

Choose three picture books you consider to be postmodern. Examine what defines them as such.

2,323 words



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Picture books are made up of words and images, which have their own purpose but are able to feed off each other, using their opposite strengths. Peter Wagner used the term 'iconotexts', and W.J.T Mitchell the term 'image text' (Walker, Chaplin, 1997) to describe these works. They are important, as children learn to read images before they learn how to read words. Child states that we as humans are "visual beings" (Child, 2018). When we first come into the world, we visualise before we can process. Berger agrees: "seeing comes before words" (Berger, 2008, p.7). In this essay, I will be reviewing three picture books and how they display postmodern characteristics, such as: intertextuality, playfulness, indeterminacy and metafiction, which, as itself, shares the role with the postmodern picture book in being able to break the fourth wall and make the reader question what is reality and what is fiction.

Lauren Child's follow up from her first picture book idea *Clarice Bean: That's Me* comes *Clarice Bean: My Uncle is a Hunkle*. Myself, as a child, was drawn to the movement of the words, and how they went around in circles and upside down, which encouraged my eye to follow the images surrounding the text. The artist has really experimented and played around with the text by changing the size of the font, the shape and layout. McCallum states a characteristic shared with metafiction being "playfulness", along with "disorder and chaos" and "narrative fragmentation" (Sipe, Pantaleo, 2012, p.3). Words being "scattered" is a technique used "to stimulate" the imagination, which "cannot always be followed on a linear outward or homeward path" (Clement, 2013, p.57). This would be considered postmodern. In this picture book, sometimes you will almost see the words falling off the page as

though they are trying to escape. According to a few sources, the relationship between text and image is oppositional, as conventional signs (words) are linear, whereas iconic signs (images) are non linear (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2013, Introduction). Child puts into consideration how the words and images will work together so, like many other practitioners suggest, “one doesn’t work without the other” (Child, 2020). The words resemble characteristics of images, which is one of the reasons why it is defined as postmodern.

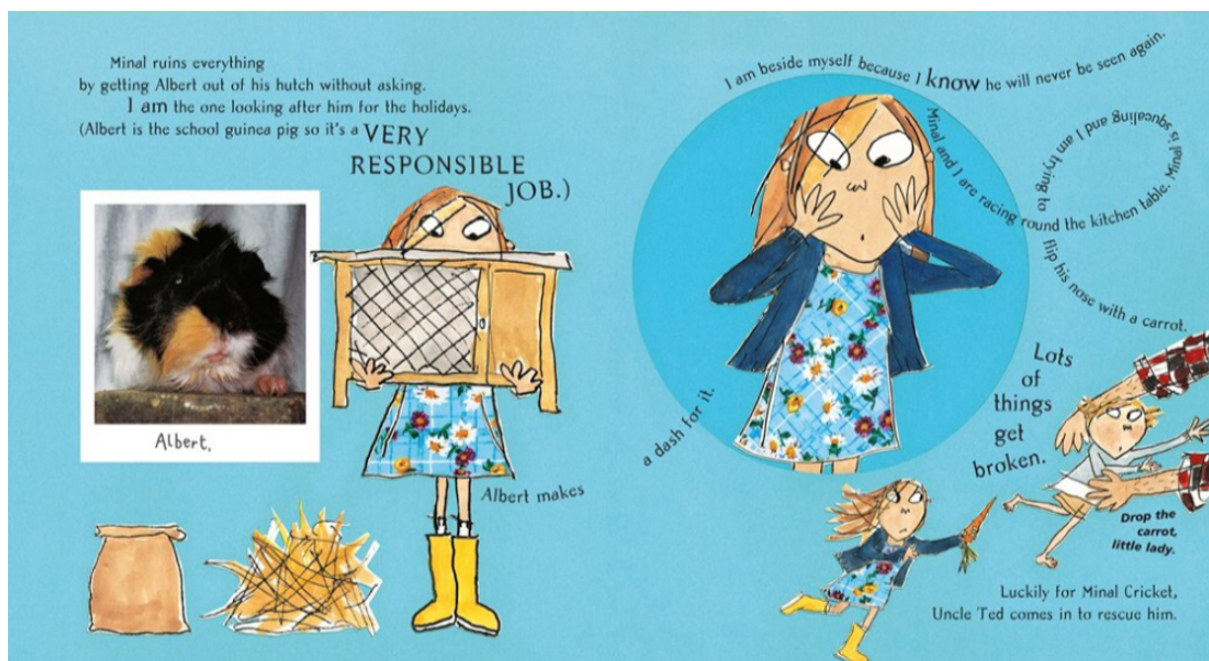


Fig. 1

Looking at figure 1, you can see that the movement of the words reflects the theme of ‘the chase’ with Calrice Bean running after her brother, and trying to find the lost guinea pig. This blurs the line between image and text, and so the words become a part of the story (deconstructionism) using “framing devices that break down boundaries between text and image” and “compositional strategies” that make “text and image indistinguishable” (Clement, 2013, p.58). The fact that the

illustrator used hand drawn characters and placed them on top of ready made photographs, or has included photographic pictures in her illustrations, really drew my attention to the surrealness of combining reality with fiction. Child's illustrations use "juxtaposition between the photographic images in the secondary world with the photographic images in the primary world" (O'Sullivan, 2008, p.48).

From figure 1, we can identify the guinea pig from the photograph, being used to highlight the lost subject. This technique was also a way to connect more with the reader as they could visualise the protagonist, Clarice Bean, in familiar places they could recognise, as opposed to being something that was drawn to replicate a scene that maybe wouldn't be as recognisable in a child's mind. We can also identify this in figure 2.

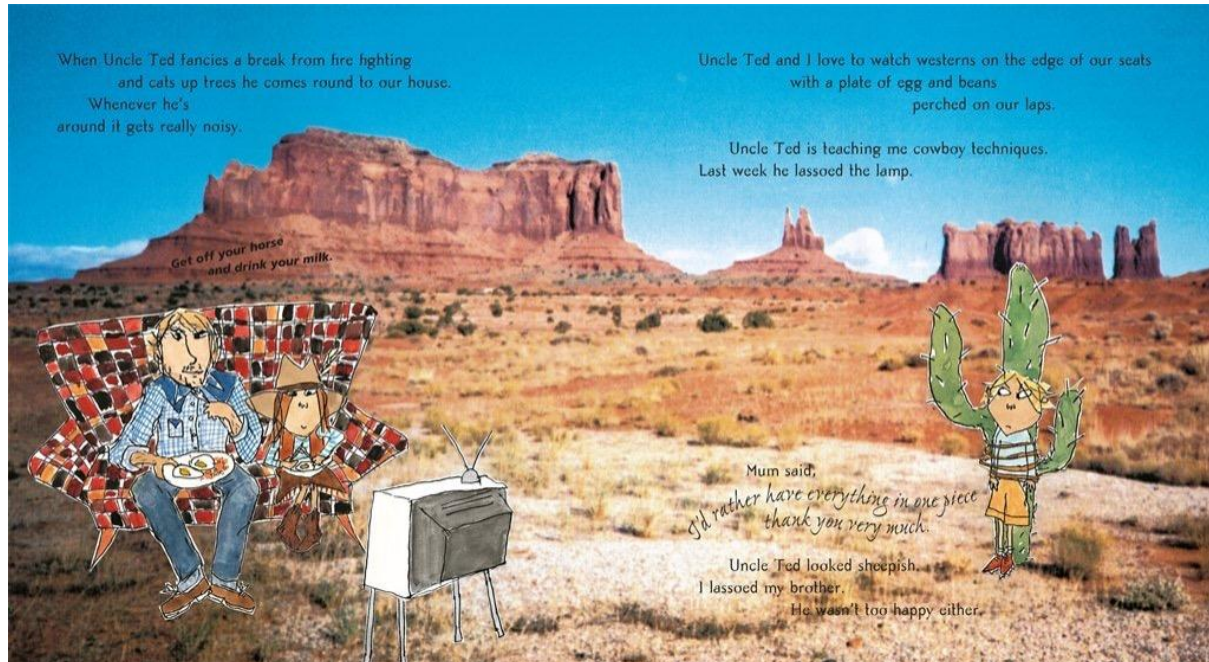


Fig. 2

This is a prominent example of combining reality with fiction as the protagonist, Clarice Bean, and her Uncle Ted, are sat on the sofa in a sitting room setting,

watching television. However, the background is a photographic image, describing the setting of the scene from the show they are watching; it is as though they have escaped from their world and have been transported into a different world. Although, the illustrations convey that they are still in their sitting room as they are not interacting with the world they are placed in, having been stuck on top. Therefore, the viewer is met somewhere in between.

The landscape is spread out on a double page, with Clarice Bean and her Uncle Ted on the left-hand side, and Clarice Bean's younger brother, Minal Cricket, on the right hand side. Gaffron concludes: when we look at a picture, we follow "a certain fixed path which we seem normally to follow within the picture space". The fixed path our eyes follow, starting from the foreground on the left of the page, around the space, until our eyes get to the background on the right of the page (single or double). She also states:

Because we look first at the left foreground, we tend to place ourselves in that position and to identify with the objects or figures located there.

(Clement, 2013, p.58)

In this case, we would identify more with Clarice Bean and Uncle Ted.

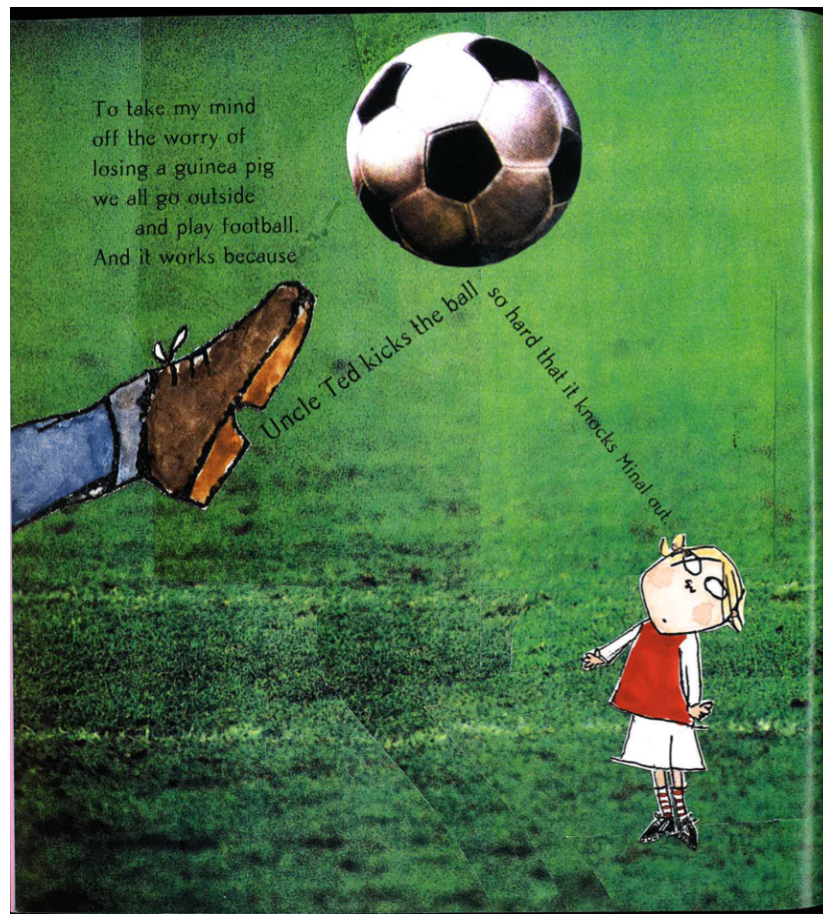


Fig. 3

Another example of our eyes following the page, and the images interacting with the text, would be in figure 3, where the words follow upwards from Uncle Ted's foot towards the football, and then from the football in the direction of Minal Cricket's head, indicating the character being knocked out by the highlighted object.

This also allows us as viewers to visualise both perspectives, as we follow Uncle Ted's kick, and we can see the difference in size between Uncle Ted and Minal Cricket, and so we begin to sympathise with the younger brother. A postmodern characteristic identified by Lewis would be "double orientation" which

enables the picture book to look in two directions at once and sometimes permits picture book makers to play off one perspective or view against the other.

(Clement, 2013, p.58)

In conclusion, the book takes us on a journey with the images and the words working together, also allowing us to view the story from the multiple perspectives of the characters.



Fig. 4

Another example would be in figure 4, where we are able to follow a sequence of events that concludes a problem solved with the images/symbols, indicating each step: our eyes follow the dotted line and so we identify and empathise with 'mum', and view the situation from her perspective.

Returning back to the relationship between image and text and the idea of scattered words and images in a non linear context stimulating the imagination, according to author Lesley D.Clement: “This interanimation” of image and text...

engages the reader’s visual imagination to make connections and provide a shape to what is seen.

(Clement, 2013, p.57)

Similarly, Goldstone identifies two postmodern characteristics, including “greater power given to the reader/viewer encouraging co creation with the author/artist” and “nonlinearity” (Sipe, Pantaleo, 2012, p.2). When readers make connections, they are co creating the story and therefore the author and/or illustrator is “promoting the reader as a producer, not a consumer” (MP Flory, 2016). This comes from being able to draw out multiple meanings from the text and/or image. Lewis outlines ‘indeterminacy’ as being one of the defining strategies/characteristics in postmodern picturebooks. Anstey and Bull agree, labeling some of the other characteristics, such as “contesting discourses, intertextuality, and multiple meanings and audiences” (Sipe, Pantaleo, 2012, p.2). This means in order for the reader/viewer to participate in creating the story, the combination of images and words need to be ambiguous in order for the viewer to place their own meaning onto the story.

Recurring to what would be recognisable, looking at Lauren Child's *Clarice Bean: My Uncle is a Hunkle*, according to Margaret Meek:

the meanings that we make from text depend on our previous experiences and each reader will bring something of themselves to the reading of a text.

(Watson, Styles, 1996, p.105)

Berger agrees: "Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own ways of seeing" (Berger, 2008, p.10). The connections we make in a picture book are usually based on our own experiences, as we are born storytellers (Phillips, 2017). Robertson says: "stories are the way we keep our memories" and "we form our identity based on personal stories" (Robertson, 2018).

Garmann's Summer is the second picture book illustrated and written by Norwegian graphic designer/illustrator, Stian Hole, which won the 2007 'BolognaRagazzi' Award. In his picture books he makes..

playful postmodern references to a range of visual idioms including mid-twentieth century consumer advertising and "Bollywood meets David Lynch" colour arrangements.

(Sipe, Pantaleo, 2012, p.30)

This would be making reference to 1950s consumer advertising: 'allusion', one of the 3 types of intertextuality (Shattock, 2016).



Fig. 5

He also uses Adobe Photoshop to create digital collages that look like he has combined photographs with drawings and has assembled them together in a way that has been painted or drawn: “but takes it that bit further by truly painting with it rather than merely assembling disparate elements and references cleverly” (Sipe, Pantaleo, 2012, p.32). We can see this in figure 5, with Garmann’s reflection in the water, how the sea fades into the skyline, and the shadowing in the bottom left

and right-hand corners of the image. Common techniques found in both Child and Hole's picture books are bricolage and collage: the construction of different forms of mixed media and piecing together different elements, especially including photographic images.

Multiple award winning author and illustrator, Anthony Browne, illustrated *Into the Forest* which has taken reference from classic fairytale stories, such as Jack and the Beanstalk and Little Red Riding Hood.



Fig. 6

Browne has used Pastiche and Allusion (intertextuality); putting the main character in the shoes of Little Red Riding Hood and setting him out into the forest to deliver a basket to Grandma. To help the audience distinguish one story from another, the main character stands out by being in colour, contrasting from the monochrome forest and the characters from separate fairytale stories. This is so we know that the character who is entering the forest is from the story we are reading and has crossed over into a different world, similar to Child's picture book. Comparably, Winnicott states: "Dream fits into object-relating in the real world, and living in the real world fits into the dream world in ways that are quite familiar" (Winnicott, 2005, p.36).



Fig. 7

Another example of this would be in figure 7, where you can identify the protagonist running out of the frame, which comes under 'metafiction' as it has been reinforced that the book is nothing more than a book and therefore "plays on the idea of what a book is or what could be" (Nel, 2010). The border around the frame is a white space that breaks that wall between the world of the book and our world. The protagonist interacting with classic fairytale characters/pastiche references, indicates that one

story has transitioned into another, and has become a story within a story. The author wants the reader to make that connection of different stories interlinking.

On the other hand, in Hole's picture book, it is not his intention for children to pick up on certain postmodern references made that are perhaps more adult. Nevertheless, he does understand how children and adults may view picture books differently. In an interview, he states: "Children are not afraid of what they don't understand" (Sipe, Pantaleo, 2012, p.30). This implies that children are more straightforward and will ask questions if they are curious. Being children, they are more open to all kinds of ideas, since there is less of a restriction. Similarly, in the introduction of Nikolajeva and Scott's book, it suggests that children "do not read the same book; they go more and more deeply into its meaning". This ties in with what I mentioned earlier, relating back to scattered word imagery and nonlinearity: "we may find infinite possibilities for word-image interaction" as "words and images leave room for the readers/viewers to fill with their previous knowledge, experience, and expectations", relating back to the idea of co creation (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2013, Introduction). Children subconsciously understand the importance of images in working together with words to communicate the story or the meaning of something.

Helen Bromely, a teacher in a class of six and seven year olds, made notes on what the children were picking up on when viewing a different book by Anthony Browne, titled: *Voices in the Park*. Bromley notes: "The children were themselves able to be authors of polysemic texts" and they were able to read around the text and pick up on postmodern characteristics such as 'parody' and 'ambiguity'.

They understood that “words can mean so much more than they actually say” (Watson, Styles, 1996, p.106), whereas adults would normally “regard the illustrations as merely decorative” having lost our natural ability to really look into/read pictures, as we have perhaps become heavily reliant on “verbal, especially written, communication in our society” (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2013, Introduction).

Similarly, Berger addresses the power words have in our world: “we are surrounded by the world, although we use words to describe it” (Berger, Chapter 1). This puts emphasis on images as being fundamental as we often need to view something before we can understand it.

The dominance of verbal and/or written communication in the world might be to blame for losing our ability to read images in a way that would help us to move through the story. Browne demonstrates the method of the power of images by creating clues and puts into consideration the marks and colours he uses in order to convey hidden messages. I found that he was inspired by the ‘spot the difference’ pictures you would be faced with in comics (Browne, 2013). Postmodernism responds to this notion of how images speak, making it an engaging and enjoyable experience for the reader.

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Fig. 1 and 2:

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Fig. 7:

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Fig. 5:

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