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Narrative in Picture Books or, The Paper That Should Have Had Slides

I'm not sure my title is quite right—while the product is a unified one, I think there are *narratives* in a picture book, not just one narrative. As Perry Nodelman says:

[the picture book] is unique in its use of different forms of expression that convey different sorts of information to form a whole different from the component parts—but without those parts ever actually blending into one, as seems to happen in other mixed-media forms such as film and theater, so that someone reading a picture book must always be conscious of the differences of the different sorts of information. (21)

The literary world is so verbally attuned that it's easy to consider narrative as words only, and therefore to consider a picture book as a narrative with pictures; the art world focuses on the pictures, considering the picture book as an art object with extended captions. These views both seem to me unfortunately limited—if narrative were merely the words on a page, people wouldn't attend conferences—and this side-taking also seems to me to overlook the nature of the picture book as synthesis of art and words. To read a picture book aloud, as most were intended, is to dramatize it. One might almost consider a picture book a variant of a play, one that carries its own set design with it.

In this sense picture books resemble other combinative art forms, such as opera or musical theater, films, and ballet; older examples include the courtly masque and the emblem book. This resemblance is good for me, since I thrive on analogies (I was apparently permanently warped by that section of the SATs), and I therefore often find it useful to consider picture books along with those other media, without, of course, ignoring the fact that picture books also have their own individual charms and characteristics. I'd like to examine the aspects of the picture book—the text, the art and other physical factors—and then discuss how these narratives work together to affect each other and the final outcome.

TEXT: THE DOWNTRODDEN PARTNER

Despite its primacy, the text is often the downtrodden partner in the picture book form. A picture book can, after all, be a picture book without a text; it can't be one without pictures. It's tempting to consider the relative responses to the term "textbook" and the term "picture book"; the former is dull, the term occasionally used pejoratively; the latter is pleasurable and imaginative. Because the text of a picture book is short (*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak contains 338 words in all), the writing of it can seem easy; because the text accompanies pictures, it may seem insignificant. This apparent insignificance can lead to underestimation of the author's role. It's difficult, for instance, for the author of picture books to gain a reputation solely for that skill; many of the best known write for older readers or illustrate as well. The number of critical articles addressing picture book illustration far outweighs those dealing with picture book text, nor is it usual for the author of a picture book to win any writing award such as the Newbery (Nancy Willard's medal for *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* is an obvious exception, but one that was supported by well-received illustrations that made the title a Caldecott Honor book as well). The late Margaret Wise Brown was one of the first picture book authors to gain wide repute; two of the currently most prominent are Eric Kimmel and Robert San Souci, both of whom specialize in folktale adaptation, a type of text that frequently draws more attention, because of cultural interests, than does an original story (Tony Johnston is one of the writers of original texts whose reputation is growing). A likelier way to gain an authorial reputation is as a part of an author-illustrator team, such as Arthur Yorinks and Richard Egelski or Jon Scieszka with Lane Smith (Scieszka's one book with a different illustrator was nowhere near as successful); better still, create both text and art and allow the illustrator's fame to be the same as the author's.

This deceptive simplicity of picture book texts may be one reason why it's so easy to find bad ones. It can become a vicious and self-fulfilling circle: since it seems so easy to write a picture book, it must mean that anyone can, and picture book texts are further cheapened. Picture book authors are also likelier than illustrators to think or be told to think in terms of education rather than art. The pressure on a picture book to be educational, whether pedagogically, politically, or socially, falls almost entirely on the text, so desirable subject matter or an important message can outrank good writing. I have no objection to narratives with lessons: most stories have a point, and didactic tales are alive and well and often absorbing and frequently well-received by children as well as adults, but a lesson in itself is not sufficient for a story. Some picture books seem quite content with the idea that pictures exist as sugarcoating for the textual pill, because that arrangement relieves the text of the burden of being interesting;

the result is artistically inferior and unappealing to most children and adults.

Fortunately, however, many writers of picture books craft their work well, rising to the challenge of writing a text that will meet an illustrator at least halfway. The restraint involved in writing a picture book is a challenge; authors of other kinds of books generally employ narrative to tell the “whole” story, but picture book text must leave some meaning to the illustrations while still possessing its own spirit. It is the text through which adults hope to shape children and inspire them, and the text that an adult will reread a multiplicity of times to an importunate child.

The reading aloud is an important consideration, since most literary texts are designed with a different kind of reading experience in mind. It’s odd that the otherwise perceptive Nodelman, in his *Words About Pictures*, a detailed examination of the operation and process of picture books, focuses almost entirely on silent reading of the written text; he finally suggests that the “ironies and rhythms” he analyzes may not be apparent if those texts are read aloud (263). In practice, this seems incorrect. Most picture book creators seem attuned to the auditory aspects, since with most picture books those ironies and rhythms are generally most apparent when the book is read aloud as intended. Many picture book texts read quite blandly on the page, but their patterns of rhythm and energy appear with force when one speaks them aloud.

There are a multiplicity of possibilities even in this compressed and focused genre that will change the narrative completely: the text prose or rhymed; present tense or past; first person, second person, or third person. From a formal point of view, a text can be visually end-stopped, to borrow a term from poetry, with sentences completed before every page turn, or there may be visual enjambment, with sentences continuing through page turns, as in *Where the Wild Things Are* when Max makes “mischief of one kind// and another.” The text may be separated from the art (as in *Wild Things*), interspersed with it, or winding around it; or it may only appear in speech balloons (Raymond Briggs’ *Father Christmas*). Every page may have text, or text and illustration pages may alternate; or illustration alone may carry many spreads (*Wild Things* again). Or it might be primarily a wordless book with only a small bit of text (Rathmann’s *Good Night, Gorilla*). Even before you get to the myriad vagaries of individual style, there are narrative choices that will change a story completely.

As there are, of course, with the illustrations.

THE LANGUAGE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

I’ve found it very challenging, at times, to write about picture books, because the critical vocabulary is geared to words. The term “text” in critical circles, meaning the thing that is contained within every edition of the book, that sense of a title that exists without regard to the physical

objects, linguistically excludes illustration. In a larger sense, however, picture book illustration is inarguably part of (and in wordless books, completely) a picture book's text; it is read, it conveys intentional and unintentional meanings, it imparts the story.

As someone whose skills lie entirely in the writing area of the equation, I find myself overwhelmed with the technical side of illustration, with gouache versus watercolor, with color separations each painted in black and then photographed in a different color, with selecting two different kinds of black inks to approximate the brown tones on an original (as happened for Tom Feelings' *The Middle Passage*). I find it hard to imagine making it beyond these technicalities to the creative sweep of artwork, but I suppose it's not that dissimilar to fierce preferences for certain wordprocessing software, an understanding of the different effects between the passive and active voice, or the authenticity conferred by specificity.

Yet every technical aspect of illustration is an aspect of the visual narrative. Oils tell a story differently from watercolor, photo collage from pastels. Black and white (Isadora's *Ben's Trumpet*) obviously differs from color (Ehlert's *Circus*), or even from sepia tones or other monochromatic palettes (Van Allsburg's *The Sweetest Fig*) and even other black and white (Van Allsburg's *Jumanji*); illustrators, like filmmakers, know that the pictorial narrative changes if the colors are different. Look, for instance, at the stylistic and color differences between wordless books, which remove the additional possibility of textual difference (*Anno's Journey* and Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman*).

Differences in the visual treatment make for a completely different narrative. Sometimes it's a matter of interpretation. We're all familiar with songs that have been covered by two different artists. The difference can be substantial (I'm particularly remembering the anecdote about music-hall legend Marie Lloyd performing a rendition of the innocent drawing-room song "Come into the Garden, Maud" that had critics of her morality blushing on account of what they allowed into their own homes). That additional effect can be entirely the province of illustration. It's impossible that a story would be the same when illustrated by David Wisniewski as by Chris Van Allsburg, or by Ed Young and by Arthur Geisert.

Even very small differences alter the construction of the visual narrative. Betsy Hearne has a nifty set of slides that she uses in teaching—the artist Adrienne Adams redid her pictures for Priscilla and Otto Friedrich's *The Easter Bunny That Overslept* 20 years later, and the two sets of illustrations make a provocative contrast. The artist has clearly gained in skill and expertise over the years, and the changes are in keeping with the enhanced sophistication and subtlety of the genre and printing technology; the later illustrations have subtler hues compared to the primary colors of the earlier versions, and the compositions have gotten more diverse and

less uninflected, and there's much more sensitivity to the sweep and drama of line. The text remains the same and the pictures are really only slightly altered. Yet, the result is not the same story.

There is always the question of the necessity of such artistic achievement when the young audience may well not notice. I go now for my analogy to the world of musicals for Oscar Hammerstein's metaphor—he pointed out that when the Statue of Liberty was carved, Bartholdi took pains with the top of her head even though he had no reason to believe anyone was going to see it. Merit lies in careful craftsmanship of areas that few will notice as well as those that all will notice; Hammerstein was discussing underlying musical themes and verbal plays that may not be noticed as they go by quickly in live theatre, but are nonetheless there.

And, of course, people do now see the top of the Statue of Liberty's head. Changing times mean different viewpoints and different sets of knowledge, and contemporary children are much more visually schooled than previous generations. Take, for example, the Cottingley fairy incident, which is depicted in a movie called *Fairy Tale* in the U.S. For those who don't know the incident, a pair of young sisters, at the beginning of the century, claimed that fairies were visiting their garden and that those visitors had been captured on film—and indeed, they had pictures of themselves with fairies so convincing that Arthur Conan Doyle, for instance, believed them. Yet these photographs very obviously, to modern eyes, feature living girls and cardboard cutout fairies. Even without tackling the issue of our greater skepticism about such visitation, our visual sophistication makes differentiating between cardboard cutouts and real figures elementary . . . my dear Watson.

Visuals, after all, have their own language; some of it is literal, but some of it, particularly in narrative, is not. Apparently, for instance, many small children have difficulty understanding the convention that sequential pictures of the same object indicate the passage of time rather than just several similar objects at the same time. It's also possible that a child who has recently learned that the shimmers of green and yellow outside do constitute a tree will not be overjoyed at an Impressionist's careful return to the predistinguished vision. Nor is it fair to judge children's visual sophistication by their capability in production. Adults, after all, do not necessarily appreciate a mediocre violinist just because they are themselves execrable musicians. Evelyn Goldsmith notes the difficulty children have in recognizing some theoretically "childlike" abstractions (150). What we have here is a literary and artistic equivalent of what psychology terms the "fis phenomenon," wherein a child whose developing motor skills aren't yet up to the consonantal cluster pronounces "fish" "fis," but whose linguistic knowledge makes him insist that an adult's use of "fis" was incorrect; his ability to produce lags behind his ability to understand.

Children also react to pictures at a startlingly early age: Dorothy Butler's granddaughter Cushla, for instance, in one of the great longitudinal examinations of reading, responded to pictures and abstract symbols with fascination at nine months of age. Leonard Marcus argues that it can be appropriate to speak of "readers" of the picture, since a child's response to them is centered on words and names (35). In many books, especially alphabet books, art is simultaneously picture and language, as with *Anno's Alphabet*, Stephen Johnson's *Alphabet City*, and David Pelletier's *The Graphic Alphabet*. In a different vein, if you'll pardon the circulatory system pun, Ed Young's *Voices of the Heart* refigures the meaning of Chinese characters in new metaphoric images—in these books, the pictures are *about* language. From the child's point of view, the experience is no less reading for involving pictures. A toddler on a parent's lap experiencing *Wild Things* may not be literate in the technical sense of the term, but she is reading in the broad sense; she is decoding messages and meanings from the volume in front of her in order to recreate a story. Whether young children are poring over a wordless book, sharing a picture book read aloud, or privately experiencing both text and pictures, they are increasing their visual literacy and their understanding of the breadth and diversity of narrative.

FORMAT AND MORE

We often break up our discussion of picture books into the two components of words and pictures, but a recent spate of variations in form and physical effects reminds me that those aspects of a book, which don't fit neatly into the categories of words or pictures, also affect a narrative. Even before children can read books, the sheer physicality of a volume is very important to them; they are little inclined to abstract "text" or "pictures" from the construct of the book. Various studies have made it clear that physical makeup of a book greatly affects a child's response to it, and that children, who don't worry about shelving constraints, can warm to books both oversized and undersized. Children pet books and wear them, taste them and listen to them, creating a material connection with books that adults rarely envision. In reviewing Nodelman's *Words about Pictures*, Juliet Dusinberre reasonably criticizes him for failing to consider as a factor a book's smell (397); olfactory appeal rarely enters into critical discourse, but it can play a large part in a child's reaction. Maurice Sendak describes his reaction to a book received as a child:

The first thing I did was to set it up on the table and stare at it for a long time. Not because I was impressed with Mark Twain; it was just a beautiful object. Then came the smelling of it. I think the smelling of books began with *The Prince and the Pauper*, because it was printed on particularly fine paper, unlike the Disney Big Little Books I had gotten previously, which were printed on very poor paper and smelled

poor. *The Prince and the Pauper* smelled good, and it also had a shiny cover, a laminated cover. I flipped over that. And it was solid. I mean, it was bound very tightly. I remember trying to bite it, which I don't imagine was what my sister had in mind when she bought the book for me. The last thing I did was to read it. It was all right. ("Notes" 173)

Sometimes these forms are variations of books originally published in a more traditional arrangement. Picture books get reissued as big books, for instance, and more and more of late turn up again in board book form. Pop-up versions have been around for awhile, but a new (or perhaps resurrected) form, so far used for original books only, has been the foldout frieze (or pullout panorama, as I note a new one calls itself), which accordion-folds neatly between the book covers but opens up into a single lengthy, connected page. Then, of course, there are the newer versions, the downloadable electronic text, or the book on CD-ROM. (There are also movies and television, but I'm speaking of forms in which the illustrative and the verbal text are the same as the original.)

I don't mean to suggest some sort of purist hierarchy, whereby the sewn binding and paper pages are some holy literary grail. I like board books, and popups, and CD-ROMs. Nor do I think the conversion of any book into a different format is a recipe for disaster. But the medium is at least part of the message, and a book's narrative alters with its format and appearance. The very way readers interact with the book is changed, which Beatrix Potter so wisely noted in specifying the tiny trim size of her volumes. A book you can make a clubhouse out of is obviously going to demand different treatment than a book you can tuck under your pillow, or one which can only be handled occasionally and gently. In her excellent *Horn Book* article, Sarah Ellis discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of the electronic format of Bjarne Reuter's *The End of the Rainbow*, noting such important and overlookable details as the physical warmth of the laptop and its comparative unportability. [*Editor's note: The electronic format cited no longer was available at the time this publication went to press.*] A CD-ROM has its own momentum which can remove the onus from the reader. Scrolling is not the same as "the drama of the turning of the page," as Barbara Bader so eloquently puts it (1). This drama, too, is lost in the frieze, which offers a chance at a more sustained, less discretely episodic narrative, and indeed a more literally circular one. The story of snakes in *The Snake Book* would be a muted and lost one in a tiny format (though it might make a terrific frieze, with snakes all around). The focused and hemmed intensity of *Grandmother Bryant's Pocket* would lose its impact in a large trim size.

WORKING TOGETHER: SYNTHESIS OF ART FORMS

But it's all got to come together somehow. Maurice Sendak, when discussing illustrating his own text, suggests that in order to attain this

synthesis of art forms, a picture book creator not only deliberately balances the text and illustrations but “must not ever be doing the same thing, must not ever be illustrating exactly what you’ve written. You must leave a space in the text so the picture can do the work. Then you must come back to the word, and now the word does it best and the picture beats time. It’s a funny kind of juggling act. It takes a lot of technique, a lot of experience, to really keep the rhythm going between word and picture” (“Notes” 185-86).

There’s a story, for instance, about Katharine Hepburn and friends watching Charlie Chaplin’s *A Countess from Hong Kong*, his big flop, and finding it awful. Then someone suggested turning the sound off, and they suddenly found it effective. Chaplin had written a successful visual narrative, as he had done so many times before, and then added superfluous words, creating an unsuccessful combination and an ultimately unsuccessful narrative. He had not performed what Sendak terms the balancing act.

Linda Ellerbee, discussing television news, suggests that if the news report makes equal sense without looking at the visuals, the program’s doing it wrong, and that pictures that are merely redundant are superfluous. Dramatically speaking, there are a multitude of differences between television and picture books, particularly television news. But as Nodelman notes, television—like the picture book—is “a medium dependent upon the interrelationship of words and pictures. In his attack on wordless books, Patrick Groff suggests that, given the predominance of television in their lives, children are “‘prewired’ to see plots in pictures, but not in writing.’ Given the predominance of television, I suspect that children are actually ‘prewired’ to see plots in pictures accompanied by words” (Nodelman 186). And the principle of pointless redundancy applies as well to both media; pictures may reinforce the text, but if they do only that, they are not using the medium to its fullest.

Text and pictures, in fact, can achieve remarkable effects in contradicting one another, expanding one another, or even limiting one another. Joseph Schwarcz speaks of Tomi Ungerer’s pictures as “spiting the text” (16), and Perry Nodelman mentions that they are both narratives of dramatic irony (221), each speaking about matters on which the other is silent. He also notes the effect of illustrations not only in expanding the text but in opposing expansion, in buffering imagination and allowing it to explore dangerous areas in safety:

When I have read the text of Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* to adults who have not previously heard it, without showing them the pictures, many feel it to be a terrifying story, too frightening for young children. Without Sendak’s particular Wild Things to look at, they conjure up wild things out of their own nightmares, and those they find scary indeed. When I then tell them the story accompanied by the pictures, they always change their minds. (197)

Nor are the authorities of text and illustration identical. (We believe what we see, not what characters say—I just watched a show where we saw what the character did and then heard him deny it, which “means” that he’s lying. How does that work? When did I learn this?) If, for instance, you see a television character saying one thing and pictures demonstrating another, the picture is generally “the truth.” This can also be true in picture books, as in Stoeke’s *Minerva Louise* series or Hutchins’ *Rosie’s Walk*—the pictures tell what really happened, and the text is just the concept the joke needs to contrast against. In Swiftian terms, the text is that which is not.

Yet there is room also for the illustrations to be their own kind of non-literal truth, the truth, often, of the child protagonist. Whether you’re talking about John Burningham’s *Come Away from the Water, Shirley*, or Maggie Smith’s *There’s a Witch Under the Stairs*, the fact that the child’s visions are pictured lends them credence. If *Where the Wild Things Are* is pictured Max staring at the walls of his room or looking at a book of mythical beasts, it would be a book about the quaint imaginings of a thwarted child. In a genre, the picture book, where depiction of the legendary is commonplace and integral to the logic of many books, illustrations walk that narrow border between literal reality and imaginative reality, in a sense offering an authenticity that may not match objective experience.

It is partly out of the need for this balance that the best texts don’t necessarily make the best picture book texts, and the best art doesn’t necessarily make the best picture book illustration, just as the best poetry doesn’t often make the best songs, and the Mona Lisa would have a hard time being an illustration of anything other than the Mona Lisa. When Christine Jenkins was describing the Graduate School of Library and Information Science’s on-line classes, I was particularly intrigued by her ability to present picture books on the on-line environment with the text scrubbed out. And then I thought, with all the lovely neo-PhotoShop software available, that she could probably even fill in the text spaces or crop the pictures to present them as art that hadn’t anything to do with words, and then I thought—maybe that’s not quite fair? I’m reminded of Trina Schart Hyman, who responded to a gallery owner who lamented the empty blocks in the middle of her pictures, by stiffly pointing out that those empty blocks were the reason for the art. It’s surprising, for instance, even in our small manipulation of images at the *Bulletin* (either selecting for the Web page or choosing art to include on our cover) how often impressive illustrations lose their thrill as mere art. I’m not suggesting that these separate elements must be deliberately bad in some way, but rather that works of art, whether literary or painterly, that are successful independently rarely have the skills, as it were, to be good partners.

Those partnerships can take a variety of forms. When Stephen Sondheim first started learning about the writing of musicals under the

tutelage of Oscar Hammerstein, the master set his pupil certain tasks for his education. "For the first one," says Sondheim, "he told me to take a play I admired and turn it into a musical. . . . Next, he told me to take a play I didn't think was very good and could be improved and make a musical out of it. . . . For the third effort, Oscar told me to take something nondramatic, like a novel or a short story. . . . For the fourth and last in this series, he told me to write an original. . ." (Zadan 5). There are equivalents of those categories for picture books, too, and it's interesting to examine them when considering the relationship between the narratives. There are classic texts, such as Grimm and Perrault, that have been turned into picture books; there are not-so-classic texts that have been improved by their illustrations. Books such as James Michener's *South Pacific* are adaptations from another medium, and, of course, there is no lack of original books. Like musicals, picture books have components that are displayed independently and that sometimes are more successful separately than in their original setting. Yet together, the two aspects of those art forms are supposed to make something more than just the addition of the two, something greater than the sum of the parts and where the parts are no longer truly extricable from the whole. And surprisingly enough, they often do.

Like musicals, picture books almost always start with the text. This chronology is sufficiently established in the genre that books where the pictures have come first are rare indeed (though one cannot entirely be sure of the procedures of author-illustrators, whose prerogative it is to switch back and forth between the two). Often these art-first arrangements use pictures not to illustrate but to inspire, to take off from them as a starting point, such as Barbara Porte's riffs on Bill Traylor's art or Joan Aiken's stories from Jan Pienkowski's images. Sometimes, as in Walter Dean Myers' words for Jacob Lawrence's narrative paintings of the life of Toussaint L'Overture, the words undercut the carefully architected silent drama of the art when they are added to pictures made to be self-contained. Some of the most successful, such as Gwen Everett's *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie* or Toyomi Igus' *Going Back Home* use the art not as expansion and illumination but as portraiture of people and situations within the story. Then there is the additional complication that, with some of these works, the art was originally designed to be substantially larger and hung on a wall; the collectiveness, intense focus, and smaller size of book art makes for an entirely different display situation, so even without the words, the art has become a different thing. These books demonstrate that even the chronology of words and pictures changes a narrative.

Whether or not they employ the traditional hierarchy of words and pictures, many picture books manage an extraordinary fusion of narratives into a read-aloud drama that is, as critic Peter Hunt notes, the only literary genre that children's literature contributes rather than borrows (175).

Nodelman states:

Hearing someone else read a book, we are able to look at each picture during the whole time that the words printed with it are spoken. . . . Furthermore, hearing the words read aloud causes us to focus on them as a whole sequence—to want to know what happens next rather than to be content to pause and look at a picture when, for instance, a sentence has not been completed on a page. Children, then, encounter picture books when that literature is closest to its traditional ideal, but in a way far removed from most adults' reading experience. (263)

This is a unique effect. And to illustrate why it is worth taking pains to achieve, I go on one final borrowing mission, this time to Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Thing*. In the play, the character Henry, who is a writer, discusses the power of writing by using the metaphor of a cricket bat:

This thing here, which looks like a wooden club, is actually several pieces of particular wood cunningly put together in a certain way so that the whole thing is sprung, like a dance floor. It's for hitting cricket balls with. If you get it right, the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, and all you've done is give it a knock like knocking the top off a bottle of stout, and it makes a noise like a trout taking a flyWhat we're trying to do is to write cricket bats, so that when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . . . travel. (53)

While literary physics may be a highly inexact science, we all know that it exists, and that properly formed picture books comprise several pieces of cunningly combined narrative to send those with which they connect a great distance. This is craftsmanship, and that is its goal. When all those pieces are put in place and they hit children at the right speed . . . they travel.

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