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The Postmodern World of Children's Book Illustration

By: Laura J. Colker, Ed.D.**Source:** RIF Exchange

Traditionally, picture books have been characterized by illustrations that are focused and uncluttered. Though imaginative, they follow a linear left-to-right movement across the page. As Goldstone (2001/2002) points out, nearly every beloved picture book for the last century has followed this design. Goldstone then goes on to pose this question:

If this is a formula for success, what then should be done with children's picture books published in the last two and a half decades that run contrary to the aforementioned characteristics? How can books like *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Stupid Tales* (Scieszka & Smith, 1992) be evaluated, categorized, and explained to children? This book definitely does not have a clear, traditional, linear story structure or a sweet and innocent tone. It mocks rather than models oral tradition... In *Art Spiegelman's Open Me...I'm a Dog* (1997), a dog has been turned into a book. Despite earnest efforts to be transformed back to his original canine state, the dog remains a book. The charming protagonist does not resolve the conflict. He does not return home. The books just mentioned are renegades from traditional picture book structure.

This "new breed" of picture book has been dubbed "Postmodern." Postmodernism, as a concept, emphasizes the interconnectedness of our modern world and embraces multiculturalism. What then is a postmodern picture book? It is one in which the boundaries of what we expect a picture book to be like are stretched. Both the author and the illustrator employ devices that defy the reader's expectations. Rather than just enhancing the meaning of the text, postmodern picture books challenge the reader to come up with her own meaning. Indeed, each reading of a book may cause a reader to construct a new and different meaning.

Anstey (2002) writes that postmodern authors and illustrators make use of the following devices to achieve this different style of book:

- Nontraditional ways of using plot, character, and setting, which challenge reader expectations and require different ways of reading and viewing;
- Unusual uses of the narrator's voice to position the reader to read the book in particular ways and through a particular characters' eyes (this can be achieved by the written or visual text);
- Indeterminacy in written or illustrative text, plot, character, or setting, which requires the reader to construct some of the text and meanings;
- A pastiche of illustrative styles, which require the reader to employ a range of knowledge and grammars to read;
- New and unusual design and layout, which challenge the reader's perception of how to read a book;
- Contesting discourses (between illustrative and written text), which require the reader to consider alternate readings and meaning; intertextuality, which requires the reader to use background knowledge in order to access the available meanings; and
- The availability of multiple readings and meanings for a variety of

audiences.

Although not calling them postmodern, Kirk (n.d.) has compiled a listing of books (partially reproduced below) in which the text and pictures have intentional inconsistencies:

These books were suggested as having outwardly playful mismatches between the text and the pictures...The inconsistencies are regarded as 'intentional' and exaggerate the irony that Perry Nodelman, for example, argues always exists between the two media in this form. Children typically notice and enjoy the inconsistencies.

A IS FOR SALAD, Mike Lester

A MOUNTAIN OF BLINTZES, Barbara Diamond Goldin; illus. Anik McGrory

BAD DAY AT RIVERBEND, Chris Van Allsburg

BOODIL, MY DOG, Pija Lindenbaum; illus. Gabrielle Charbonnet

BOOTSIE BARKER BITES, Barbara Bottner; illus. Peggy Rathmann

CLEVELAND LEE'S BEALE STREET BAND, Arthur Flowers; illus. Anna Rich

COME AWAY FROM THE WATER, SHIRLEY, John Burningham

DRAC AND THE GREMLIN, Allan Baille; illus. Jane Tanner

FANNIE IN THE KITCHEN, Deborah Hopkinson; illus. Nancy Carpenter

GOOD NIGHT, GORILLA, Peggy Rathmann

HURRICANE, David Wiesner

IT'S TIME TO GET OUT OF THE TUB, SHIRLEY, John Burningham

JUST ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY, Rod Clement

MOLE MUSIC, David McPhail

NEVER SATISFIED, Fulvio Testa

NOTHING EVER HAPPENS ON MY BLOCK, Ellen Raskin

OFFICER BUCKLE AND GLORIA, Peggy Rathman

ONCE UPON A TIME, Vivian French; illus. John Prater

SHORTCUT, David Macauley

STORY OF CHICKEN LICKEN, Jan Ormerod

THREE PIGS, David Wiesner

TROUBLE, Jane Kurtz; illus. Durga Bernhard

TWO BAD ANTS, Chris Van Allsburg

VOICES IN THE PARK, Anthony Browne

Probably the most cited example of the postmodern picture book is David Macauley's *Black and White* (1991). The book begins with four different stories, each with a different artistic style. These four stories within the story can be read up to down, right to left, left to right, or down to up. This is not your father's picture book--its design is cluttered and its story isn't action driven.

Reading a postmodern book like *Black and White* requires what Anstey (2002) calls multiliteracy. Literacy, she argues, is no longer an appropriate term because it focuses just on language. Multiliteracy, on the other hand, involves being literate about illustrations as well as language. "The development of different relationships between the written and illustrative text is...an important feature of the postmodern picture book." (Anstey, .447.)

Postmodern books challenge children to go beyond the obvious in finding meaning. It's no longer required that the reader get drawn into the reality of a story. Readers of postmodern books are jolted out of any comfortable sense of reality. Goldstone (2201/2002, p.365) describes it this way:

Characters and the narrator may use the physical pages of the book for props or describe the book's creation. This is referred to as a self-referential text. The book asks the reader, "What is real? The story? The page? The book itself?" *The Story of a Little Mouse Trapped in a Book* by Monique Felix (1980), a wordless picture book, poses such questions. In this story a little mouse is trapped literally in a book. How can she get out? The mouse begins to nibble around the edges of the page to cut away the paper. Carefully she slides the paper from its moorings on the page, and below is a world filled with all that a mouse could want--fields, trees, houses, and blue skies. The ingenious creature then makes a paper airplane out of the page she has just cut and flies to freedom. The child is unconsciously or consciously asking "What is real?"... A world existing underneath the page?

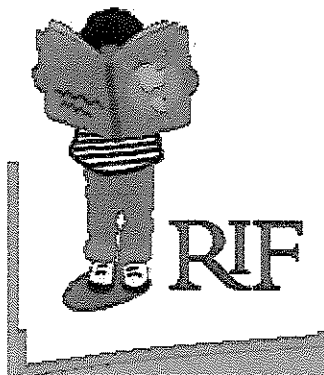
Postmodernism gives as much weight to a book's illustrations as it does its text. For the postmodern reader, illustration doesn't just support the meaning of the text. In many instances, illustration carries its own meaning, separate from that in the written story. A postmodern storybook has the potential to extend the definition of reading comprehension to new, unexplored levels.

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