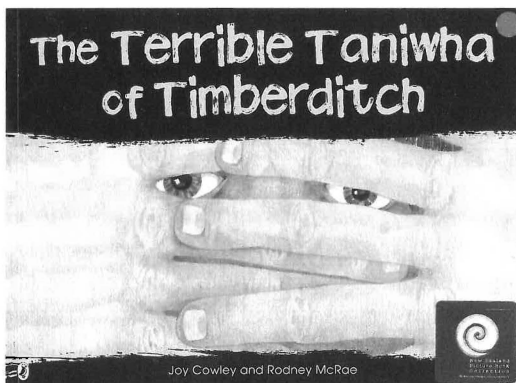
Intercultural Stimuli

Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese suggest that picturebooks allow young children opportunities to develop their understanding of others, while affirming children of diverse backgrounds. Stella Thebridge supports them and believes that children’s books are “where it all begins, where first impressions of the world outside are formed” (205). Accordingly, reading the visual narratives of carefully chosen picturebooks provides invaluable intercultural stimuli and awakens curiosity in children worldwide. The

images in picturebooks are incredibly important because, through pictures, it is often possible to indicate things that are difficult to say in words. The universal power of illustrations can help children appreciate similarities and celebrate differences within an unfamiliar culture—owing to the ways in which illustrators make use of visual codes such as position, size, perspective, frame, line, color, shape, action, movement, facial expressions, body gestures, cinematic devices, and incidental details (Cotton, *Picture Books sans Frontières* 51). In addition, because pictures offer readers a position of power, they can observe a story from different viewpoints and, through interaction with the text, are absorbed into a form of interculturality. Margarida Morgado (2006) suggests that whilst “multicultural” implies the co-existence and preservation of cultural differences within cultures, *interculturality* is applied across cultures in order to enhance and translate cultural identities through the varied cultural forms that coexist, compete, and live together.

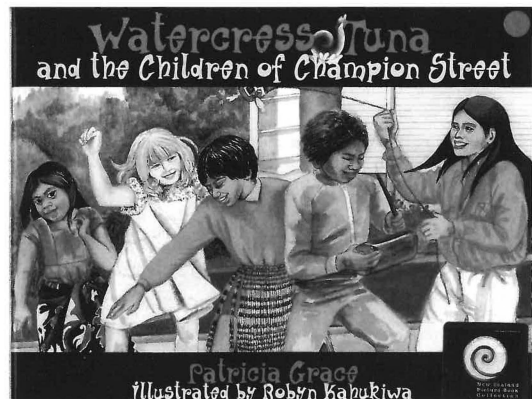
Exchange Between Cultures

The NZPBC provides an opportunity for non-New Zealanders to see another world from an intercultural and inter-continental perspective by examining those aspects of text, story and illustration which differ from their everyday lives. The notion of exchange between cultures is the focus in books such as Joy Cowley’s *The Terrible Taniwha of Timberditch* (2009) and Patricia Grace’s *Watercress Tuna and the Children of Champion Street* (1984), which give insights into the multicultural nature of New Zealand society.



The Terrible Taniwha of Timberditch (Cowley, 2009)

Monster stories from around the world are at the heart of *The Terrible Taniwha of Timberditch*. When the young female protagonist is forbidden to go down to the lake because of the taniwha (monster), she makes a trap to capture it and find out what exactly it is. In the meantime, she asks people in her multicultural community about monsters from their own cultural experiences. Rodney McRae vividly portrays the various forms of these monsters and centrally locates them, often spilling across double page spreads. His richly colored illustrations detail their skin, claws and habitat which provide ample opportunity for readers to discuss similarities and differences between monsters universally, plus associated emotions. Often the round or oval shaped monster’s eyes stare out at the reader, almost responding to the fear in the child’s large eyes on the front cover. This child’s eyes, seen in a cinematic ‘big close-up’, peep through rather podgy young fingers and suggest fear of the unknown and the unexpected. In contrast with the imaginary worlds in the other illustrations, the reality of this image is emphasized through the extremely detailed lines on each taut little finger, showing a fear with which all children can identify across continents.



Watercress Tuna and the Children of Champion Street (Grace, 1984)

The main character in the *Watercress Tuna and the Children of Champion Street* (Grace and Kahukiwa) is a tuna (eel) with a magical throat who visits children in a multicultural neighborhood (Champion Street). The diversity of the community is visually evident through the movement and positioning of the characters as the eel visits children in their homes, presenting them with a piece of clothing or a musical

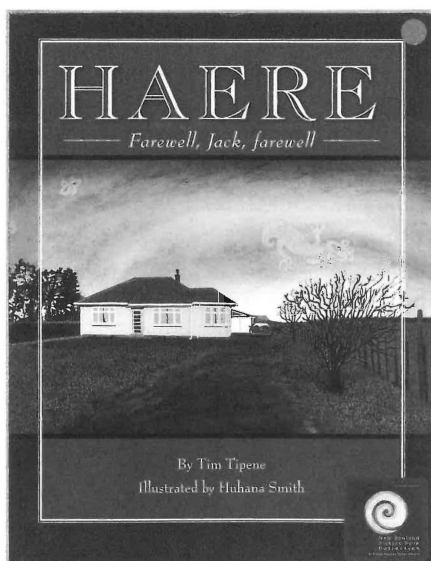
instrument linked to their heritage. As each gift is given, readers are introduced to the possibly unfamiliar names and forms of each present, both textually and visually. The eel is centrally placed on the verso page whilst each child is in a similar position on the recto, receiving their gift and dancing with it. This textual and visual reinforcement provides two opportunities for readers to discuss a range of cultural traditions and move towards intercultural awareness, thus exemplifying the pedagogical affordances of loanwords in picturebooks discussed by Daly (*Windows between Worlds*). The facial expressions of the children on the front cover clearly show how much they are enjoying themselves as they share their gifts. Kahukiwa's use of line, color, body gestures, and movement also shows how the children express themselves in different ways, depending on their culture; it makes it easy for young readers to see how they could perhaps add their own cultural artefact to become part of this cultural exchange.

Beliefs and Values

Tim Tipene's *Haere. Farewell, Jack, farewell* (2005) reflects traditional Maori beliefs and values surrounding the death and birth of a whanau (family) member. The story is told from the perspective of a young girl whose grandfather Koro Jack dies in the winter and whose niece is born the following spring. It provides many opportunities for readers to explore unfamiliar

beliefs and practices which surround death and birth, and is a chance for them to make comparisons with their own family or community practices. The first half of the book focuses on the winter when Koro Jack dies. The text and visuals show how family members take Koro Jack's body to the whareniui (meeting house), share stories and songs during the funeral, and finally bury him. The way that the illustrations are visually 'framed' highlights the memories that the characters have about Koro Jack. Tones of grey, black and brown predominate. Additionally the visual narrative portrays a spiritual aspect to the proceedings, with tupuna (ancestors) seen as shadowy white figures in the interior scenes before Koro Jack's body is moved to the whareniui. On the front cover, too, both the earthly and the spiritual are combined: the reality of the whareniui (meeting house) and the manaia (three fingered mythological creatures who are spiritual guardians and messengers between the earthly and the spiritual worlds) can be seen in the sky within the same static frame as the house and garden.

The visual narrative progresses in three consecutive double-page spreads, to show the coffin carrying Koro Jack to the whareniui, and each spread comprises several differently framed scenes plus a large panel of text spreading across the double pages. In the first spread, the coffin is carried in darkness and rain into the luminous white whareniui. Below the grey text panel, a second scene follows the family as they place a photograph of Koro above his coffin, shown in two framed images with framed text in between them. In the second spread, where manuhiri (visitors) are speaking inside the whareniui, two framed, almost claustrophobic scenes are divided by a beige bar and lead to a grey text panel on the verso side of the spread. The somber colors and enclosed images reinforce the solemnity of the moment. Again, manaia can be seen hovering above the heads of the manuhiri and blending into the brown walls. The third double spread depicts two framed scenes, above and below the text box, where the facial expressions of the speakers talking about the dead man's life show both the happy and sad moments. Their words are shown in memory bubbles presenting each individual's own memories of Koro Jack, whilst silhouetted scenes within the bubbles allude to events that are not mentioned in the dialogue. To the right of these images, the main character and her Nana appear to



Haere: Farewell, Jack, farewell (Tipene, 2006)

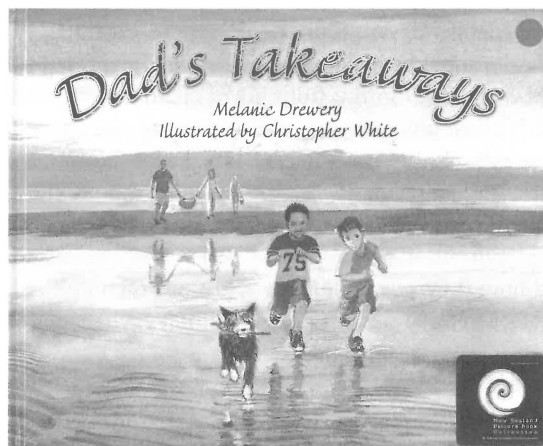
be watching Koro's life unfold, film-like, before them. Initially, in the top illustration, as the memories come back, grandchild and grandmother are looking down and crying against a dark background with slumped body gestures. In the lower scene, in which the background takes on a lighter hue, the gestures of the two characters are facing upwards and laughing in response to some of the speakers' amusing comments.

The second half of *Haere: Farewell, Jack, farewell* depicts the arrival of a new family member during New Zealand spring-time. It uses the same exterior view of the family home as the beginning of the book but this time with a sunny blue sky, lighter colored grass, bright green leaves on the trees, and active children playing outside. The interior illustrations are also much more cheerful, with more light and color in the house and characters wearing brighter colored clothes. The two double-spread illustrations show eating, giving speeches, and singing in an outdoor barn against a clear sky, tinged with the pink of a New Zealand sunset and later sparkling with stars. A warm yellow light glows from inside the barn, centrally framed in the illustration, so that we can see faces, dishes and the baby wrapped in a blanket reflecting this light. In the second spread the barn is much smaller and to the right of frame; a little reminiscent of the Christian nativity with which many children will be able to identify. This gives the impression that we the readers, as we walk away from the scene, have some understanding of the new birth. The final images, similar to that in the first half of the book, show the family at the urupa (cemetery); but this time they are taking the new baby to Koro's grave. Life has turned full circle as it does in all cultures.

Cultural Lifestyles

The NZPBC includes many books portraying everyday life situations which are familiar to children across cultures whilst, at the same time, providing opportunities for reflection on and discussion of differences in lifestyle and surroundings. Readymade food brought into the house, known as 'takeaways', is a familiar cultural concept in many countries. However in Melanie Drewery's *Dad's Takeaways* (2005) some specifically New Zealand aspects of lifestyles are represented visually as Dad takes his family to get the promised treat. Before they leave home, the wooden deck (verandah), tyre-swing hanging from a

pohutukawa tree (a distinctive New Zealand coastal tree), washing flapping in the wind and a dog chasing a ball across a large lawn depict the summer outdoor lifestyle familiar to New Zealanders. When the family drives across town, more distinctive aspects of a New Zealand seaside resort are revealed: a fish and chip shop, wooden posted power lines with seagulls, and Victorian-style wrought iron lampposts.



Dad's Takeaways (Drewery)

Chris White's very fluid use of light/bright colors, particularly on the front cover, take on an iridescent hue and, in this magical atmosphere, it is very easy to see how much pleasure the whole family is getting from their outing. The centrality of the sea, an aspect of everyday life for island-living New Zealanders, is shown by the use of a soft blue color and expressive lines in every illustration to create a shimmering movement for both the sea and the rock pools. The twist in the story comes when the family drive past all the usual places for takeaway food and Dad drives them to the beach. Here the family learn to gather kaimoana (seafood) from the shoreline including pipi (a shellfish), oysters and mussels. Later, when cooking their kaimoana on an open fire, the blue and yellow tones of the beach during the day turn pink and blue with the setting sun, visually depicting both the passage of time and the beauty of the New Zealand setting. Through focusing on the facial expressions/body gestures of the family as they go barefoot, use their toes to find pipi in the sea/rock pools, and later build an open fire an outdoor lifestyle which may not be familiar to all children is shared.

Sharing Visual Imagery

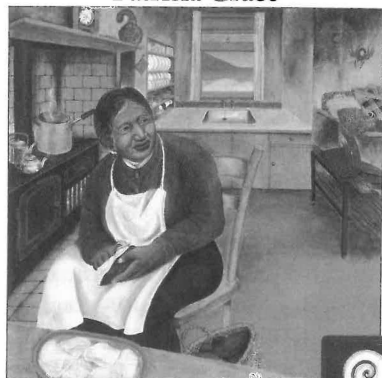
Sandra Beckett believes that “picturebooks offer a unique opportunity for a collaborative or shared reading experience” (2). This sharing of visual narratives can present all readers with believable unfamiliar cultural settings, and Gail Ellis suggests that these images are really important when learning about other cultures as well as reflecting on one’s own. She says that she “looks for stories that take place in settings other than western and urban,” such as those in the NZPBC, and address issues like citizenship and multiculturalism in order to develop intercultural awareness.

The visual imagery presented in Patricia Grace’s *The kuia and the spider* (1984) reflects a non-Western rural coastal setting which affords many opportunities for developing intercultural awareness and sharing visual imagery. In this classic New Zealand story, there are two main characters: the kuia (grandmother) and a spider who lives in her kitchen. These two have a competitive and argumentative relationship and compete to see whose weaving and whose grandchildren are best. The setting is a house across the road from the local whareniui (meeting house) in a small coastal community. The front cover underneath the title shows the inside the kuia’s house and sets the scene for most of the visual narrative. The kuia is sitting up-stage and her large figure dominates the page, but she is not looking at what she is doing

or at us. Her facial expression and body movements tell us that she is turning to look at, and maybe talk to, something/someone in the top right hand corner of her kitchen, and the title above this image tells us who it is. Even though his web in this corner is a fairly normal size, the spider himself appears to be quite large in comparison. Illustrator Robyn Kahukiwa’s visuals force us to look at the two main characters, but the incidental details that surround them in the kitchen give a good idea of how the kuia and the spider live together in this cozy setting with framed views through the window of the beach and the local whareniui. She uses soft yellows, blues, and greens in the kitchen, almost as a continuation of the beach, and expresses this theme in the yellow draining board, green shelves, green/yellow weaving, and the blue of the kuia’s shirt. Additionally, to add warmth to the scene, she uses misty grey lines as the steam puffs out of the large cooking pot on the stove and the round-shaped teapot is ready for making tea. The rustic red of the floor, which is also the color of the window blind, adds to the cozy harmony.

The relationship between the kuia and the spider is depicted through the shared visual imagery used for both of them on the front cover and throughout the visual narrative. The kuia has black hair, a blue-black skirt and a yellow scarf. This coloring is reflected in the spider who is blue-black with yellow eyes, and the pattern on his back is echoed in the tie of the kuia’s apron. What is fascinating about the illustrations is the way in which Kahukiwa uses line and muted colours to demonstrate the contrasting textures of the kuia’s weaving and the spider’s webs. Movement, too, is expressed in the use of lines and shapes as both sets of children arrive. The presence of the grandchildren (both human and spider) allows readers to visually experience the different uses for both the kuia’s and the spider’s weaving. Kahukiwa’s visual imagery details, through line, color and positioning on the page, the forms and functions of *rāranga* (Maori weaving): to make bags (kits) to hold *kumara* (sweet potato), seafood, shopping etc. as well as to sit and sleep on. Her images also show how the spider’s webs are used to catch flies, to climb on and to swing from. A montage of images concludes with the kuia’s grandchildren asleep close together on their mats in various poses, including the youngest sucking her thumb. The juvenile spiders, on the other hand, spread out in different parts of their grand-

The Kuia and the Spider Patricia Grace



Illustrated by Robyn Kahukiwa



The kuia and the spider (Grace, 1984)

father's web. Alongside this, the spider (male) and the kuia (female) are seen almost like an old married couple who argue a great deal but yet have affection for each other.

Interplay between Text and Image

Mieke Desmet suggests that cultural specificity can be “the catalyst for a new and different culturally intertextual text” (122). Gavin Bishop’s *The House that Jack Built* (2012) exemplifies this as it uses extracts from outside its own text taken from a well-known old English rhyme. The original rhyme, which makes reference to characters/lifestyle of sixteenth century rural England, is interwoven with images showing both the colonization of New Zealand by the *Pakeha* (Europeans) and the Maori culture that is gradually being overpowered. The phrase “house that Jack built,” often used in common parlance as a derisory term for a badly constructed building, is an appropriate metaphor for this story because Jack’s house collapses during the Maori up-rising at the end of the book.

Interplay between verbal intertext and visual images, set in counterpoint, follows Jack as he tries to create a new life for himself in New Zealand, and Gavin Bishop uses a whole gamut of visual codes to express this. The front cover, for example, centrally positions a poster of the house that Jack built and places an oversized Jack outside this frame putting it up as an advertisement for his arrival in the new land. Incidental details—like the pot of glue on the ground, his positioning on the ladder, and the fact that he has to stretch his body until it moves a little uncomfortably so that his hand can fix the poster onto the brick wall—suggest that he is not really at ease here. On the poster itself are small facial images from the indigenous Maori culture looking down on Jack’s house. These faces are framed by an oval border, reddish in color, and its motif is mirrored in the square frame around the poster, visually suggesting that they have power over what is happening. The house itself is centrally positioned with a vibrant red door, the color of both love and war, and looks rather out of place in an idyllic beach-like setting. Bishop uses soothing greens, cool blues, warming yellows, and curving lines to suggest that this is truly a place of calm serenity. The hard triangular shape of the house looks very invasive and out of place, and the cat on the roof announces an imported household European necessity.



The house that Jack built (Bishop, 2011)

At the opening of the story, in the first wordless double spread, there is movement everywhere to accompany Jack’s arrival. The page is so busy with activity that it is difficult to know where to look. The sepia toned images are only interrupted by the color red, both of Jack’s door being carried on a cart and of flames in the background. Each subsequent illustration tells the story of Jack’s arrival, building a small tent house whose red door motif is visible in every subsequent illustration as he sets up his business, marries and settles in. These initial pages, showing Jack’s arrival, also tell a second story of Maori society which is woven into the border and background of some of the images. Apart from the red door, the rest of the European image, including Jack, is always presented in sepia tones—not really hard, definite colors—and one has the impression that he may disappear. In addition, he is not very large on the page and is placed in a semi-subordinate position in the middle on the far left-hand side of the double spread. What dominates these two pages is a blue sea and sky with eyes scattered throughout, representing the children of *Ranginui* (the Maori sky father) and *Papatuanuku* (the Maori earth mother). Around the entire border of the spread is another text in brown-red capitals telling the Maori creation story of Papatuanuku and Ranginui. Throughout the book, a Maori perspective is represented in the border of alternate illustrations, sometimes using text and Maori motif, sometimes illustration. Also present in the central part of every illustration are the eyes in the sky. The presence of these eyes gradually declines until later in the story they are almost absent, indicating that Jack is becoming established and is finally

able to marry 'the maiden all forlorn'. The growth of the European settlement is also reflected in the size and development of 'the house that Jack built' which retains its red door, but expands to become "Trader Jack's Store".

As the narrative progresses, the red textual border giving the Maori perspective using myths and legend is replaced with European artefacts: hammers, candles, guns, wheels, nails, livestock, potato plants, and Maori people in European clothes. Later, the arrival of a fleet of sailing ships is followed by a gallery of European faces sporting hats and moustaches of the nineteenth century and, finally, bullocks drawing wagons. In contrast, the subsequent Maori uprising against the desecration of their land is represented by the red borders seeping into the visuals and ends with a resurgent Papatuanuku and a burnt down house that Jack built. The synergy of picture and text, often presented with several cinematic/cartoon format images to complement the words "this is the malt; this is the cat; this is the cat that killed the rat," provides an effective counterpoint for helping to explain the early European colonization of New Zealand through complex and multi-layered illustrations and intertextual references to the early English rhyme.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested some of the ways in which the New Zealand Picture Book Collection can be discussed in order to develop intercultural understanding and cross-continental awareness visually. Picture books (such as those in the NZPBC), as well as having the power to act as mirrors reflecting a national culture, can also provide windows into another culture for children living in a different continent. Through discussing the visual narratives of these texts, it is possible for young readers to gain a better understanding of the values and beliefs that have evolved in New Zealand, both before and after it was colonized by Europeans. Reading the NZPBC books to non-New Zealand children is an opportunity for sharing unknown visual stories and raising an awareness of the similarities and differences that exist elsewhere. By analyzing a small selection of the NZPBC books, it is possible for readers to begin to understand how diverse elements in New Zealand's cultural history have made the country what it is today. We hope, therefore, that teachers

from around the world will want to discuss the New Zealand Picture Book Collection with their pupils and contextualize cross-continental similarities and differences within an intercultural context.



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