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# Young children interpret the metafiction in Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*

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**Abstract** *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) was one of nine picture books I used in a study that explored the nature of Grade 1 children's literary understanding by examining their verbal responses during storybook read-aloud sessions, and their subsequent written, visual arts, and dramatic responses. This article discusses the Grade 1 students' responses to and understandings of the metafictional devices in Anthony Browne's picture book. Although researchers and theorists have written about metafiction, a paucity of research has explored elementary students' literary understandings of and responses to books with metafictional devices. As well as defining metafiction and identifying various metafictional devices described in the literature, this article contextualizes Browne's work and the children's responses in a discussion of metafictional textual practices in postmodern and Radical Change literature.

**Keywords** children's responses; metafiction; picture books; postmodernism; radical change

## Introduction

Narrative or storying is a way of making sense of human experience. It has been suggested that narrative is a 'primary act of mind' (Hardy, 1975: 4), a way of thinking, and that we remember much of our experiences in the world and our knowledge of the world in the form of story (Rosen, 1986). Children enter school with various oral storytelling traditions and they draw upon their oral narrative experiences when they encounter written stories. Through multiple experiences with stories, oral and written, readers construct schemata or cognitive representations of story structures, elements and genres. McCabe (1997: 455) has found that variation in storytelling 'within a culture is as remarkable as variation between cultures'. McCabe's (1997: 456) research indicates that many European North

American children come to school 'equipped for the kind of stories they hear in school', the kind that have a 'clear beginning, middle and end' and that 'contain a clear temporal sequence of events that matches some sequence of events in the real world'. However, not all children are familiar with linear and sequential narratives; researchers who have examined children's oral narrative forms have found significant differences in how storytellers construct their stories. For example, McCabe reports the following: European North American 'children tend to talk about one important thing at a time' (McCabe, 1997: 456), 'Japanese children living in America tend to tell concise stories that are cohesive collections of several experiences they have had' (McCabe, 1997: 457), and 'African-American children usually plot numerous sequences of events within the context of the individual experiences combined' (McCabe, 1997: 460). Thus, adults who work with children need to 'recognize, appreciate, and value cultural differences in storytelling style' (McCabe, 1997: 462), and understand that the European North American linear narrative structure of beginning, middle and end is one discursive narrative structure. Further, it is fundamental that students have experiences with diverse written (and oral) narrative structures at school.

Interestingly, a growing number of novels, picture books, movies, television programs, computer software programs (including hypertext fictions), and video games are offering readers and viewers a range of storytelling styles, and narrative forms and formats. These alternate discursive structures may be more familiar to some children in our schools than the European North American linear narrative structure, and for other students, these variant structures can augment their schemata of narrative structures. According to structuralists, literary understanding consists of an internalized grammar of story structure and knowledge about the ways that stories work (i.e. literary competences) (Culler, 1980). An extensive understanding of 'the nature and variety of written discourse' (Meek, 1988: 21, emphasis in original) will augment the development of students' literary competences.

Some authors and illustrators are enriching readers' literary competences by using a number of discursive and illustrative techniques called metafictional devices in their work. Metafictional devices distance readers from texts, draw their attention to the artifice of fiction, and position them in a more interactive and interpretive role as readers. Metafictional texts, in their portrayal of alternative discursive, linguistic and visual structures and devices provide certain types of 'reading lessons' (Meek, 1988) for readers about the construction of narratives by authors and illustrators, and about their roles as readers. Texts with metafictional devices call for more interactivity by the reader, force a higher level of engagement, and require a

process-oriented style of reading that 'subverts the dominance of traditional linear narrative' (Trites, 1994: 228).

This article focuses on one book that includes several metafictional devices: Anthony Browne's (1998) picture book *Voices in the Park*. The trajectory of events in *Voices in the Park* is non-linear and non-sequential, and the narrative is multistranded as multiple stories and perspectives are presented in text and illustrations. Indeed, the numerous metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park* draw attention to its status as text and fiction. Although much has been written about metafiction, few researchers have explored students' literary understandings of and responses to books with metafictional devices (for example McClay, 2000; Pantaleo, 2002, 2004b). Further, although several individuals have examined primary grade (K-Grade 3) students' responses to literature (for example Barone, 1990; Commeyras and Sumner, 1996; Hickman, 1981; Labbo, 1996; Many and Wiseman, 1992; Sipe and Bauer, 2001), few studies have focused on the responses of Grade 1 children (for example Kiefer, 1993; McGee, 1992; Pantaleo, 2002, 2003, 2004a,b; Sipe, 2000). Therefore, this article addresses two gaps in the literature as it discusses young children's responses to and understandings of some of the metafictional devices in the picture book *Voices in the Park*. The article also contextualizes Browne's work and the children's responses in a discussion of metafictional textual practices in postmodern and Radical Change literature.

## Metafiction

Lewis (2001: 94) writes that metafiction is 'an a-historical notion . . . [that] has tended to appear from time to time throughout history'. Indeed, examples of metafiction have existed since the beginning of literary publishing (and earlier in some devices of oral storytelling). Waugh (1984: 2) defines metafiction as 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'. By drawing readers' attention to how texts work and to how meaning is created, metafiction reflects 'upon the processes through which narrative functions are constructed, read and made sense of' and poses 'questions about the relationships between the ways we interpret and represent both fiction and reality' (McCallum, 1996: 397). Goldstone (1998), Lodge (1992), Lewis (1990, 2001), Stephens and Watson (1994), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) and Trites (1994) have also written about metafiction. One element common to their discussions of metafiction is its self-reflexiveness and self-consciousness; metafictional texts draw attention to their status as fiction and text through the use of a number of devices or techniques.

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, Waugh (1984) discusses the metafictional novel and describes the various techniques authors use to create metafictional texts. McCallum (1996: 400) also writes about 'specific strategies through which metafictional texts play with literary and cultural codes and conventions'. In picture books, metafictional devices can be used with both the verbal and the visual text. Illustrations can reveal, sometimes independently of and sometimes in conjunction with the words, how the fictional reality of the story is constructed (and therefore comment about how our world is constructed).

As discussed elsewhere (Pantaleo, 2004b), many individuals have identified discursive techniques commonly found in metafictional forms of adult, young-adult and children's literature. According to the professional literature, metafictional devices include manifold or multistranded narratives, multiple narrators, non-linear and non-sequential plots, narrators who address the reader or comment on their own narrations, narrative and illustrative framing devices, intertextualities, and parodic appropriations (Pantaleo, 2004b). Generally, metafictional techniques are used in combination and the synergy of multiple devices serves to amplify the fictional status and self-conscious nature of a text. The list of metafictional devices in the Appendix should not be canonized as it is neither exhaustive nor definitive. Indeed, several of the devices identified in Appendix A could be incorporated by some of the more general metafictional techniques described in the literature such as 'boundary-breaking' (Lewis, 1990), 'unstable text' (Fish, 1994), and 'nontraditional ways of using plot, character, and setting' (Anstey, 2002: 447). Further, the devices are not mutually exclusive and there is overlap among many of the techniques. The common feature of the various devices in Appendix A is their power to distance readers from text, often frustrating traditional reading expectations and practices, and positioning 'readers in more active interpretive roles' (McCallum, 1996: 398).

As stated previously, Anthony Browne incorporates several metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park*, and these devices will be identified and discussed in subsequent sections of this article. I chose to focus on *Voices in the Park* because the book is 'an extreme example of foregrounding the ways in which narrative fictions are constructed and of interrogating our notions of what a picture book might be' (Doonan, 1999: 53).

Browne's book was one of nine picture books I used in a study that explored the nature of young children's literary understanding by examining their verbal responses during storybook read-aloud sessions, and their subsequent written, visual arts, and dramatic responses. I used the conceptual categories developed by Sipe (2000) as a guide when examining the

children's literary understanding. In Sipe's research with first and second grade students, he identified five aspects of literary understanding: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative. In my study, much of the Grade 1 students' conversations about the peritextual features of the picture books were analytical in nature (Pantaleo, 2003). As discussed elsewhere (Pantaleo, 2004a), the children made numerous intertextual and autobiographical connections during the read-aloud sessions. I used the term autobiographical rather than personal because the latter term could describe several different responses identified as analytical, intertextual, transparent, and performative in Sipe's categorization scheme.

Sipe (2000: 267) categorized 'responses suggesting that the children were intensely participating in the narrative world of the story' as transparent, and responses where the students entered 'the world of the text in order to manipulate or steer it toward their own creative purposes' as performative. According to Sipe (2000: 268), the children lived through the story in the former category and used the text as a platform to express themselves in the latter category. I combined Sipe's fourth and fifth categories as both involved the children actively using their imagination and creativity as they participated in the diegetic, 'the fictional "world" of events narrated' (Van Peer and Chatman, 2001: 357). Currently, I am labeling my fourth facet of literary understanding as collaborative.

As well as considering the nature of the Grade 1 children's literary understanding, I have written about other aspects of the aforementioned larger study. I have discussed the children's responses to and interpretations of David Wiesner's (2001) *The Three Pigs* (Pantaleo, 2002) and David Macaulay's (1995) *Shortcut* (Pantaleo, 2004b). I have also examined the Grade 1 students' understandings of several peritextual features of the picture books used in the study (Pantaleo, 2003), and analyzed the types and uses of textual connections articulated by Grade 1 children during the small group and whole class read-aloud sessions (Pantaleo, 2004a). As stated earlier, this article describes the children's interpretations of and responses to several metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park*.

## The research context

During the 10-week research project in the Spring of 2001, I read aloud nine picture books to a class of Grade 1 students (six-year-old and seven-year-old children). The books were read in the following order: *Willy the Dreamer* (Browne, 1997), *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998), *Safari* (Bateman, 1998), *Something From Nothing* (Gilman, 1992), *Shortcut* (Macaulay, 1995), *The Empty Pot* (Demi, 1990), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), *The Three Pigs*

(Wiesner, 2001), and *Tuesday* (Wiesner, 1991). The books represented a variety of types of picture books (e.g. storybook, non-fiction, informational narrative, wordless). Further, the picture storybooks ranged in complexity and sophistication of presentation of verbal and visual text.

The research site was an elementary school (K–Grade 6) of approximately 300 students in a midsize city in eastern Ontario. The school's population consisted of students from predominantly lower socio-economic class families, and several families were recent immigrants to Canada.

Of the 19 boys and five girls in Ms P's Grade 1 class, all but one of the students' parents/guardians gave informed consent for their children to participate in the study. English was not the language spoken at home for eight children; two had very limited proficiency in English, one was somewhat proficient in English, and the other five were quite proficient in English. Of the 23 participants, four girls and 11 boys were of European Canadian ethnicity, one girl and one boy were South Asian, two boys were Asian, one boy was Libyan, one boy was Saudi Arabian, one boy was Cambodian, and one boy was Chilean. Overall, in the teacher's opinion, the literacy skills of the Grade 1 children were below average at the beginning of the year. Ms P, who was in her seventh year of teaching, based her opinion on teacher observation, formal and informal assessments, anecdotal notes, and Grade 1 provincial standards. Although all children made progress throughout the school year, the work of seven students remained below Ontario provincial standards for Grade 1 in both reading and writing at the end of the year.

As well as participating in guided reading groups (Pinnell and Fountas, 1996), the children in the Grade 1 classroom engaged in numerous whole class reading and writing activities in language arts and in other curricular areas. Daily, Ms P read aloud at least one book (fiction, non-fiction or poetry), and often there were follow-up writing activities related to the book. At the beginning of the research project Ms P told me that although the children thoroughly enjoyed listening to stories, the large group story discussions were 'limited in depth,' and dominated by a few children. Ms P stated that some children lacked the vocabulary to express their opinions.

I spent time in the Grade 1 classroom during January 2001 in order to develop a rapport with the children. Data collection occurred from February to May. With input from Ms P, the students were organized into heterogeneous groups of three or four students. However, for a variety of reasons (e.g. student absenteeism, participation in learning support programs), small group membership fluctuated throughout the study.

The children were pulled out of regular classroom activities once a week for approximately 25 minutes to participate in small group

read-aloud sessions that occurred in a vacant room in the school. Research findings indicate that 'reading to children in small groups offer[s] as much interaction as one-to-one readings and appear[s] to lead to greater gains in comprehension than whole-class or even one-to one readings' (Morrow and Gambrell, 2000: 571). The children were encouraged to talk to one another or to me at any point during the small group interactive read-aloud sessions (Barrentine, 1996). As well as providing expansions on the children's comments and articulating topic-continuing replies, I asked various types of questions (e.g. imaginative, affective, analytical and reflective) during the sessions that encouraged consideration and discussion of unexplored textual and illustrative aspects. Subsequent to reading the story to each small group, I reread the book to the entire class, and again, student participation was encouraged. Understandably, the children's small group read-aloud experiences with each book influenced both their articulations and my questions during the whole class read-aloud sessions. All read-aloud sessions were audio-recorded. For each book used in the study, there were seven read-aloud sessions, six small group and one whole class, resulting in approximately 210 minutes of audiotape for each book.

During the whole class read-aloud sessions, Ms P. took field notes and recorded the children's comments, facial expressions, and body language. Although the discussions during the large group read-aloud sessions were more structured, as generally the children raised their hands to make contributions, many children made spontaneous comments on numerous occasions.

For the first five books, the children completed an independent writing activity after the small group read-aloud sessions. However, neither Ms P. nor I were able to assist the children with their writing as she was usually working with a guided reading group, and I was conducting another small group session. We found that some children copied each other's ideas and/or rushed through their work. Therefore, we changed our procedures. For the last four books, the children wrote responses after the whole class read-aloud sessions. Before the children began writing we reminded them to think about what they were feeling, thinking, wondering about, questioning or imagining as they listened to and talked about the story during both the small group and whole class read-aloud session. Finally, for each of the nine books used in the research, the children completed a drama, or visual arts and/or writing activity designed to extend their reading experiences. For *Voices in the Park*, the children worked in pairs, drew a scene from the book that included at least three different characters, and communicated each character's thoughts via speech balloons.

## Metafictive devices in *Voices in the Park*

Anthony Browne's *A Walk in the Park* (1977) is the 'pre-text' to *Voices in the Park*. In Browne's *Voices in the Park*, a mother and her son, Charles, take their pedigree dog, Victoria, for a walk in the park. A father and his daughter, Smudge, take their mongrel, Albert, to the same park at the same time. The canines immediately begin to interact, much to the disdain of the mother. The adults ignore each other, but Charles and Smudge tentatively begin to play together. Charles' mother abruptly ends the blossoming friendship and each child returns home with his or her parent. The four main characters in *Voices in the Park* are zoomorphic, having human bodies and ape heads. Doonan (1999: 48) writes that zoomorphism, 'distances the viewer, and the gap between fantasy and reality is made explicit'. Each small group remarked on the zoomorphism of the girl's father. When I turned to the 'Second Voice' and Ali saw the father, he stated, 'Hey, he's half man and half gorilla. Look at his arms. He looks like a man but he has an ape head.'

As with each book used in the study, there were seven read-aloud sessions for *Voices in the Park*. However, owing to technical problems, one-half of one small group read-aloud session was not audio-recorded. I also consulted the observational field notes taken by Ms P. during the whole class read-aloud session, and my research journal when analyzing the transcripts. I read the transcripts several times, searching for examples that both reflected and illustrated the children's responses to and interpretations of the following metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park*:

1. polyphonic narratives or multiple narrators or character focalizers
2. manifold or multiple or multistranded narratives
3. narrative framing devices (e.g. stories within stories, or 'a nesting of narrators' [Waugh, 1984])
4. disruptions of traditional time and space relationships in the narrative(s)
5. non-linear and non-sequential plots including narrative discontinuities
6. intertextuality
7. parodic appropriations
8. typographic experimentation
9. 'indeterminacy in written or illustrative text, plot, character or setting' (Anstey, 2002: 447)
10. 'availability of multiple readings and meanings for a variety of audiences' (Anstey, 2002: 447)

Owing to the interdependent and synergistic relationship among many of the above metafictional devices, several of the techniques are discussed collectively in the following sections of the article.

The transcript excerpts, taken from only the small group discussions (and thus the children's first experience with the book), are representative of the students' talk about *Voices in the Park*. The excerpts are examples of how young children responded to, interpreted and appreciated the 10 metafictional devices identified above. All names are pseudonyms and S represents my articulations.

## **Multiplicity, non-linearity, disruptions, and indeterminacies**

Browne's picture book includes textual and visual manifold narratives (Trites, 1994); the narrative framing of *Voices in the Park* includes stories within stories. Multistranded narratives 'are constructed of two or more interconnected narrative strands differentiated by shifts in temporal and spatial relationships, and/or shifts in narrative point of view' (McCallum, 1996: 406). There are multiple narrators or character focalizers as each of the four chapters in *Voices in the Park* is told from the point of view of a different protagonist. Browne reveals much about the four narrators through their type font, vocabulary and syntax, and the intensity of color and quality of line in their illustrations, as well as through their account of the happenings in the park.

Each character's version of the events in the park is depicted as occurring at a different time of year (i.e. season) resulting in shifts in time and space relationships, and indeterminacy in setting. According to Doonan (1999: 48), the 'settings [in *Voices in the Park*] function as a symbolic reflection of attitudes of each character'. Further, as each character picks up the storyline at a different point in the story, there are narrative discontinuities. For example, Charles's mother starts her narration as she, Charles and Victoria, their dog, leave the house, and Smudge's story begins as she, her father and Albert, their dog, enter the gates to the park.

Each of the four individual narratives in the book is linear and sequential; the versions could be read in any order but obviously changing the sequence of the individual narratives would affect reader interpretation. *Voices in the Park* has 'an interlocking and interweaving of a plurality of worlds because the original story is given in four versions, each separate and complete in itself, each narrated by one of the main characters, but which taken together make another complete story, though without a linear structure' (Doonan, 1999: 47). The manner and order in which Browne presents events in the narrative creates an overall text that is non-linear and non-sequential. As described earlier, Browne's book includes the co-existence of several narratives that are interconnected and looping, a

narrative structure that differs from traditional time and space relationships in picture books. The discursive organizational format of chapters (i.e. voices) foregrounds the narrative structure in the book. Readers must suture the narrative disruptions in order to construct a cohesive 'story'. Thus, the narrative structure of the book disrupts time and space relationships in the story, diverts reader attention, and creates indeterminacies.

Iser (1978) writes of gaps or blanks in texts and of the reader's active role of 'filling-in' these indeterminacies. Indeterminacies may be found in written and/or illustrative text, plot, character and setting (Anstey, 2002), and are dependent on the reader's interpretation. Indeed, indeterminacies may be interpreted in a number of different ways, hence the multiple possibilities of a text. Readers must fill in the gaps in *Voices in the Park* as they work to make sense of the stories within stories, the non-linear plot, and the disruptions of traditional story time and space relationships.

The Grade 1 children actively worked to create unity among the polyphonic narratives. The students formed connections between the characters and their actions, understanding both the simultaneity and interdependency of events. For example, when I began reading the 'Second Voice', the children identified the man from the park bench and his dog. 'And that's the same dog as the one that was chasing the brown dog [Victoria]!' remarked Omar.

- Kathy: It's the same man [Smudge's father].  
 S: That's right. Where have you seen him before?  
 Robert: From those pages where she [the mother] was sitting on the bench.  
 S: How do you know it's the same character?  
 Changwei: Because I saw him on that page.  
 Kathy: He has the same hands – human hands and he is a monkey.  
 Fernandez: Oh, and the same clothes – painter's clothes.

Although 'intertextuality refers to all kinds of links between two or more texts' (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001: 227) (i.e. text-to-other-text connections), the narrative structure in *Voices in the Park* is intratextual in nature as Browne makes text-within-same-text connections. When asked who Charles was looking at as he sat on the bench on the second recto, the students told me that it was the girl from the front cover. They knew because 'she had a red shirt and jeans'. When I started to read 'Second Voice', Tom stated, 'And the same thing is going to happen to the girl because the girl is going to find the boy and then the woman is going to yell at Charles'. They made connections to Smudge, the other three characters and the dogs in every individual narrative. When we reached the 'Fourth Voice', many

children recognized that we had not heard Smudge's story yet. Brianna stated, 'It's that girl's turn to talk.' Thus, the children easily understood that multiple perspectives were conveyed in the book and that they must consider each character's point of view in order to understand the 'whole' story.

Browne refers visually and verbally to previous events, characters, or items in a way that highlights the interconnectedness of the narratives and hence the 'constructedness' of the text. The children observed a connection among three of the stories as the characters left the park.

- S: Where are these pink leaves coming from?  
 Ethan: From Smudge's shoes.  
 Mohad: From the trees they were climbing.  
 Jeremy: Wait a second. All the way back here . . .  
 Nathan: Look, cupid. Cupid gorilla.  
 S: Jeremy, what were you going to say?  
 Jeremy: All the way back when we first saw the leaves . . .  
 S: You want to go back when we first saw the leaves? O.k. (I turn to the illustration.)  
 Jeremy: Yeah, the leaves were orange in this picture.  
 S: Right.  
 Ethan: But this time they're all nice and flowery and pink.  
 Nathan: Hey, there was just white stuff before too – like footprints in the other picture with that girl and her dad (turns to the page).

The students also noted how the picture on the book's cover appeared on two other occasions in the book. It appears near the end of the 'First Voice' and as Phillip remarked, 'It's the same as on the cover.' The second illustration near the end of the 'Fourth Voice' is somewhat different from the cover.

- Gurjit: Look it. It's the same picture as the cover only it's different.  
 Ryan: This one [the cover] is light and that one is nighttime [second last verso illustration in the book] and that's daytime [the cover].  
 S: That's right. It's the same illustration of him giving her the flower but it is different. Good observation.

As well as multiple stories and narrators, there are many illustrative diversions in the picture book. Several of the embedded visuals in *Voices in the Park* are intratextual connections, and these visual intratextual links both connect and disrupt or interrupt the reading experience. The children searched for hat shapes throughout the story because after their experiences with *Willy the Dreamer*, they knew that Anthony Browne embedded 'secrets' in his illustrations. The children identified the recurring image of the mother's hat on

the fence post, in the clouds, on the lamp-posts, in the trees, on the statue, on the mother's scarf at the end of the story ('Hey, these are supposed to be flowers, but they're hats!'), and on the gateposts leading to Charles' house. Ivan's comment summarized the students' opinions about the dominating image of the mother's hat repeated throughout the book.

Ivan: You know what? I see something funny in this.

S: What is that?

Ivan: In *Willy the Dreamer*, there was lots of bananas and in this one there's lots of hats.

There are lamp-posts in several illustrations in *Voices in the Park*. In some instances, the lamp-posts are indeed 'ordinary' but in other illustrations, Browne uses the lamp-posts to continue the hat motif. The students noted the mother's hat on the lamp-posts, and a crown on a lamppost on the first verso and on the lamp-post as Smudge and her father enter the park. Melissa observed, 'And there's a queen's or a king's crown on the lamp.' When Peter's group looked at the illustration of Smudge and Charles on the see-saw, they noted the lamp-posts in the background.

Peter: Hey, that's a Santa hat on the lamppost.

S: It looks like a Santa's hat.

Chris: And look, that's the same. I guess a lot of people are leaving their hats behind on the lamppost.

S: It seems that way.

Omar: Maybe a lot of people are forgetting their hats on the lamppost.

## Intertextuality and parodic appropriations

Also typical of Browne's artwork is the inclusion of cultural allusions. Again these visual intertextual links serve both as connections and interruptions or disruptions. The children drew upon their 'Lifeworld and School-based World' domains (Ryan and Anstey, 2003: 11) when identifying intertextualities in the picture book. 'All readers have an identity which is derived from their life experiences and which provides them with resources as a reader' (Ryan and Anstey, 2003: 11). The types of interactions occurring during the read-aloud sessions also influenced the students' repertoires of literary and life experiences (Rosenblatt, 1981) – their intertextual histories were constantly changing as they listened to, talked about, and wrote about each picture book. The changes in individual functioning subsequently influenced the next small group and whole class read-aloud sessions, and again these social experiences shaped individual thinking. Thus, students mutually affected each other and the group as a whole, and the group

affected the individual; individual and collective identities were constantly changing, adapting and emerging (i.e. social constructivism).

The children connected the character Charles in *Voices in the Park* to Willy, a character in other books by Anthony Browne. The children thought that Charles 'looked like Willy'. As well as reading *Willy the Dreamer*, Ms P. and I had read other Willy books (e.g. *Willy the Wimp* [Browne, 1984]) to the Grade 1 class. Some thought that the striped lamp-post in the first illustration of 'Fourth Voice' had 'the same colours as Willy's vest.' Initially, some of the children in two groups thought the character atop a building in one illustration was Buster Nose, a character in several other Willy books. However, further discussion by the children resulted in all of the small groups identifying the ape as King Kong.

- Frank: Oh no, who's that?  
 José: It's a big monkey.  
 Tom: I think it's a big huge monkey that's trying to get a guy.  
 S: Who is that big monkey?  
 Phillip: It's King Kong. He's a superhero.  
 José: And he looks like he is going to jump off the roof.  
 Frank: Is this in New York?  
 S: It could be New York.

Several groups made another connection to *Willy the Dreamer* when they saw the illustration of Smudge's father at beginning of 'Second Voice'. They commented about the green chair the father was sitting in.

- Robert: And you know what I just realized? This chair looks like the chair in *Willy the Dreamer*, only this one is green. Remember he was in one that was pink?  
 Kathy: Now the top is different.  
 S: It does look somewhat the same.

The children identified other intertextual connections as well. As noted earlier, the children's personal backgrounds affected their recognition and identification of intertexts. Although not all groups could identify the Mona Lisa, all the children said they were 'familiar' with the famous painting. Melissa's comment was typical of the children's responses, 'I've seen it but I don't remember what it's called.' Although only a few children were able to identify Mary Poppins, most said they were familiar with the character once she had been named.

- Sam: Oh, there's an angel flying up because it wouldn't be on the ground.  
 Shamah: It's a flying person.  
 S: It is. Do you know what story or movie that person is from?

- Ivan: I know. Mary Poppins.  
 Shamah: I've never seen it.  
 Sam: She files around with her umbrella.  
 Ivan: I have the movie of this.

According to Dentith (2000: 6), parody is a form of 'intertextual allusion' that can be 'irreverent, inconsequential, and even silly' (Dentith, 2000: 37). He defines parody as 'any cultural practice which makes a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice' (Dentith, 2000: 37). There are several examples of parodic appropriations in *Voices in the Park* and although the children noticed or commented about many of the intertextual allusions, most were beyond the children's experiences to understand the significance of these allusions as parodies (e.g. Magritte's hats, the shadow of the mother as a wolf, the burning bush, the use of Munch's *Scream* in the father's newspaper and as Charles' reflection on the slide). Most of the children did not understand the parody of Santa Claus as a beggar with his sign that read, 'Wife and millions of kids to support' (unpaginated). Several could not understand why Santa would beg for money when he had lots of elves to help him! However, each small group of children noted the eyes and mouths in the trees in the second verso and thought the trees were imitating (parodying) the mother calling for her son.

- Mohad: Look at the trees.  
 Ethan: They're blowing.  
 Ali: But no, it might not be her [the mother] – it might be the wind.  
 Mohad: No, she yelled so . . . she yelled so loud and the trees just broke their leaves off.  
 S: Think so?  
 Nathan: Look, the trees have eyes and mouths (points to details in the illustration).  
 S: So what do you think the trees are doing?  
 Ali: They're calling for Charles.  
 Ethan: Yeah, she's yelling and the trees are doing the same thing.  
 Mohad: Yeah the trees are saying, 'Charles!'  
 All: 'Charles!' (We put our right hand to our mouth as we call 'Charles'.)

## Typographic experimentation

The type font, an element of design, 'can contribute to the overall experience of the story' (Cullinan and Person, 2001: 102). Browne uses a unique typeface for each character's voice that reflects the different personality of

each character. Each type font 'has its own effect on the psychological force of the words' (Doonan, 1999: 47). Jeremy succinctly summarized the variation in typeface. 'You know what? Any time a different character talks, there's different letters.' One group thought the father's font was bigger because the character was a 'big man.' Sam said, 'Yeah, it's bigger because he's a bigger monkey'. Phillip stated that, 'these are the same kind of printing that we [Grade 1 students] use'. When another group saw the printing for Charles, Ryan observed, 'It's smaller because he's very small.' When Gurjit's group met Smudge, the fourth voice, she stated, 'Guess what I know what the writing is. It's called gooeey. It's called smudgy writing.' Thus, the children recognized the different fonts and most realized that the different fonts had significance with respect to communicating information about the characters.

## More indeterminacies

In many instances, the synergy among the words and pictures in *Voices in the Park* creates indeterminacy. Numerous illustrations in the book can be 'read' and interpreted in multiple ways. The children worked to fill in the gaps and construct meaning. Several explained that the tree was on fire at the end of the 'First Voice' 'because she [the mother] was screaming so loud.'

A multitude of other 'secrets' or visual jokes (Doonan, 1999) diverted the reading of each narrative and the children eagerly and enthusiastically searched the illustrations for secrets. I often did not start reading the text on the page until the children had scrutinized the illustrations because their attention was focused on the pictures, not on the text. Omar remarked, 'Hey a crocodile. I think he [Browne] likes to do secrets.' Other visual jokes include the elephant's trunk and leg in the trees, the crocodile or alligator shadow, the gorilla profiles in the trees and shrubs, the bicycle with two riders pedaling in opposite directions, the two dogs appearing to be attached, the fruit in the trees, the castle, the dogs switching tails, the whale in the trees, and the father's toque on the statue and shrub. The following three transcript excerpts illustrate some of the children's conversations about Browne's visual jokes.

- |          |                                                                     |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brianna: | I see an elephant's trunk and an elephant leg.                      |
| Melissa: | Oh, a trunk! Look this here's cut off (points to the tree).         |
| S:       | What's happened to the tree?                                        |
| Ryan:    | It got sawed off.                                                   |
| Brianna: | Hey, look that was so funny, it's . . . the dogs are going so fast. |
| Gurjit:  | The dogs are going so fast that they are cutting the trees.         |
| Melissa: | The tree might fall on them!                                        |
| S:       | Look at the dogs.                                                   |

- Frank: They switched tails!
- Tom: She [Victoria] has his [Albert] tail and he [Albert] has her [Victoria] tail.
- S: That's right.
- José: This is a really funny book. I like it.
- Frank: Weird things keep on happening with these two dogs!
- Kathy: Hey, look at the dogs.
- Fernandez: They're attached together again.
- Robert: Just a sec. Hey, way, way, way back here (turns pages of book to first illustration where dogs were attached) . . . look it, they're switched around.
- S: You're right. The dogs did switch around.
- Changwei: Right, see last time it was the head of that dog.
- S: Victoria.
- Changwei: Of Victoria and the back of the other dog.
- Kathy: Albert.
- S: And this time?
- Robert: This time it's the front of Albert and the back of the other dog [Victoria].
- Fernandez: Wow, that is neat.

The synergy among the various metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park* creates an overarching indeterminacy in the text and positions readers in a co-authoring role. There are several defensible interpretations of the events and characters in the text. From their experiences during the picture book read-aloud sessions, the children acquired 'various social practices, identities and tools' (Galda and Beach, 2001: 66), including the adoption of a collaborative role in the construction of meaning. As demonstrated by the two examples below, the Grade 1 children participated in constructing storylines by inventing possibilities and filling in gaps.

- S: How can it be sunny on one part of the bench and cloudy on the other part? The bench is the same (second verso in 'Third Voice').
- Peter: I think I know why.
- S: Why?
- Peter: This one is happy [points to Smudge] and this one is sad [points to Charles].
- S: Peter has a really great idea.
- Chris: Well these guys aren't having much fun [points to Charles and his mother] and these guys are [points to Smudge and father].
- Brianna: They came out of the picture [Mona Lisa and other painting] (last recto of 'Second Voice').
- Melissa: They came to life.

- Gurjit: Look. The light turned to a flower.  
 Ryan: Everything is all strange.  
 Gurjit: Look at this. There's footprints. Just like the other ones back here.  
 S: That's right – just like with the mother and Charles.  
 Melissa: The Mona Lisa and him are dancing.  
 S: They're dancing, that's right.  
 Brianna: I think they're doing the tango.  
 Ryan: And Santa is doing the ballet.

## Metafictive devices and the young reader

Browne's use of metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park* affects the telling of each individual linear narrative and the telling of the overall non-linear story. Although readers should always be involved in the construction of meaning when reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), the metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park* give agency to readers and require them to become even more involved in the creation of meaning. The multiplicity of narrators, narratives, intertextual and intratextual connections, illustrative disruptions, typographic styles; the stories within stories; the simultaneity of events; the non-linear and non-sequential plot; and the disruption of time and space relationships, coalesce to create indeterminacies in the visual and verbal texts, resulting in the possibility of multiple readings. *Voices in the Park* is a writerly text (Barthes, 1970), open to a multitude of interpretations owing to its indeterminacies in written and illustrative text, plot, character and setting (Anstey, 2002). Picture books have always required readers to fill in gaps (Iser, 1978) and generate predictions and connections on multiple levels as readers move back and forth between text and illustrations. However, picture books with metafictional techniques such as those in *Voices in the Park* demand a higher level of sophistication and complexity with respect to gap filling and interpretation. Indeed, as Doonan (1999: 53) writes, Browne assumes that his readers have great skills of interpretation.

A body of research, including the work described in this article, has found that 'children can handle quite sophisticated visual and narrative devices' (Goldstone, 1998: 51). As evident from the transcript excerpts, the Grade 1 children, several of whom were not meeting grade level expectations in language arts, capably dealt with the metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park*. Metafictional narratives, such as *Voices in the Park*, can potentially foster reader awareness of 'how the processes of fiction are operating as they read' (Mackey, 1990: 179). In reviewing several different approaches that describe the developmental nature of reading fiction, Mackey (1990) identified the common theme of,

some sort of distance between reader and story. The reader is engaged by the story but is also aware of how it is working with a greater or lesser degree of explicitness. Such an awareness seems to be seen by all these writers as essential to full adult reading. (Mackey, 1990: 180)

Through their experiences with challenging and complex picture books with metafictional devices, children will grow in their abilities as readers. Their metafictional awareness will assist them as they become older and encounter similar devices in other picture books, novels, and media representations.

### **Metafictional textual practices in postmodern and radical change literature**

Lewis (2001) notes how the use of metafictional devices has become more widespread with the publication of postmodern fictions. 'One can see why metafictional devices are essential to the postmodernist enterprise, with its sustained attack on all manifestations of authoritative order and unity' (Lewis, 2001: 94). Among many writers, Coles and Hall (2001), Goldstone (1998; 2001/2002), McCallum (1996), and Yearwood (2002) describe how changes in contemporary children's and young-adult literature reflect the broader social, cultural and historical movement referred to as postmodernism. According to Nikolajeva (1998: 222) 'an ever-growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries . . . exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism'. Two of the postmodern characteristics identified by Goldstone (2001/2002: 363), 'greater power given to the reader/viewer encouraging cocreation with the author or artist' and 'nonlinearity', are most evident in *Voices in the Park*. Because writers and illustrators have been exposed to 'the same postmodernizing influences as everyone else . . . it would be reasonable to suppose that such influences might find their way into books' (Lewis, 2001: 99). However, as Lewis (2001: 94) notes, it is important to distinguish between postmodernism, 'a cultural and intellectual phenomena' and metafiction, 'an approach, or set of devices, for undermining expectations or for exposing the fictional nature of fictions': postmodernism fiction is 'an historical phenomenon' but metafiction is 'an a-historical notion' (Lewis, 2001: 94).

In *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age* (1999), Eliza Dresang includes many of the characteristics of postmodern society identified by the individuals noted above in her framework that describes changes in contemporary children's and young-adult literature. However, she does not use

postmodernism as a context to frame her Radical Change theory. Rather, Dresang (1999: 14) proposes that, 'connectivity, interactivity and access in the digital world explain the fundamental changes taking place in the body of literature for young readers'. Thus, like postmodernism, Radical Change is an historical phenomenon. She identifies three types of changes in literature for youth. Type One Radical Change, books with changing forms and formats, incorporate one or more of the following characteristics: 'graphics in new forms and formats, words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy, non-linear organization and format, non-sequential organization and format, multiple layers of meaning, [and] interactive formats' (Dresang, 1999: 19). Type Two Radical Change, changing perspectives, includes 'multiple perspectives, visual and verbal, previously unheard voices, [and] youth who speak for themselves' (Dresang, 1999: 24). Changing boundaries, Type Three Radical Change, includes: 'subjects previously forbidden, settings previously overlooked, characters portrayed in new [and] complex ways, new types of communities, [and] unresolved endings' (Dresang, 1999: 26). Note the duplication among some of the metafictional devices listed in Appendix A and several of the characteristics identified in Dresang's changing forms and formats, and changing perspectives. Thus, similar to postmodern fiction, it seems that Radical Change texts often incorporate metafictional devices. All of the characteristics of Type One Radical Change, and one characteristic of Type Two Radical Change, multiple perspectives, were addressed in the previous discussions of the metafictional devices in *Voices in the Park*.

## Final thoughts

We need to continue to explore how children (and adolescents) respond to and interpret various narrative structures, and discursive and illustrative devices in texts. Texts with metafictional devices can provide reading and viewing experiences that will contribute to the development of understandings about texts that are necessary to be multiliterate in the 21st century (Anstey, 2002). Research that is examining students' interpretive practices of an ever-growing range of symbolic representations in our culture (Mackey, 2003) should include the further exploration of children's textual engagements with literature with metafictional devices. We need to examine how reading (and viewing and writing) texts with metafictional devices influences the development of students' literary competences. Further, it is important to explore the role of teacher influence. A wealth of research has documented how the nature of the classroom interpretive community (Fish, 1980), of which the teacher is the most influential

member, influences children's and adolescents' responses to and understanding of literature. Research could examine teachers' knowledge and understanding of metafictional devices, as well as their instructional practices associated with the use of texts with metafictional techniques.

## Appendix: metafictional devices

1. 'overly obtrusive narrators who directly address readers and comment on their own narrations' (McCallum 1996: 397) (Anstey, 2002; Lodge, 1992; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Waugh, 1984)
2. polyphonic narratives or multiple narrators or character focalizers (McCallum, 1996; Stephens and Watson, 1994)
3. manifold or multiple narratives (Goldstone, 1998; McCallum, 1996; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Trites, 1994; Waugh, 1984) or multi-stranded narratives (i.e. 'two or more interconnected narrative strands differentiated by shifts in temporal and spatial relationships, and/or shifts in narrative point of view' [McCallum, 1996: 406])
4. narrative framing devices (e.g. stories within stories, 'characters reading about their own fictional lives . . . self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations . . . a nesting of narrators' [Waugh, 1984: 30])
5. disruptions of traditional time and space relationships in the narrative(s) (Goldstone, 1998; Lodge, 1992; McCallum, 1996; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Waugh, 1984)
6. non-linear and non-sequential plots including narrative discontinuities (Goldstone, 1998; McCallum, 1996; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Waugh, 1984)
7. intertextuality (Anstey, 2002; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001)
8. parodic appropriations of other texts, genres and discourses (McCallum, 1996; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Waugh, 1984)
9. typographic experimentation (McCallum, 1996; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Waugh, 1984)
10. 'mixing of genres, discourse styles, modes of narration and speech representation' (McCallum, 1996: 397), including 'people prose' (Goldstone, 1998; Stephens and Watson, 1994; Waugh, 1984)
11. 'situations where characters and narrators change places, or shift from one plane of being to another' (Stephens and Watson, 1994: 44)
12. 'a pastiche of illustrative styles' (Anstey, 2002: 447)
13. new and unusual design and layouts (Anstey, 2002)
14. excess (i.e. 'testing limits – linguistic, literary, social, conceptual, ethical, narrative' [Lewis, 1990: 144])

15. illustrative framing devices, including mise-en-abyme (i.e. 'a text – visual or verbal – embedded within another text as its miniature replica' [Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001: 226])
16. description of the creative process making readers 'conscious of the literary and artistic devices used in the story's creation' (Goldstone, 1998: 50) (McCallum, 1996; Waugh, 1984)
17. 'indeterminacy in written or illustrative text, plot, character or setting' (Anstey, 2002: 447) (Goldstone, 1998; Lewis, 1990; McCallum, 1996)
18. 'availability of multiple readings and meanings for a variety of audiences' (Anstey, 2002: 447) (McCallum, 1996; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001; Stephens and Watson, 1994)

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