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“The Simple Little Picture Book”: Private Theater to Postmodern Experience

Wiam El-Tamami

A picture book is a text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child. . . . On its own terms the possibilities are endless.

— Barbara Bader¹

What is a picture book?

Lay responses to this question will often refer to the ubiquitous A for Apple/B for Bear alphabet book, or that indestructible object known as a toy or board book, containing a myriad assortments of flaps, holes, and pop-ups, and used, most commonly, as a toddler's teething tome. These examples *are* picture books. But so are Babette Cole's *Mommy Laid an Egg*² and Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*,³ which tackle, respectively, the subjects of sex and death. *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss⁴ is also a picture book—one that is customarily purchased by adults *for* adults, particularly as a going-away gift prior to a long journey. There are picture books on everything from Hiroshima to homosexuality; picture books that are lyrical, abstract, philosophical, surrealist; picture books that are enjoyed by children and adults alike.

The picture book is a rich and versatile art form which has surpassed all prevailing notions of the medium. It is no longer exclusively peopled by a cast of adorably furry characters—including the ever-present rotund baby bear and mischievous kitten—who learn, through the threat of a fearsome foe, to obey their mothers. In other words, it no longer houses stories stripped down to the sum of their pedagogical aims: the technical development of reading skills, coupled with the didactic 'message' or 'moral' from the omniscient adult author to the *tabula rasa* that is the passive child addressee. The good picture book challenges and subverts this relationship on every page. This article will explore the unique features of the picture book that put this process into play.

Words and Pictures: Multiplying Readings

“And what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “that has no pictures or conversation in it?”

— Lewis Carroll⁵

It is very difficult to find one universal definition of the picture book. It is usually composed of thirty-two pages, but picture books of twenty-four and forty-eight pages are also in existence. The word count is often less than one thousand, though many are well below five hundred, while others range up to two thousand. One can only say, with relative confidence, that the essence of the picture book lies in the fundamental “interplay of narrative and illustration.”⁶

Pictures in fictional works are commonly associated with the development of reading skills; images in a picture book are often considered a mere reading aid, a visual reference to the textual elements of the story. As the child reader grows older, pictures are thought to become less and less necessary. The reader is shifted from picture books to illustrated storybooks, with increased word counts and reduced emphasis on images. S/he is then ‘moved up’ to the level of the paperback, with longer passages of text, that may occasionally be ‘broken up’ with a picture or two. Eventually, pictures are withdrawn altogether. S/he is taught that picture books are ‘childish’ and may even be berated for showing interest in one. “It is a sad thing for adults and children alike,” writes Shirley Hughes, “if, once we have learned to read, the pictures in our books are sternly removed.”⁷

What do we have against pictures? A widespread fallacy claims that pictures are only useful as a reading aid, after which they become not only unnecessary but harmful, as they ‘fix’ the text and, thus, hinder the imaginative process. The child becomes a passive recipient, rather than working to create her/his own mental images of the story. This conclusion is based on the erroneous assumption that the images in a picture book simply *replicate* the text. Apart from a small fraction of reading scheme books, the reality is far from this:

Pictures in reading schemes may intentionally show what the written text indicates . . . but most illustrators are more ambitious than that and will aim for the unusual or unexpected, a secondary story, a running gag, a surreal

embroidering, incongruity, ambiguity and irony, even in books aimed at the youngest audience.⁸

The act of reading—of meaning-making—is, thus, not stifled, but *stimulated* by the picture book form. The simplest picture book presents, from the very outset, at least two different interpretations of the story: the textual and the pictorial. There is inevitably a space, a gap, an incongruity between the two—even more so when we consider that the writer and illustrator are often two different people—which inherently demands an analytical, questioning approach. This medium, according to Baddeley and Eddershaw, is, thus, a good means of “moving children towards an appreciation of sub-text and irony.”⁹

“In *Rosie’s Walk*¹⁰ by Pat Hutchins,” writes Matulka, “there are three stories: one the words tell, one the pictures tell, and the one they tell together.”¹¹ Rosie the hen goes for a walk across the yard and back to the chicken coop in time for dinner, and the words (less than forty in total) simply narrate the route she is taking. The illustrations tell a different story, that of the fox following her who, every time he is about to pounce, falls into trap after trap unwittingly left by Rosie. The text is told from the standpoint of Rosie, blissfully unaware of the pandemonium occurring in her wake, while the images reflect the fox’s painfully thwarted efforts, and we are privy to the hilarity of both placed side by side.

Another wonderful picture book example of the ironic discrepancy between text and illustrations is John Burningham’s *Come Away from the Water, Shirley*.¹² The words on each page—much like the title—are the standard instructions of a mother to her child at the beach, while the images depict Shirley in the entirely different world of her imagination, rife with pirate adventure and hidden treasure. A more radical example is David McKee’s *I Hate My Teddy Bear*,¹³ in which two children—a boy and a girl—compare teddy bears in idle chatter whilst walking through a surreal, Magritte-like landscape, strewn with step ladders and men in bowler hats, oblivious to the bizarre characters and objects surrounding them.

Anyone who has read a picture book with a child or a group of children knows what an absorbing—sometimes even boisterous—experience it is. The children are active participants in the process. Emotionally involved and intellectually challenged, they laugh, grow sad, show fear; they join in with character voices, point out pictorial details, and ask questions. Often, they anticipate where the story is headed, and go there along with it.

Oral Storytelling: The Drama and the Poetry

A picture book text is a script for performance by the reader, performing to a very personally involved audience.

— Martin Waddell¹⁴

The interplay of the textual and the pictorial, then, lies at the heart of the picture book. Let us consider a further dimension: the fact that picture books are designed to be read aloud. This adds the element of oral storytelling to this unique fusion of media. Oral storytelling is a medium traditionally responsive to its audience. It derives its vitality from the continuous live exchange between performer and audience which, moment by moment, actively informs, and transforms, the performance.

Good picture books are written with this theatrical aspect in mind, making the most of pacing and “the drama of the turning of the page.”¹⁵ As Shirley Hughes writes: “A picture book is like a theatre. . . . You open it and up goes the curtain. . . . The characters you draw are like actors on a stage carrying the narrative along with gestures and facial expressions.”¹⁶ Indeed, the adult ‘performer’—whether performing to one child or many—will often employ theatrical devices, such as distinctive character voices, speeding up or slowing down the presentation and page-turning, and dramatic endings; taking cue from the child audience, s/he recreates—using timing, facial expressions, hand gestures, volume, timbre, and pitch of voice—the dynamics on the page.

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo Willems is a wonderfully quirky example of a picture book whose text and illustrations make full use of the inherent drama of the picture book form. There are two characters: the bus driver and the pigeon, both of whom directly address the reader in the second person throughout the book. On the first page, the bus driver introduces himself to us the readers, entrusting us with a very important task: “Hi! I’m the bus driver. Listen, I’ve got to leave for a little while, so can you watch things for me until I get back? Thanks. Oh, and remember: Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!”¹⁷ He disappears, and the pigeon pops its head around the corner of the page, then tiptoes onto the next page with the announcement: “I thought he’d never leave.” It subsequently tries to convince us to allow it to drive the bus, switching tacks faster than we can follow, from pleading to assurances, bribery to compromises, vying for sympathy to tantrums: “I’ll be your best friend. How ‘bout I give you a fiver? What’s the problem!? It’s just a bus!!! No fair! I bet your mum would let me. I have dreams, you know!”¹⁸ Both the text and pictures are

funny and expressive, vividly bringing this character to life, involving the reader directly in its efforts, and encouraging the child to create her/his own response to throw back at the lovably garrulous pigeon.

Picture books also resemble another oral literary form: poetry. At the simplest level, many picture books are written in verse, for a more fluid and aurally pleasing read-aloud experience. Even when writing in prose, good picture book writers—like poets—make every word matter, and harness the power of sound which adds a further dimension to words beyond their semantic meaning: “[Words] have a sound. A sentence or paragraph is like a chord or harmonic sequence in music: its meaning may be more clearly understood by the attentive ear . . . than by the attentive intellect”.¹⁹

The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson, a massive bestseller since it was first published several years ago, employs both dramatic and aural devices to great effect. It has a tightly woven and suspenseful story with a clever twist, which is also told in perfectly measured verse, and makes excellent use of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition—not to mention a little mouse protagonist who wards off myriad predators (ample opportunity for different character voices!) through wit and imagination alone:

A mouse took a stroll through the deep dark wood.
A fox saw the mouse and the mouse looked good.
“Where are you going to, little brown mouse?
Come and have lunch in my underground house.”
“It’s terribly kind of you, Fox, but no—
I’m going to have lunch with a gruffalo.”
“A gruffalo? What’s a gruffalo?”
“A gruffalo! Why, don’t you know?

“He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws,
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.”
“Where are you meeting him?”
“Here, by these rocks,
And his favourite food is roasted fox.”²⁰

Because of its textual economy and its multi-sensory nature, the picture book is an art form that, like poetry, is suited to taking text to a deeper level, that is, beyond the merely literal. As Le Guin writes: “The artist deals with what cannot be said in words. The artist whose medium is fiction does this *in words*. . . . Words can be used thus paradoxically because they have, along with a semiotic usage, a symbolic or metaphoric usage.”²¹ Attesting

to the same notion, Carla Poesio in “The Rhythm of Images” describes the picture book experience as an “alchemy” of words and images that “evoke not only sounds, but also tactile sensations, emotions, and moods,” thus likening it, more than any other literary form, to poetry.²²

In John Burningham’s *Granpa*, the illustrated scenes are of a young girl playing with her grandfather. The text, meanwhile, weaves together their two different strands of thought—not through literal narrative or direct dialogue, but rather by capturing the voices of their meandering minds, full of whimsy and wistfulness:

One man went to mow
Went to mow a meadow
Little ducks, soup and sheep, sunshine in the trees
If I catch a fish we can cook it for supper.
*What if you catch a whale, Granpa?*²³

The last page leaves us with the haunting image of the little girl looking across at Granpa’s empty chair.

Way Home by Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers²⁴ is another evocative piece, with muted illustrations of a dark urban landscape that is traversed by a boy and a stray cat he has found on the street and tucked inside his jacket. The words are the often-oblique murmurings of the boy to his feline companion, at once demotic and lyrical.

The use of language in this way—in abstraction, allusion, symbol, and metaphor—tips the balance of power toward the child reader, as it entrusts her/him with a greater freedom and responsibility of interpretation.

Intimate Theater: An Open Forum for Difficult Questions

Sure it’s simple, writing for kids. Just as simple as bringing them up.

All you have to do is take the sex out, and use short little words, and little dumb ideas, and don’t be too scary, and be sure there’s a happy ending. Right? Nothing to it.

— Ursula Le Guin²⁵

More than any other literary form, the picture book is designed to be a shared experience. Andrew Melrose sums up the picture book experience shared by adults and children as “nurture in action”, explaining thus: “touch, sound, sight, story, warmth, security, affec-

tion, love; they are all brought together in the shared experience of a 'read-to' story."²⁶ I cannot think of a more intimate setting in which literature—or, indeed, any art form—is so commonly enjoyed, than a parent and child poring over a picture book, last thing before bedtime—to soothe, to inform, to bolster with nurture—before sending the child off, on her/his own, into the world of dreams.

Shirley Hughes, continuing her discussion of the picture book as theater, states that it is a uniquely "intimate theater, which the audience can return to again and again."²⁷ All the elements examined above—the security and intimacy of the shared experience; the non-literal use of language; the evocation of a medley of senses and sensations; the openness of interpretation that invites engagement and promotes an observant and inquisitive approach—combine to make the picture book an ideal forum for difficult and sensitive topics.

Let us take a moment to discuss the rationale behind broaching difficult subjects with children in the first place. Many adults, including parents, educators, and children's writers, seek to shield children from the larger questions in life, with romantic notions about not sullying the innocent idyll that is childhood. Children experience the full spectrum of emotions from a very young age, and it does not help anybody involved to simply deny the existence of what are perceived as the 'negative' emotions—such as fear, sadness, anger, and confusion—or difficult experiences in life, including death and other forms of loss. "I am in favour," in the apt words of Jill Paton Walsh, "of exercising all the muscles of the heart."²⁸ Most children have a high degree of awareness and sensitivity, and an insatiable hunger for greater understanding. Every parent has been faced (some are faced daily!) with a child's question that has left them stumped:

Children unavoidably treat their parents as though they were the experts on life . . . but children make demands on adults that adults don't know what to do with. . . . Paradoxically, it is the adult's own currency—words—that reveal to them the limit of adult authority. . . . Adults can nurture children . . . but they do not have the answers . . . what they can do is tell children stories about the connections.²⁹

Young children, in my opinion, are often more adept at handling natural aspects of life, such as sex and death, than adults, until they are taught to fear—and, thus, avoid, deny, and suppress—natural emo-

tions through clumsy teachings springing from adults' own ideological confusion. "Could it be," asks Peter Hunt, probably rhetorically, "that adults are more afraid of reality than children?"³⁰

Melrose posits an interesting argument about the undertaking that is writing for children: "The gap is between the child and the author or parent's experience, between the experience of authority and the child's inexperience. It is the writer's job to try to close the gap."³¹ He speaks of the picture book as a "mediator" of dialogue between the adult and the child.³² The crucial proviso here is that the picture book is not written with the sole purpose of 'tackling an issue.' Altruism does not necessarily make the best Muse, and, in many cases, falls into the trap (an easy slip when writing for children) of condescension and didacticism. A good picture book—whether or not it deals with a sensitive subject—is always one that is open and engaging, that involves the child and encourages her/him to ask questions and develop personal understanding, rather than providing pat answers.

A picture book can be a mediator for day-to-day issues of contention between parent and child. Lauren Child's Charlie and Lola books, such as *I Will Not Ever NEVER Eat a Tomato*³³ and *I Am NOT Sleepy and I WILL NOT Go To Bed*³⁴—with solid characters and a distinctively energetic collage illustration style—air many such issues, with the theme of sibling rivalry and bickering running throughout.

The picture book can also step into a rather sensitive—and controversial—territory, as does the inimitable Babette Cole in *Mommy Laid an Egg*, with deftness and wit to spare. The book opens with a mother and a father sweeping into the living room where their two children—a boy and a girl—are sprawled on the sofa, and announcing: "'We think it's time we told you how babies are made!'"³⁵ What ensues is a medley of parental excuses, from the humdrum: "Girl babies are made from sugar and spice and everything nice" to the surreal, "You can grow them from seeds. . . . Or just squeeze them out of tubes!"³⁶—all hilariously illustrated by Cole. The children's response? "'Hee hee hee, ha ha ha, hoo hoo hoo, what a bunch of nonsense!' we laughed. 'We'll teach you how babies are really made.'"³⁷ They sit down and do a simple crayon sketch of a man and a woman, and proceed to explain the reproductive process, in terms that manage to achieve a near-impossible balance of being accurate and informative, without being either simplistic or overly technical. Cole's candid, funny writing and zany illustrations are hugely popular with children. The fact that the story

is told from the children's perspective—along with the core 'inside joke' of the patronizing parents one-upped by breezily knowledgeable children—hands the reins of authority over to the child.

Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*, with illustrations by Quentin Blake, is a picture book that speaks about the death of a loved one more ably than any other work of art I have come across. Written with his characteristic ability to capture a child's voice, and his eye for small, true-to-life details, Rosen narrates his own experience of losing his son, Eddie. He describes his fluctuating feelings:

Sometimes this makes me really angry. I say to myself, "How dare he go and die like that? How dare he make me sad." . . . Sometimes I want to talk about all this to someone. . . . Sometimes I don't want to talk about it. Not to anyone. No one. No one at all. I just want to think about it on my own. Because it's mine. And no-one else's. Sometimes because I'm sad I do crazy things—like shouting in the shower . . . banging a spoon on the table . . . or making my cheeks go whooph, boooph, whooph.³⁸

Trying to understand those feelings, he also accepts that, sometimes, there is no conceivable reason:

Sometimes I'm sad and I don't know why. It's just a cloud that comes along and covers me up. It's not because Eddie's gone. It's not because my mum's gone. It's just because. Maybe it's because things now aren't like they were a few years ago. Like my family. It's not the same as it was a few years ago. So what happens is that there's a sad place inside me because things aren't the same.³⁹

He allows the feelings to take their course. Without attempting to provide an answer or a solution that would deny or belittle the validity and importance of the emotions, he offers ways that have made it a little easier for him to live with them:

I've been trying to figure out ways of being sad that don't hurt so much. Here are some of them:

I tell myself that everyone has sad stuff. I'm not the only one. Maybe you have some too.

Every day I try to do one thing I can be proud of.
Then, when I go to bed, I think very, very, very hard
about this one thing.

I tell myself that being sad isn't the same as being
horrible. I'm sad, not bad.

Every day I try to do one thing that means I have a
good time. It can be anything so long as it doesn't make
anyone else unhappy.⁴⁰

Finally, he lays the emotion bare, in a way only the language of
metaphor can:

And sometimes I write about sad.
Where is sad? Sad is anywhere. It comes along and finds you.
When is sad? Sad is any time. It comes along and finds you.
Who is sad? Sad is anyone. It comes along and finds you.
I write:

Sad is a place
That is deep and dark
Like the space
Under the bed

Sad is a place
That is high and light
Like the sky
Above my head

When it's deep and dark
I don't dare go there

When it's high and light
I want to be thin air.⁴¹

With grace and open, explorative writing, Rosen leads us through his experience. His words are let loose to roam inside the reader, striking chords wherever they may. His writing is sure, yet allusive, always leaving room between the lines for the reader's experience to fuse with the written word, and fill out what has been left unsaid. He provides a beginning to an on-going dialogue, between child and adult, and between child and her/himself.

The Universal Story

Picture books present archetypal stories. All stories are, of course, essentially archetypal, but in picture books this essence—the story core—is not diffused with barrages of detail. Problematic instances of language for translators, such as culturally specific details and vernacular expressions, do not usually exist in picture books. The economy and concision of style demanded by the form makes the picture book perhaps the most universally translatable of all literary forms, and, thus, particularly invaluable in today's world.

Shel Silverstein's *The Missing Piece*⁴² is a quest tale pared down to its constituent elements. The protagonist is a circle (a black-and-white line drawing) that is missing a piece. The book opens with the following lines: "It was missing a piece./And it was not happy./So it set off in search/of its missing piece."⁴³ With directness and simplicity of execution, Silverstein's allegory soon takes a 'beware-of-answered-prayers' turn, challenging prevailing ideas of love, belonging, self-acceptance, and needing another in order to feel whole—making it particularly appealing to adults as well as to children.

*The Day of Ahmed's Secret*⁴⁴ by Florence Parry Heide, Judith Heide Gilliland, and Ted Lewin captures a universal story that just happens to be set in (a quite authentic) Cairo, and written in English. Ahmed has a secret, he tells us on the first page, that he cannot wait until the end of the day to go home and share with his family. We are led through the lavishly illustrated streets of Old Cairo, where Ahmed goes about his day's business, delivering gas cylinders to houses. He reveals his secret on the last page—that he has learned to write his name—but not before giving us a glimpse of his daily life. The context is specific, but the elements of the story are universal, and could translate just as successfully into many tongues—including, of course, Arabic.

With chillingly simple words and breathtaking illustrations, *The Rabbits*⁴⁵ tells the story of a community of brown rodent-like creatures whose lives are transformed with the arrival of enormous ships carrying large white rabbits at their shores. The community is at first hesitantly welcoming, their feelings ambivalent:

At first we didn't know what to think. They looked a bit like us. . . . Some were friendly. . . . They didn't live in trees, like we did. They made their own houses. We couldn't understand the way they talked. They brought new food, and they brought other animals. We liked some

of the food and we liked some of the animals. But some of the food made us sick, and some of the animals scared us. . . . The rabbits spread across the country. No mountain could stop them; no desert, no river.⁴⁶

The community's reaction turns to horror as the rabbits strut around self-importantly, carrying shiny, complex gadgets, chopping down trees, constructing massive buildings in their wake, and impaling the land with flags. When the community tries to resist this ravaging, their primitive weaponry is easily defeated by the rabbits' advanced technology and gleaming, elaborate instruments of torture. More and more ships arrive; the land is overrun with millions of rabbits, and is soon laid to waste. A simple, natural way of life is destroyed:

The land is bare and brown and the wind blows empty across the plains. Where is the rich, dark earth, brown and moist? Where is the smell of rain dripping from gum trees? Where are the great billabongs, alive with long-legged birds?

Who will save us from the rabbits?⁴⁷

As both creators of this work, writer John Marsden and illustrator Shaun Tan, are Australian, it would be easy to peg *The Rabbits* as an ode to the Aboriginal cause. However, it is as universal and all-encompassing a story as any, raising some of the major issues of our day. Whether as a cautionary call for conservation, an indictment of colonialism, a general lament for dispossessed peoples all over the world, or a plea for the preservation of indigenous cultures in the face of the daily assault of globalization and cultural imperialism, its discontents are diverse, and fiercely contemporary.

The Postmodern Medium: Play of the Signs

A writer is, after all, only half his book. The other half is the reader and from the reader the writer learns.

— P. L. Travers⁴⁸

I have tried to be careful, while sitting at the academic table, not to 'lose sight of the child running under my legs'; in other words, not to divorce this critical exploration from the core child-

hood *experience* that is the picture book.⁴⁹ At the risk of now doing so, I propose that the picture book form is an embodiment of post-modernism, not in the nihilistic sense commonly attributed to it, but in its most joyously freewheeling incarnation.

On the simplest level, we see this in works that appropriate past material and piece it together in new ways, such as a slew, in recent years, of picture books that revisit fairy tales. Some, such as John Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*⁵⁰ and Lauren Child's *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?*,⁵¹ swallow the tales whole, and then offer up fragments in a mad-cap hodgepodge of pastiche; others are somewhat more deliberate in their schema, adding a parodic twist, most notably the on-going trend in the 'emancipation' of traditionally passive rescue-me princess characters (Robert Munsch's *The Paperbag Princess*⁵² and Babette Cole's *Princess Smartypants*⁵³ are two examples of this). Still others are more difficult to categorize, as is the case with *The Three Pigs* by David Wiesner.⁵⁴ The pigs begin the book in customarily hapless form, being bullied by the wolf, but are then *blown out* of the 'story frame' by his huffing and puffing—their image rounding from the flat line drawings within the frame to a photographic, three-dimensional naturalism outside it. Wiesner thus reveals the 'edges' of his stage, drawing attention to the conceits of narrative fiction, and self-reflexively exploring the space *beyond* the conventional margins of storytelling.

We also see the postmodern presence (or is it absence?) in many picture books that toy with the idea of signification. The best picture book 'creators' admit to—in fact, revel in—their loss of control: subverting the idea of a direct cord between signifier and signified—and thus between Meaning-Maker and ready recipient. Instead, they prefer to produce rich, provocative pieces, (willingly) handing over the act of meaning-making to the child reader (who has always, in reality, been its rightful owner). As Poesio writes:

Picture books . . . privilege a subtle ambiguity between true and false, reality and invention, which stimulates us to day-dream, to intensify the meanings, to find new meanings.

This intriguing ambiguity . . . is often created by unexpected matches between words and images, which remind us of the proverbial stone in the pond mentioned by Gianni Rodari in *Grammatica della fantasia* (*Grammar of Fantasy*). The stone "thrown into a pond

sets in motion concentric waves that spread out on the surface of the water. . . . It is not much different with a word, thrown by chance into the mind, producing waves on the surface and in the depths. It provokes an infinite series of chain reactions and, as it falls, it evokes sounds and images, analogues and recollections, meanings and dreams, in a movement that touches experience and memory, the imagination and the unconscious.”⁵⁵

A wonderful example of this is the aforementioned *Granpa* by John Burningham, which, rather than presenting us with hard plot, gently captures, side by side, the two airy voices of a little girl’s and her grandfather’s random musings, distinctive yet interweaving, subtle yet powerful, in its achingly true portrayal of a relationship of mutual, unconditional love. Anthony Browne’s *Voices in the Park*⁵⁶ is another successful picture book attempt at multiple voices. Four characters narrate their walk in the park one afternoon. As the story unfolds, we realize that they are there at the same time, and begin to piece together how their four walks intersect. Illustrated in Browne’s trademark surrealist style, the reader must often work to spot the peekaboo pictorial clues to each character’s personality and mood. A thought-provoking book, with its range of perspectives and richness of detail, both in text and illustration, the narrative is further deepened by dark undertones of preconception and prejudice.

More dramatic than the allusiveness of style of the two books mentioned above is a book where the illustrations are purposefully completely divergent from the text, or, even more so, a book where the story has not even been written. David McKee’s *I Hate My Teddy Bear* is an example of the former. Although interesting, it retains the cold air of a literary experiment, and I am not sure whether the challenge it presents would engage or merely alienate a child. Considerably more sophisticated in its approach—and more successful as an enjoyable, engaging experience for children and adults alike—is *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, by one of the picture book masters of our time, Chris Van Allsburg.⁵⁷ The book begins with a workable premise: Mr. Wendels, a publisher, receives a visit from the mysterious title character, who has written a collection of stories. After dropping off a picture from each of the stories, along with the title of, and one line from, the corresponding story, Harris Burdick disappeared, never to be heard of again. The rest of the book comprises each of the pictures with its accompanying caption. One, for instance, is of a boy asleep in his bed, with several bright spots of light hovering over him; the title is “Archie Smith,

Boy Wonder,” and the line reads: “A tiny voice asked: ‘Is he the one?’” The black-and-white illustrations are superrealistic; each frame is an enigma, a tantalizing invitation to step into the role of Storyteller—a fertile jumping-off point for a flight of the imagination.

As we read “Sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to,” we see a little girl sit up in bed. The details of her facial features are minimal, but the slight downward tilt of her head, in addition to the way the chin-length curtain of hair falls over her face, belies her state of mind. She is surrounded by a small, bare, clay-colored room. A few brown leaves are fluttering down into the room. The next page reads: “And things go from bad to worse.” We now see the room submerged in a sea of dead leaves, the little girl trying to make her way out of the door, wading waist-deep through the dark mass.

So begins *The Red Tree*,⁵⁸ one of the magnificent picture book creations of writer-illustrator Shaun Tan. Large, abstract statements are accompanied by surreal artistic interpretations, exquisitely detailed and ripe with echoes, allusions, and unplumbed depths, which the reader pores over again and again, each time discovering something new. The words on the next page are: “Darkness overcomes you,” and we see our girl on a dreary street of tenement buildings, shoulders dispiritedly slumped. She is walking in the shadow cast by the head of a gigantic, fish-like monster towering over her. On the following page, a bottle is tossed into a dark, pebbled aquatic landscape. The girl is curled up in a pool of water inside the bottle, with a rusty metal helmet, reminiscent of a medieval suit of armor, covering her head. The text reads: “Nobody understands.”

In the face of such overwhelming questions and the unsolvable issues of all-too-common universal human emotions experienced by children as well as adults—feeling lost, bewildered, disoriented, bored, burdened, lonely, regretful, misunderstood—a successful conclusion to such a book seems less and less likely with each page turned. Tan, however, manages the near-impossible feat of achieving a richly satisfying conclusion, whilst maintaining the openness of interpretation (and of spirit) that makes this book surpass his authority, leaving it limited only by the (lack of) bounds of the collective imagination of its readers.

The picture book is constantly stepping outside its own frame and redrawing it, questioning itself from within and without. This is tangibly true in the innovative design of many contemporary picture books. There are picture books, for instance, that are read both right side up and upside

down; picture books that employ a ‘cutout’ technique—a hole in the page which belies some element on upcoming pages; picture books in which the paper is translucent in order for past pages to echo through, following the reader on her/his journey through the book—to give but a few examples. Suffice to say that the picture book, in a dialectical relationship between form and content, is constantly reworking the definitions of literature, of art, and, crucially, of material fit for children. The irreverent combination of genres and media, the polysemous, multi-sensory experience, and the organic amalgamation of different art forms and influences make it continuously contemporary, a medium of perpetual growth:

The picturebook is thus emphatically not itself a genre. It is an omnivorous creature, ingesting, absorbing, co-opting pre-existing genres—other ways of speaking, writing, picturing—in order to make its texts, and as these genres change and mutate within society, so does the picturebook. We can never be sure exactly what the picturebook will do next as it is forever becoming and never completed. It turns its face to the unfinished future rather than to the preservation of the forms of the past.⁵⁹

The picture book is a medium of Derridean *freeplay*, the constantly self-questioning system that prefers to live in flux, to ponder possibilities and explore multiple “provisional, contingent, temporary and relative”⁶⁰ mini-narratives, rather than succumb to the security of fundamentalism, of championing one Grand Narrative above all others. As Derrida writes:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who . . . throughout his entire history has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.⁶¹

The best picture books provoke questions rather than providing definitive answers. They have moved away from the “inequity of

the relationship between the ‘adult, knowing’ author and the ‘innocent, receptive’ child,” from “certainty surrounding the author’s function to an admission of the power of the reader.”⁶² This makes the picture book a much-needed forum of subversion of given ideas and set-in-stone power structures.

If, then, the function of literature is as Roderick McGillis concludes in *The Nimble Reader*, “What we teach when we teach literature to children is not themes and structures, but rather the desire to examine, analyze, re-create, perform, and understand the forces that shape our own lives”⁶³—the picture book is the ideal medium for the teaching of literature. I sum up, then, with borrowed words, a statement I could not have made more succinctly: “There is nothing simple about the simple little picture book.”⁶⁴

Notes

- ¹ Qtd. in David Lewis, *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text* (NY: Routledge Falmer, 2001), 1.
- ² Babette Cole, *Mommy Laid an Egg* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993).
- ³ Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake, *Sad Book* (London: Walker Books Ltd., 2004).
- ⁴ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!* (NY: HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2004).
- ⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (NY: Signet Classics, 2000), 5.
- ⁶ Denise I. Matulka, *Picturing Books: A Website about Picture Books*, <<http://picturingbooks.imaginarylands.org>>.
- ⁷ Shirley Hughes, “Drawn to the Story.” *Guardian Unlimited* (July 10, 2004), <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1257188,00.html>>.
- ⁸ Kimberley Reynolds, ed., *Modern Children’s Literature: An Introduction* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 210-11.
- ⁹ Qtd. in Penni Cotton, *Picture Books Sans Frontiers* (Staffordshire: Trentham Books Ltd., 2000), 28.
- ¹⁰ Pat Hutchins, *Rosie’s Walk* (NY: Little Simon, 1998).
- ¹¹ Matulka, *Picturing Books*.
- ¹² John Burningham, *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* (London: Red Fox Books, 1977).
- ¹³ David McKee, *I Hate My Teddy Bear* (London: Andersen P Ltd., 1982).
- ¹⁴ Martin Waddell, “Writing Texts for Picture Books,” *The Best of Books for Keeps* (1994): 68.
- ¹⁵ Lewis, *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*, 1.

- 16 Hughes, "Drawn to the Story," n. pag.
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- 23 John Burningham, *Granpa* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1984), 21-22.
- 24 Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers, *Way Home* (NY: Knopf Books, 1994).
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- 27 Hughes, "Drawn to the Story," n. pag.
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- 29 Melrose, *Write for Children*, 5.
- 30 Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 67.
- 31 Melrose, *Write for Children*, 4.
- 32 Melrose, *Write for Children*, 93.
- 33 Lauren Child, *I Will Not Ever NEVER Eat a Tomato* (London: Orchard Books, 2000).
- 34 Lauren Child, *I Am NOT Sleepy and I Will NOT Go To Bed* (London: Orchard Books, 2002).
- 35 Cole, *Mommy Laid an Egg*, 1-2.
- 36 Cole, *Mommy Laid an Egg*, 4 and 9-11.
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- 38 Rosen and Blake, *Sad Book*, 5 and 7-9.
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- 41 Rosen and Blake, *Sad Book*, 15-18.
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- 47 Marsden and Tan, *The Rabbits*, 29–32.
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- 64 Melrose, *Write for Children*, 97.