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Ecoliteracy through Imagery: a close reading of two wordless picture books

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to propose some ways of reading two wordless picture storybooks which have recently been published, by Suzy Lee and Bernardo Carvalho respectively. The objective is to analyse the ways in which the visual discourse can create an effective narrative using a variety of pictorial strategies. These works were not idly chosen, however. Both are concerned with ecoliteracy, having narratives that tell a story about a specific relationship between humans and the sea. Depicting maritime scenarios, the two picture books promote a special and symbolic approach to the natural environment. The narratives help to configure the environment as more than merely an undifferentiated space inhabited by living beings, this being the most elementary concept of “environment”; rather, it is seen as an ecological arena involving the interaction between the landscape and the living beings it harbours. As such, the books assume the role of promoting not only habits of proto-literacy, but of ecoliteracy too.

Keywords: children’s literature, wordless picture books, ecoliteracy, Suzy Lee, Bernardo Carvalho

Wordless picture books are often considered non-literary products. In addition to being used with very young “readers,” who cannot actually read, the absence of text may often imply a lower quality, lack of interest or, in some cases, a lack of a coherent narrative. Nevertheless, some of these picture storybooks, as we intend to show, have a very complex structure and can indeed stimulate a variety of readings and interpretations. In these cases, readers can be both children and adults, opening up the reading possibilities significantly.

This paper is part of a larger research study carried out within the framework of a project on “Environment and ecoliteracy in recent literature for children,” currently being developed at the Centre for Child Studies at the University of Minho in Portugal. The purpose of this paper is to propose some ways of reading two, recent, wordless picture books. Depicting maritime scenarios, the two picture books include narratives that tell a story about a specific relationship between humans and the sea.¹ The use of natural landscapes, such as beaches and their elements, promotes a special, symbolic approach to the natural environment. It is our objective to analyse the ways in which the visual discourse can create an effective narrative using a variety of pictorial strategies, such as double-page spreads, compositional and perspective effects, page turns, colour

¹ This study draws on two picture books published in Portugal: *Um Dia na Praia* [A day at the seaside], by Bernardo Carvalho (2008) and *Onda* by Suzy Lee (2009), first published as *Wave* (2008).

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and so on. From front to back cover, the young reader is led along a path where gaps and continual revision of expectations will challenge their reading skills. The final meaning is the result of an intense dialogue between the reader and the book, from which complex reading competences are acquired, practised and developed.

The study of picture books is now a well-established area, with key works by writers such as Perry Nodelman (1989), Jane Doonan (1993), David Lewis (2001), Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2001), Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles (2002) and Lawrence Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo (2008) exploring their various qualities and types. However, studies of wordless picture books are far less frequent than those devoted to picture books with words, even if the verbal component is minimal. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions; for example, the special issue of the journal *Hors Cadre* (2008–2009), together with articles by Mary Renck Jalongo et al. (2002) and Ana María Margallo (2008).

Differing from picture books in that the presence of a visual narrative ensures page-to-page coherence, the wordless picture book is often thought to be aimed at very young readers on account of the absence of written text. In fact, the genre was formerly used more for pedagogical purposes, suitable for readers who could not yet read; thus the lack of words was seen to provide the perfect stimulus for asking children questions and gauging their competence in oral expression. However, it is known that the complexity of the act of reading is not proportional to the length of a given text and, in the case of wordless picture books, the criteria required to decode and interpret pictures are wide-ranging and complex, accounting for the fact that, as Teresa Durán (2002) has argued, they cannot be regarded as mute. By including a narrative which has not been made verbally explicit, wordless picture books entail the reader's more active cooperation in the process of engendering meaning. The absence of verbal signs also opens up reading possibilities considerably, since visual signs are “more polyvalent or ambiguous than spelling signs and they show greater variety; furthermore they do not interact within such closed systems and are not bound to such strict combination laws” (Bosh and Durán, 2009, pp. 40–41).

According to Sophie Van der Linden,

[readers leave] the comfort of the spectator of sound and image demanded by a picture story book read aloud and have to take up the role of actors and even of “activators” of a mechanism of a different nature based upon decrypting, setting relationships, inferring, as in all other acts of reading (Van der Linden, 2008–2009, pp. 7–8).

The reader's participation derives from a productive dialogue with the pictures, read both in isolation and in sequence, one after another, building up expectations and activating semantic inferences that will either be confirmed or readjusted in due course, as required by the subsequent pictures. The reader is also asked to discover the underlying relationship between pictures, the events occurring in the passage from one page to another, and the meaning implied in the selection of colour, perspective, frame and composition. Van der Linden has suggested that the wordless picture book bears some resemblance to both comic books and cinematic techniques. She has looked at the similarities in composition and at the use of the double-page spread as a screen. However, she also emphasises the artistic specificities of this genre, arguably one of the most original and demanding areas (both in terms of creation and reading) in the field of children's literature. According to Van der Linden, “as a result of the constraints placed upon creators, but also and mostly because of the dynamic it sets in motion, the

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wordless picturebook compels the reader into an artistic form that relies upon the mastery of the double-page spread and page sequence” (ibid., p. 11), both of which elements are particularly relevant in the works singled out for this article. Emma Bosh and Teresa Durán (2009, pp. 41–42) also argue that the reading protocol of the wordless picture book entails close and attentive (and sometimes lengthy) observation, moving forwards and backwards during the reading process, as well as the reader’s active participation in the production of the meaning resulting from interpretation. These features, while highlighting the sophistication of these publications, do not obstruct their function as entertainment, as the work of Maria Nikolajeva (2008) has demonstrated.

Moreover, these works share with other areas of children’s literature a potential for aesthetic fulfilment, playfulness and learning. As mentioned above, the fact that readers are confronted with this kind of work calls for them to actively construct meaning by pinpointing the representations of (un)reality that the books offer and, in the case of these two texts, to pick up on the ecological complexity that is enshrined in each scene or situation.

That is why we use the term ‘ecoliteracy’, which we see as involving the confluence of two dimensions. First, it represents a recognition of the complexity of the world; that is, an understanding that in any system, the constituent parts are interrelated rather than isolated, and that the nature of the whole is always different from the mere sum of its parts (Capra, 1996); moreover, that an individual’s interactions with the system affect the entire network. This complexity can be conveyed through either formal or informal teaching, but, as David Orr notes, the words used in this process “have power. They can enliven or deaden, elevate or degrade, but they are never neutral, because they affect our perception and ultimately our behaviour” (1992, p. 91). However, when depicting nature, words themselves may not be the best vehicle, given that “the language of nature includes the sounds of animals, whales, birds, insects, wind, and water—a language more ancient and basic than human speech” (ibid.). It may be, therefore, that wordless picture books are, ultimately, more eloquent in conveying these extra-verbal dimensions of ecoliteracy.

However, moving on to the second dimension, this appreciation can only occur if it is recognised that ecoliteracy involves going beyond a passive knowledge to the adoption of a particular frame of mind, for, as Orr puts it, “students taught environmental awareness in a setting that does not alter their relationship to basic life-support systems learn that it is sufficient to intellectualize, emote, or posture about such things without having to live differently” (1992, p. 91). Ecoliteracy involves a sense of responsibility for our individual acts and a recognition of the place and role of every human being, interacting with others, human and non-human, sharing time and space in both local and global environments. It thus goes beyond a basic environmental awareness—an external thing—to something that has been internalised and valued. Here is Orr once again: “ecological literacy ... includes the more demanding capacity to observe nature with insight, a merger of landscape and mindscape” (ibid, p. 86). With this notion of ecoliteracy in mind, let us now move on to consider the first of our two chosen texts.

Onda [Wave] is a picture storybook by the South Korean author, Suzy Lee, made up exclusively of evocative pictures (except for the title on the book cover, which has been handwritten by the author herself for both the English and Portuguese editions—see Fig. 1). It was given the New York Times’s Best Illustrated Book Award in 2008, and the Golden Medal from the American Society of Illustrators.

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With its contrasting halves (see Fig. 2 below), the double-page spread is effectively used to evoke a dialogue between three natural elements (i.e. air, earth and water) and a child protagonist who finds herself at the beach for the first time, exploring this new environment, and appearing to defy the strength of the sea, but only to end up being surprised by it. The technique relies on a chromatic interplay, including the use of black and charcoal grey, to figure earthly elements, while blue is used solely for the sea. The seagulls that witness this silent dialogue and its effects suggest movement and dynamism, which are striking features in a publication that eschews words in the act of telling a story. To a large extent, the seagulls replicate, as if in an echoing or glossing effect, the child's gestures and emotions, imparting remarkable dynamism to the scenes, filling out voids, drawing readers' attention to other sections of the page and allowing readers to share with the girl the role of leading character. In addition, the seagulls highlight the fusion of the conflicting



Fig. 1 Onda [Wave] front cover



Fig. 2 Third opening of the picture book

elements (earth, air and water) by swaying gracefully in a dance-like motion across the pages, reminiscent of the protagonist, as the image above illustrates.

Besides providing panoramic images, the landscape orientation of the picture book takes advantage of the symbolic meaning of the dividing line produced by the gutter in the double-page spread, which highlights the boundary between the earth and the sea.² The cover is 31 cm wide and 18.5 cm high. Once the book is open, each page spread practically doubles its width which, in visual terms, affords considerable spatial amplification. The seaside scenario can therefore be fully reproduced by making use of this panoramic perspective.

This invisible barrier establishes the difference between the security of the sand (earth) and the instability of the sea, as well as making it possible to measure the girl's gradual progress as her confidence grows. The interplay of the elements, as personified by the girl and the wave, is patent throughout the double pages, including subtle variations in the movements executed over a short period of time.

When read in conjunction, both front and back covers (see Figs. 1 and 3) suggest a possible way of interpreting the book. In fact, the former represents the girl advancing towards the sea and the latter illuminates the outcome of that encounter, so that the character's enjoyment appears to encourage readers to try out the experience for themselves. The cover spine is also illustrated and picks up the lettering of the title and the motif of the seagulls. Almost conceived as a pictogram, the title, through its colour (blue) and shape (simulating a wave with its cursive writing), suggests the unity of signifier and signified.

The book makes use of distinct endpapers in a variation that echoes the evolution taking place in the course of the narrative. Thus, the final endpapers represent, in blue, the gifts retrieved from the sea, symbolising the encounter that took place and the ensuing discovery of different kinds of seashell.

The narrative starts with a double spread that contains the dedication and title page, both of which have become increasingly relevant paratextual elements in more recent publications. The representation of the child running hastily across the sand towards the sea anticipates the book's general theme, about her enjoyment and engagement with the seaside, besides evoking the emotions prompted by it.

These paratextual elements require close analysis, given that they are instrumental in channelling the reader's attention and in setting up expectations about the visual narrative. They also include pertinent information about the spatial coordinates of the landscape and about the characters that interact, helping to stimulate a reader's identification with the fictionalised reality and with the protagonist's actions and emotions.

² On the "poetics of shape" and the creative challenges it poses, see Mariella Muheim (1979). Van der Linden (2003) has looked at the implications of picture book shapes and dimensions for the reader. Suzy Lee seems well aware of these, using the book's shape and double-spread page division in a similar way in *Mirror* (2009), another wordless picture story book.

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Fig. 3 Detail from the back cover

The actual medium used is also pertinent, and here, the decision to draw in charcoal has opened up the possibility of producing lines of different widths and shades, suggesting not only a sense of childlike rawness and simplicity but also of dynamic motion, achieved through rapid and uninhibited sketching. Aside from this, charcoal is a very effective medium for conveying character through facial expression, posture and even mood. With minimum resources it maximises interpretive possibilities.

Aside from the use of line, colour too is crucial in the production of meaning. In this book, the use of blue is particularly noteworthy. It is, of course, primarily associated with the sea; however, it will later spread on to the girl's dress, intimating the fusion of elements which occurs when the wave soaks the child (Fig. 4).

In terms of narrative organisation, this picture storybook offers the reader a dramatic realisation of a struggle between opposing forces which is conveyed with subtle modulations over twelve spreads (in the final one of which, blue is the dominant colour, giving a clear indication that the child is underwater). This spread is followed by five more in which the child is shown reconciling herself to a more peaceful and fascinating relationship with the sea. This shift can be seen in Fig. 4, the first opening after the confrontation between the girl and the sea, which ended, first, in a plunge, then in what we might call a bath (Figs. 5, 6). The variation between each section is signalled through the colour blue, which was formerly confined to the maritime scenario and which is subsequently used for the sky, too, spreading over the pages to symbolise not only the child's encounter with the

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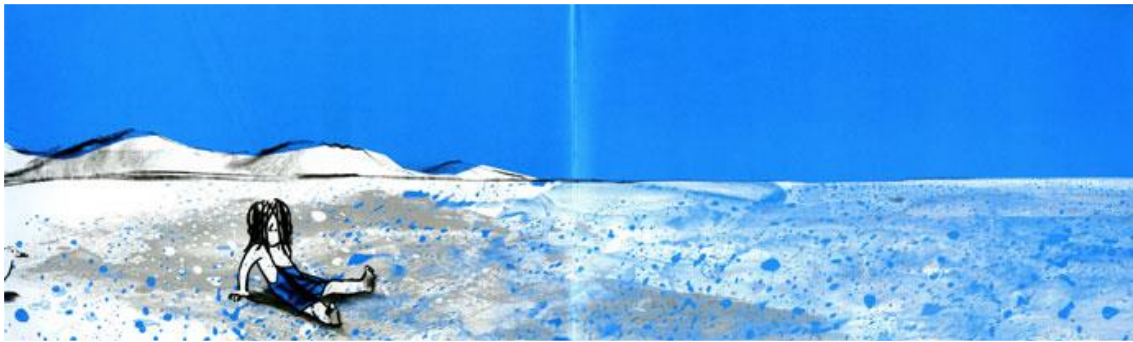


Fig. 4 Thirteenth opening



Fig. 5 Eighth opening



Fig. 6 Tenth opening

elements but also to indicate a fusion of these very elements. Each one of the eleven double-page spreads preceding the “plunge” and “bath” expresses a different emotion experienced by the child as she moves towards the sea in a game of discovery, which functions as a metaphor for the process of emotional, interpersonal bonding. From an initial curiosity to a more detached attitude of challenge, soon to be punished by the intervention of the sea, the pictures portray, in a sequential manner, fear, a longing for domination, mesmerised gazing, attempts at closeness, control, contentment and excitement (Fig. 5), surprise, fright and fear (Fig. 6). These spreads all provide evidence of the child’s growing self-confidence and of her ongoing progress towards self-discovery.

The character’s discovery helps to configure the setting as not merely an undifferentiated space inhabited by living beings—this being the most elementary conception of “environment,” according to Francisco Borges (2002)³—but also as an ecological arena marked by the interaction between the landscape and the living beings

³ Following Drouin and Astolfi’s (1986) perspective.

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it harbours. Understandably, the details of the ecological environment are not fully realised here, but the reference to the interaction, both factual and symbolic, is crucial in laying the foundations of such a concept. Rather than being subdued by the child, the natural elements are endowed with power, as if they had a will of their own, as shown by the seagulls' dance mentioned earlier, or by the waves in the tenth opening (Fig. 6). Although indebted to an anthropocentric orientation, the perspective adopted should not be regarded as merely utilitarian, as it leaves no doubt as to the individual's dependence upon the natural environment and a person's powerlessness to tame it according to his or her whims. At the end, the transformation of the character's dress, which turns from grey to blue as a result of the action of the water, is an indication of the interfusion of elements, shattering the watertight divisions underlying more elementary conceptions of a natural environment.

The fact that the same space is depicted in all of the pictures, which the representation of the dunes in the foreground helps to emphasise, facilitates a chronological reading of the images, as if they were being choreographed for a staged production. Or, perhaps more powerfully, we imagine that we might be in a cinema witnessing the events from the viewpoint of a stationary camera, as all the movement unfolds before us.

Our second wordless picture book, *Um Dia na Praia* [*A day at the seaside*] (2008) by Carvalho, dispenses with verbal discourse to the extent of omitting the title from the volume's front cover, as Fig. 7 shows. The only exceptions to the strictly visual character of this publication are the mention of the title on the spine, the book's bibliographical data (publisher, date of edition, ISBN, etc.) and a blurb on the back cover, which is both a synopsis and an invitation to engage in "reading."

Therefore, narrative interpretation will have to be based solely on the information deduced from the pictures which, when read in sequence, are organised around the actions carried out by a character that moves across the pages within a specific framework of place and time.

Using a minimalist approach based on coloured and contourless shapes, which are visual devices repeatedly deployed by the illustrator, the book encourages readers to use their initiative to fill in the blanks, reading between the lines, inferring and positing hypotheses that will eventually be reassessed and reformulated as new information is supplied by each new page. The narrative starts immediately after the cover, on the opening endpapers, in which the sheer contrast of two colours (blue on a beige background) provides relevant information regarding spatial location, as Fig. 8 clearly illustrates.

The spread that follows presents a close-up of the main character set against the blue of the sea. Based on his facial expression, which includes a broad smile, the reader is encouraged to make some inferences about the character's psychology.

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Fig. 7 Picture book front cover



Fig. 8 Initial endpaper

The subsequent spread is clearly divided in two, representing two easily recognisable actions—the spreading of the beach towel on the left and the opening up of a beach umbrella on the right—which not only situate him at the seaside but also make us anticipate his forthcoming enjoyment. The second opening confirms this, establishing an overall connection between these references and the book title and cover picture, as shown in Fig. 9.

Once the initial situation has been outlined across four pictures, a conflict emerges in the shape of an unknown object spotted in the sea. The scrutinising attitude of the man, highlighted by the position of his hand, is turned into action in the next picture as the protagonist heads towards the sea in order to retrieve the object. In the space of time separating this picture from the preceding one, some intermediate actions will have to be inferred by the reader; namely, that the man has stood up, headed towards the water and entered the sea. The production of meaning



Fig. 9 Second opening

is thus closely reliant on readers' cooperation and their ability to "read" beyond what the pictures reveal. As an economical device, the narrative makes the most of the page-turning moment, using it as a strategic way of forwarding the plot (see Sipe and Brightman, 2009). The same collaborative procedure is noticeable on the following page, which is once again split into two, creating a sort of zoom effect as the nature of the object is disclosed, being debris of some sort. While this issue of pollution appears to have been solved by the man, who takes the object out of the water, in turning the page the true extent of the pollution is revealed: the seaside is cluttered with all kinds of rubbish.

The depiction of the man in the process of entering the sea leads the reader to conjecture that the situation has encouraged him to act and presumably to repeat his initial gesture by removing all the debris from the water. The following spread is predominantly

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metaphorical, rather than referential, and the action portrayed could be occurring in the character's mind. He is completely overwhelmed by a gigantic wave of objects that, forming a pattern, stand in the background of the picture onto which the protagonist's shadow has been projected. Returning once again to the referential framework of the story, the illustrator has opted to give a panoramic, bird's eye view, presenting the overall scene, full of action and movement, and showing the man's industrious attempt to remove, one by one, all objects from the water. Their apparently random arrangement on the sand is indicative of their quantity and diversity, and, being contrasted with a space that was once the epitome of cleanliness, emphasises the scale of the waste and pollution that humans produce. For many older readers, this image will evoke memories of real maritime pollution disasters. Being not just visible but almost tangible, we as readers will want to join the protagonist in ridding the ocean of such detritus. Though in complete contrast to his anticipation of a quiet and peaceful day at the beach, the man's action does not yet show anything remarkably new: he is merely curious, engaging in socially and environmentally desirable behaviour.

The following spread, however, compels readers to re-examine their initial assumption. Coming after yet another hiatus, and again occurring at a page-turning moment, the objects retrieved from the sea are seen to have been recycled and reused, taking on an original shape and new life, which the judicious reader will ascribe to the actions of the character (who occupies a peripheral position in this picture, though he continues to be fully engaged in activity). Figure 10 shows the reconstruction process, where it is possible to discern what is being built.

This construction will eventually enable the man, as we see once the page is again turned, to set sail in what he has created (Fig. 11). As a result of his effort, hard work and, in particular, qualities of resilience, creativity and imagination, the character steers his most unusual boat into the sea. He has by now acquired the status of a hero, although at the beginning of the story his journey was completely unforeseen. Readers are also made to reconsider their interpretation of the narrative, reappraising it in metaphorical terms; that is, linking it to the power of the imagination, to our ability to dream and to freedom itself. By transforming debris into something useful and unexpected, this apparently ordinary man has simultaneously transformed himself into a hero. He has accomplished a deed worthy of celebration.

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Fig. 10 Tenth opening



Fig. 11 Twelfth opening

When faced with bizarre and unexpected circumstances, he succeeds in altering and transforming them to his advantage, certainly, but also for the benefit of everyone else in the ecosystem. The increasingly distant perspective, in line with a progressive zoom out which extends to the final endpaper, gives readers both an indication of closure and, simultaneously, of openness, since the man's journey seems to extend beyond the limits of the book we are in the process of reading. It should be noted that the suggestion of movement implicit in seafaring is conveyed by a change in focus, which allows the blue colour to spread out progressively until we reach the final endpaper. This one differs from the opening endpaper in some small but rather significant details; namely, with the

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addition of a tiny boat and a red beach umbrella visible on the skyline, suggesting that we include these elements in our interpretation of the final scene.

As a picture storybook exclusively made up of images, this work by Carvalho presents a stimulating challenge to the individual's reading and interpretive skills. By employing a very simple and yet extremely effective technique and by profiting from the shapes and the games they suggest, Carvalho relates the adventures encountered by a character in the course of what appears to be an ordinary day at the beach. When faced with a string of strange events, the character, after some initial surprise, ultimately benefits from the challenges he is faced with. He manages to transform a space dominated by squalor and pollution into a pleasurable setting by reusing, in an unexpectedly symbolic manner, what was once litter, turning it, like a bricoleur, into new and functional objects. Once again drawing on cinematic techniques (whose influence extends to the choice of frames and especially to the opening and closing of the story, using standard zoom effects), this experimental book creates a plot in which surprise plays a crucial role.

Apart from the narrative setting, the picture books we have selected also suggest a privileged interaction between human beings and their environment, the sea especially. The latter is almost personified, as becomes clear in *Onda*, where it plays with the girl and takes part in her visit to the beach. In *Um Dia na Praia*, the sea, through the protagonist's action, is rescued from its condition of waste landfill and transformed into a site of exploration, freedom and creative fulfilment. In both picture books, the human being seems to discover, even at first glance, the essence of the sea: its significance as the primeval source of life and therefore as a place of harmonious interaction—or, at least, readers can find, along with the characters, that the sea is neither a powerless element that humans can easily dominate nor a receptacle where humans can hide all their discarded waste, without consequences. Implicitly, both visual narratives present a positive image of this natural element, valuing it strongly and ultimately urging readers to protect and preserve it, accomplishing more sustainable social practices. In *Onda*, the sea is pictured as an equal, one of the protagonist's partners with whom she comes into contact during her leisure; in *Um Dia na Praia*, the sea, which was a dumping ground before, likewise becomes a more pleasurable space. In some ways this might be seen as a utilitarian outcome, but clearly it is dependent on a mutual respect and sense of reciprocity. In short, both these picture books can be seen as engaging with a growing ecocritical discourse, promoting not only habits of a proto-literacy, but also of ecoliteracy, which, as Orr stresses, “begins in childhood” (1992, p. 86).

In both narratives, the seagulls are a cohesive element that seems to prolong the symbolic bond between humans and nature, while at the same time evoking a maritime setting and ensuring visual stability. Although both picture books are technically mute, the environment depicted—the seashore, unlike the land, perhaps—is never still, such that readers will readily be able to evoke the sound of waves and, in the case of Lee's work, the squawks and cries of the seagulls which escort the child. Even her joy, arising especially from the discovery of the water and of the wonders it both conceals and reveals, might induce in us feelings of glee, laughter and surprise. In Carvalho's book, too, the continuous presence of the sea might evoke a similar soundtrack.

According to Jalongo et al. (2002, p. 168), “wordless picture books connect visual literacy (learning to interpret images), cultural literacy (learning the characteristics and expectations of social groups) and literacy with print (learning to read and write language).” In the case of the picture books focused on in this article, their respective

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sequences of pictures are organised chronologically and imply the existence of causal links, thus fostering the development of readers' narrative skills.

To understand these wordless picture books, then, one needs to “read” the expression of time, space, movement and action, besides deducing their modes of discourse. Reading, in these cases, is the outcome of an active and collaborative process that involves the interaction of pictures and readers' cultural knowledge. Moving both forwards and backwards, a reader's act of interpretation is regulated by the succession of pictures in relation to which hypotheses and expectations are either confirmed or invalidated by her or his progress. Regardless of the absence of verbal text, we are dealing with books that still inscribe the recognisable process of reading, thereby requiring attentive, perceptive and active readers who are willing to take part in the game of reading.

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