

**Postmodernism in Children's Picture Books and How it Breaks The Barriers to
Perceiving**

Student Name: Nia Hopkins

Student Number: 2104609

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Tutor: Chris Harrendence

Picture books against the meta

Introduction:

As children many will experience the joy of reading picture books, with their colourful pages and fun stories. These were read by parents and or guardians and some older readers enjoy the simplicity in this style of books. This essay will investigate three postmodern picture books in order to display what defines them as this subgenre and how to identify other postmodern picture books. This paper will also examine how postmodern picture books effect learning.

Before looking at the books in question it is important to first establish what a post modern picture book is. This is in order to better define what a post modern picture book is and how they are meant to be read.

Metafiction is the departure of normalised story telling techniques intentionally made by the author of the story. This is also how the 4th wall is depicted as this is the metaphorical barrier between the world of the story told and ours. (McIntosh) Breaking the barriers of reality in order to interact with the reader/viewer. This metaphorical wall is broken in multiple media such as movies, video games, television programs, theatre and of course picture books.

“metafiction is a stylistic device aimed at destroying the illusion of a reality behind a text and instead emphasizing its fictionality” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006)

A picture book is a 32-page book that can be either a hard cover or paper back. Picture books are often simplistic as they are intended for young children to read.

“For much of the twentieth century a picture book was an artifact of culture that contained visual images and often words”

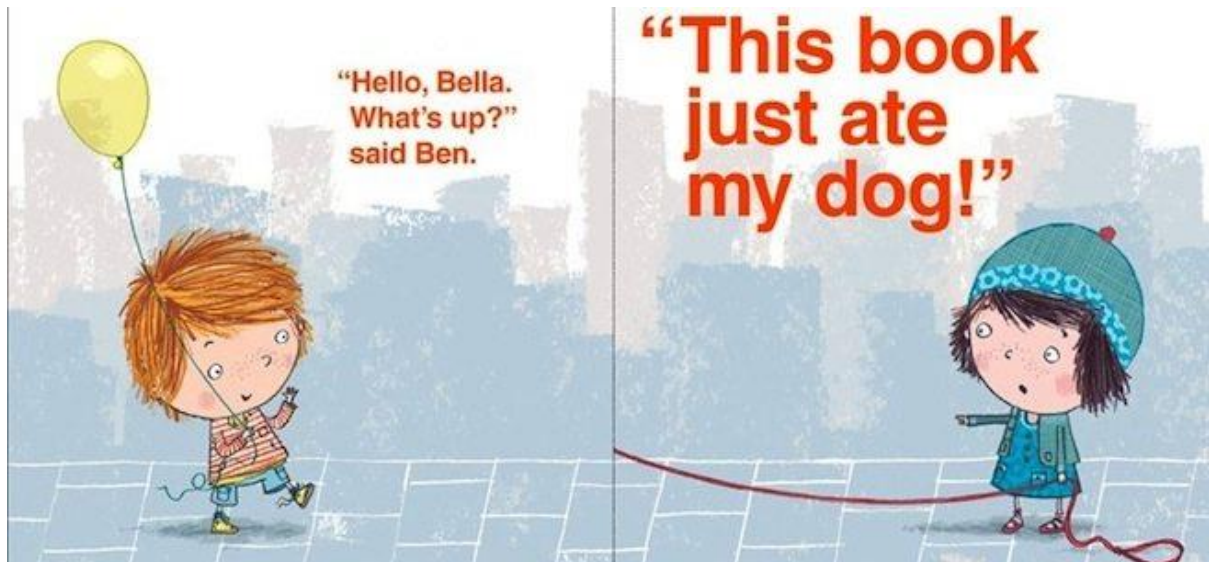
(Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008)

Postmodernism outside of picture books was the response to the modernism art movement. Modernism focuses on the form of the world as it is seen and post modernism was created to challenge the ideas that art must be a certain way. In this way it is similar to surrealism though it comes much later. (Tate, 1963)

Post modern picture books is a combination of the three elements above into a subgenre that can be interpreted differently from author to reader.

This subgenre is meant to challenge the reader’s thought process by introducing 4th wall breaking and meta ideas while expecting the reader to engage in new and strange ways. A far cry from finger puppet books.

This book just ate my dog (Byrne, 2014) is an excellent example of a post modern picture book. This book won *UKLA Our Class Loves This Book Award* in 2016 and was the first in a series featuring the characters within. Each book that came after featuring these characters share the same style of writing as they too can be considered to be post modern. While short with a simplistic art style. The book consists of one simplistic background and characters situated in the midground. Not daring to play with perspective.



Angel, R. (2014) this book just ate my dog! , Geek Dad. geek Dad. Available at:

<https://geekdad.com/2014/10/book-just-ate-dog/> (Accessed: November 27, 2022)

This book called for action from the reader. This book plays with the physicality of the gutter section of the book as characters and objects disappear into it beginning with the dog. Close to the end of the book the reader is asked to shake the book so that all those who have fallen into the gutter can escape. This mirrors its sister book *this book stole my cat* with the only difference being that the main character is a boy rather than a girl and that the chaos begins with a cat instead of a dog.

Richard Byrne writes in the about section of his website that it's not just about him...

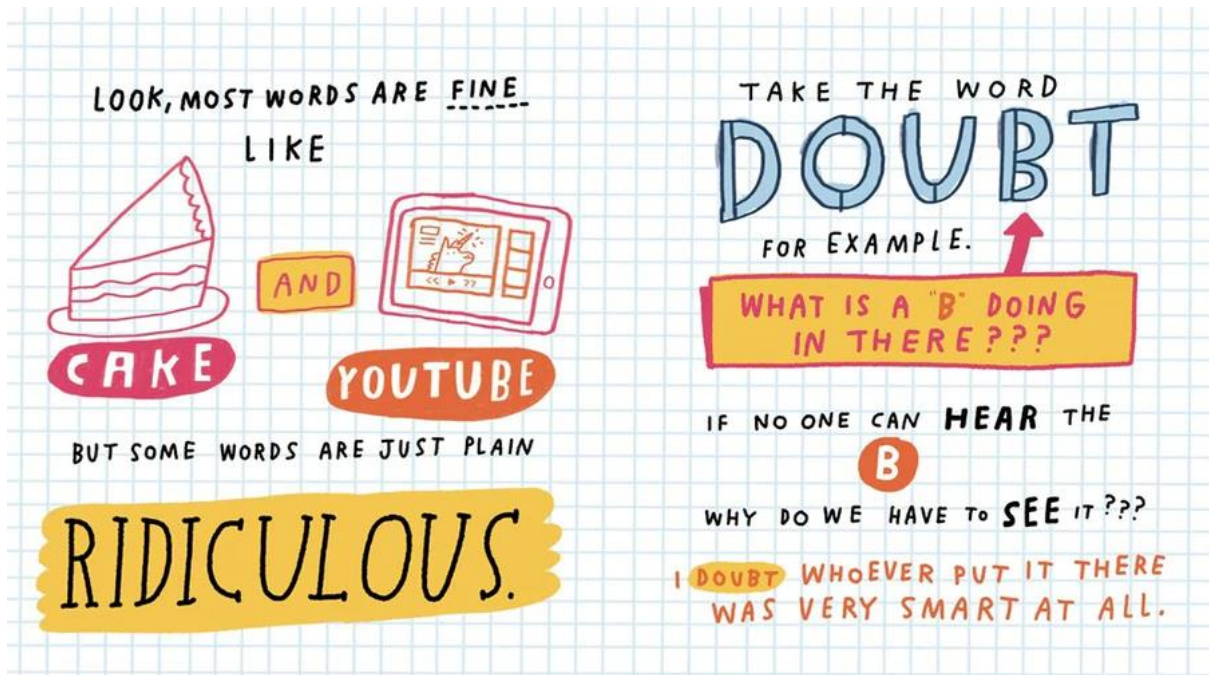
"...behind every great procrastinator there is a great partner, agent, publisher, editor, designer, bookseller (you get the idea) but here is a little about me for those who are interested" -(Byrne, 2020 website)

According to Cheryl Diane Edge verbal and nonverbal devices are used with meta fictive devices (Edge-Partinton2010). We see this here in this book just ate my dog when all of the emergency services and dog catcher go into the gutter. Bella never verbally states who the emergency services are but notes how ridiculous everything is. We can still see who has gone to save the dog not only because words such as AMBULANCE are written on the side but also because we can clearly see the vehicles.

Bette P. Goldstone stated that post modern picture books are sarcastic in nature. Mocking the tone of traditional stories. While this story is non mocking in its tone.

This is very different to *I don't want to read this book* (Greenfield & Lowery, 2021) which visually relies on words in an illustrative way. This book is self-aware with its own voice and character. The visuals are created from the use of multiple distinct typefaces in varying sizes and shapes while occasionally being accompanied by illustration.

To keep the reader's attention the voice in the book is adamant against reading the book although it continues to do so anyway. This book also calls to attention how confusing language can be such as when it points out the silent B in the word doubt or the ridiculously long word infinitesimal can mean small. Visually this is expressed by stretching the word Infinitesimal across the page in a display of written-linguistic and visual semiotics. The book continues to complain about forms of literacy while displaying them. As the book ends it notes how it can't believe it's almost done reading the book and says "after I'm done I'm going to need some space" (Narrator, (Greenfield & Lowery, 2021) and in true fashion the last page is an illustration of space complete with stars.



Greenfield, M. and Lowery, M. (no date) Page from I don't want to read this book, Books of wonder. Books of wonder. Available at:

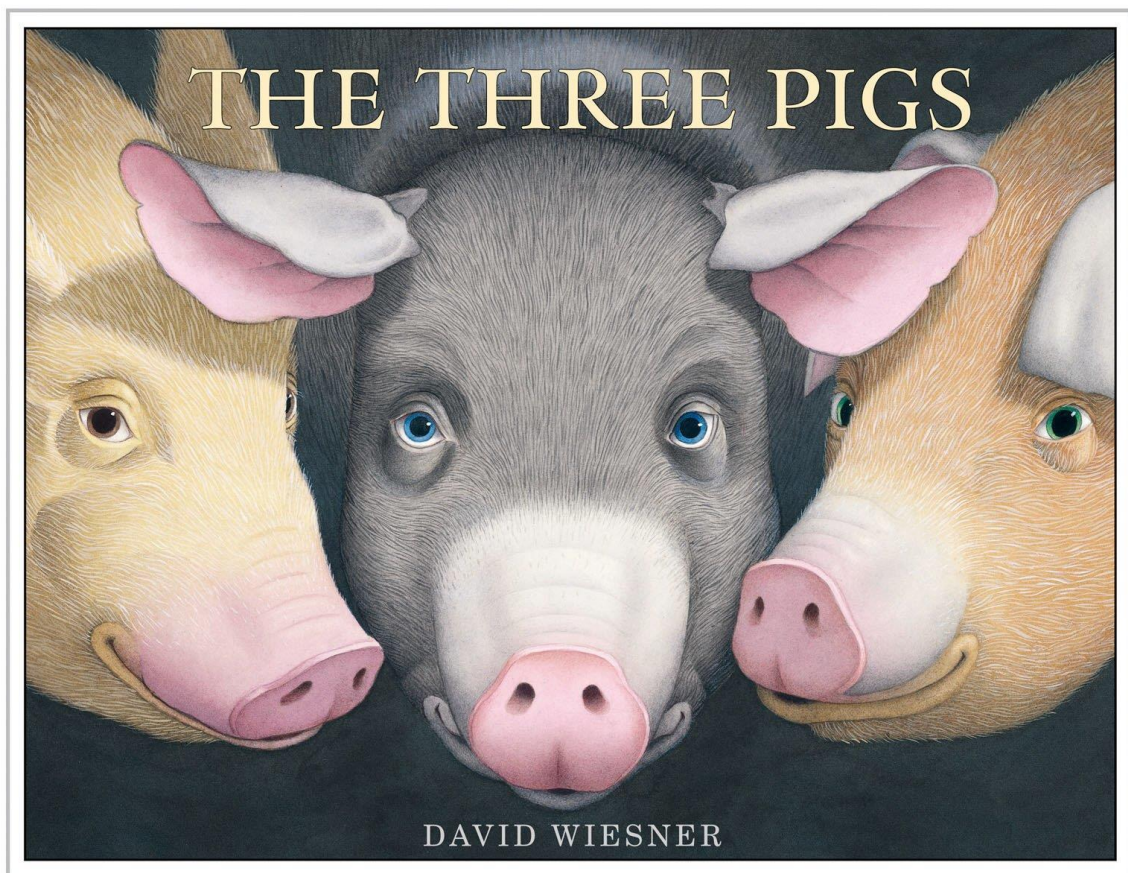
<https://booksofwonder.com/products/9780593326060> (Accessed: November 27, 2022).

Learning to read is essential and many times picture books are used as a way to begin young children's literacy journey. This book has a reading age of 4-8 years and would be a great way to transition children into reading more text heavy books. This book is dedicated to those who do not like to read and is there for ironic that this post modern picture book has fewer pictures and more illustrated text. Max Greenfield who wrote the book states in an interview that home-schooling his children during the pandemic gave him the idea to create this book. This is because when following the curriculum he was given he noticed the sheer amount of reading it required. (Gillette, 2021)

Children often notice elements of picture books before adult readers do. *Children reading pictures* Describes an experience the author had where a child noticed a detail in the image that they hadn't. In a study by Lawrence R. Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo in 2008 (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008) where children were read *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2012) it was found that children would interpret parts of the story in differing ways. As this was the first post modern book this class was shown they first had to understand that the pigs in the story were no longer attached to their own tale.

The importance of visual learning in children cannot be stated enough. As children are drawn to colourful imagery picture books are an excellent way to do this as it allows them to interpret and notice details on their own. (Salisbury & Styles, 2015)

The Three Pigs is a post modern picture book that is constantly found in discussion about post modern picture books. This book completely breaks the barriers of how a story is structured. This is visualised with the three pigs leaving the realm of their own story as to escape the Big Bad Wolf. In doing so they find themselves exploring other pieces of children's literature such as a book on nursery rhymes and another about a dragon that is to be slayed by a knight. Each time the pigs explore a new tale they take on a different art direction. This is to show how these characters traverse the world.



WINNER OF THE CALDECOTT MEDAL

Wiesner, D. (no date) cover of The Three Pigs, Amazon. Available at:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Three-Pigs-David-Wiesner/dp/1849394059> (Accessed:
November 27, 2022).

In the book the three pigs use parts of their tale to create a paper plane and manoeuvre around the white space on top of it. One of the pigs also directly addresses the reader. In this direct address the pig looks directly from the story and towards the reader and states that he thinks someone is out there (in reference to the reader) but then is called by another pig to interact with another section of the story ending the direct address.

“Children's picture books may be nonlinear, having multiple storylines running concurrently or containing multiple perspectives. They may display an unusual degree of playfulness, bordering on the absurd with unusual twists and turns. Irony slips into the books both in tone and contradictory story lines. These books can be self-referential, exposing the artistic act of the book's creation. These picture books also invite co-authoring-the power of telling the story is shared between the author and the young reader. The Three Pigs is quintessentially postmodern” - (Goldstone, Bette P)

The Three Pigs (Wiesner, 2012) almost shifts in its direction as it takes on some comic book aspects when the first pig escapes into the white space. It is similar to the Deadpool comics (Wong & Coccolo, 2022) however they are much less vulgar. While not a picture book if the same definitions were applied to this comic book series it would undoubtedly be post modern. The titular character often speaks directly to the reader and is aware of his being a fictional character. Very much the same as the pigs. However, Deadpool is not the first Marvel comic character to break the 4th wall and speak with the reader. This honour goes to She Hulk whose comic book came long before that of Deadpool. She Hulk was created by Stan Lee and John Buscema while Deadpool was later created by Fabian Nicieza and Rob Liefeld. (Stone, 2022)

At the end of the book the pigs return home to their own story with their new friends in tow. This results in the Big Bad Wolf being frightened away. In doing so the dragon knocks the words and letters from the original tale which was still being narrated onto the floor. The pigs use these letters to end the book by writing “The end”.

There is a difference between how each of these books treat the idea of a post modern picture book. The first example *This book just ate my dog* (Byrne, 2015) relies heavily on its visuals in order to pass on information to the reader while *I don't want to read this book* (Greenfield & Lowery, 2021) uses text displayed in varying styles. *The three pigs* (Wiesner, 2012) seems to use a combination of the two as it uses both image and text with one overtaking the other as the main narrative part way through the beginning of the story. While using text *The Three Pigs* also has its own way of play with it.

Each time the Metta fictive is called into question each book takes a different approach. *This Book Just Ate My Dog* using the shape of the book, *I Don't Want To Read This Book* using the narrators voice and *The Three Pigs* using the white border and other such stories. In picture books the illustrations are originally meant to support the text. (Goldstone. (2001).

However, in *The Three Pigs* the text is literally shoved into the background in favour of seeing the adventure of the pigs. This is the polar opposite to *I Don't Want To Read This Book* as the text takes centre stage and is the visually interesting part of the book.

Each book also displays its own art style with *This Book Just Ate My Dog* having a more childlike appearance and a singular background, *I Don't Want To Read This Book* looks more like a doodle and uses lots of artistic typography and *The Three Pigs* displaying a variety of styles from being detailed and cartoonish to more detailed and realistic, cartoonish and finally linework. This is until it circles back to the first art direction in the end.

Picture books aren't just for children either. Some studies show that older readers of picture books can also benefit by learning visual literacy skills. They can also be used for delayed readers and ESOL students. (Senokossoff, 2013) How children interpret post modern picture books is interesting as each child has their own interpretation on the matter. Some younger children however get confused such as in the study previously mentioned that was conducted by Sipe & Pantaleo (2008), where the children incorrectly assumed that the wolf had mistakenly eaten the straw and sticks rather than the pigs during their escape. The children eventually understood how the tale was playing out.

In conclusion: post modern picture books are a subgenre that came from authors wanting to break away from the norm of traditional picture books. They did this by delving into original concepts and traditional stories to flip the norm of what a storybook is. These picture books each take on their own interpretation of what post modernism can be within the context of its own tale by displaying varying characteristics which includes breaking away from its source material. Picture books and post modern picture books can be used to teach young and old readers how to read and use visual semiotics whilst continuing to be entertaining. Post modern picture books have a history going beyond just the books themselves as they are linked to postmodernism, the art movement.

Word count= 2309

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