

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

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Postmodern picturebooks are defined by their “playfulness, rule-breaking, fragmentation and uncertainty” (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 75). They push the boundaries of traditional picturebooks, frequently leading to “visual contemplation” (Doonan, 1993, p. 11) as a means to decipher elements of the narrative. Although categorised as a “sub-genre” (Edge-Partington, 2010, p. 1), postmodern picturebooks are becoming the new norm for up-and-coming artist-illustrators, as they take old concepts and manipulate them into something new and outlandish. The three picturebooks that are considered to be postmodern which will be examined in this essay are: *Beware of the Storybook Wolves* by Lauren Child, *The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan and *Wolves* by Emily Gravett.

Beware of the Storybook Wolves (2000) by Lauren Child, born in 1967 (British Council, 2021), is considered to be a postmodern picturebook due to the vast range of metafictional devices, including intertextuality and experimental typography. Lauren Child’s style of illustration can be seen as postmodern due to the use of multiple medias: “photographs, magazine cuttings and collage” (Foyles, 2021) and watercolours. The narrative is written in the third person.

Immediately upon opening the book, the reader is greeted by a half title and a small illustration of one of the main characters, on the recto side. Child does not conform to the traditional anatomy of a picturebook by excluding endpapers, creating a feel of postmodernism before the narrative has begun. Child defies conformity by illustrating a scene in which Herb – the protagonist – and his mother are reading *Little Red Riding Hood* in bed (Fig. 1). The blurb of the fairy tale accommodates the copyright information, therefore becoming a part of the illustration. This page also includes the dedications, which, stereotypically, should have its own page. On recto, the narrative begins with a framed watercolour illustration with white borders and traditional horizontal

lines of text, a traditional layout, lulling the reader into a false sense of normality. However, this picturebook is far from that.

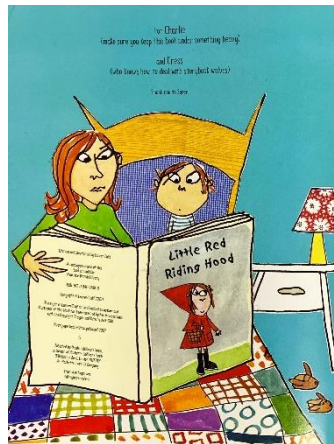


Fig. 1. *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*, Lauren Child, 2000

The use of intertextuality in *Beware of the Storybook Wolves* assists in defining the picturebook as postmodern. Child cleverly incorporates characters from multiple classic children's narratives, including: *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *The Three Little Pigs*. Child has parodied these characters and narratives by adding her own twists, fracturing the traditional stories to construct a unique narrative; an example being "The Little Fierce Wolf and The Three Pink Piglets" (Child, 2000). Not only has Child reimagined the title, but the pictorial aspect too, portraying a young and naïve, one-eyed wolf who is learning how to be "fierce" (Child, 2000), whereas stereotypically the wolf is full-fledged in his ability to be scary and cruel. The Fairy Godmother from *Cinderella* also features in Child's narrative. However, stereotypically, the Fairy Godmother is kind and gracious, whereas Child portrays her as brusque: "I've got a good mind to turn you into a caterpillar, little boy" (Child, 2000) (Fig. 2). The contrast between the original caring Fairy Godmother and Child's adapted version portrays postmodernism as Child has warped the characteristics of the pre-existing character to fit into her own narrative. Another feature of postmodern picturebooks is irony. Child's narrative reads "just like in the fairy tales" (Child, 2000); the contingency and disjunctive irony entertains, not only the child, but the "parent reader" (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 44) too. The use of irony engages the adults that read to their children as it is an advanced literary device, often beyond comprehension for younger readers.



Fig. 2. *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*, Lauren Child, 2000

Another element of *Beware of the Storybook Wolves* that creates an air of postmodernism is Child's use of typographic experimentation. Child has used different typography to represent the fairy tale characters' voices. When the wolves speak, a bold font, which bears resemblance to the horror genre, is used, communicating to the reader that they are the antagonists of the narrative. The Wicked Fairy's voice is depicted by scratchy hand-writing, resembling the effect of a fountain pen being used harshly, and the Fairy Godmother's voice is represented by swirly, spasmodically cursive lettering (Fig. 2). Child has used different typography for different characters to represent their voice, personalities and characteristics. It also helps the reader channel the characters' voices through audible expression; for example, reading with an accent, changing volume and pitch (Taylor, 2021). This results in an immersive experience for the child being read to. Child has also experimented with the layout of the text. The picturebook features traditional horizontal lines of text as well as columns. However, on some pages, the layout of the text supplements the telling of the story. A prime example of this is the double-page spread where Herb tries to "slide the jelly off the page"; the illustration is on the recto (Fig. 3). On the verso, there is a chunk of text that tapers from left to right. On the left-hand side, the text is large, but as the text gets closer to the gutter, it gradually gets smaller. The lines are also non-linear; they waver, creating the effect that the text is

sliding off the page along with the jelly and tablecloth, ultimately lending itself to the illustration.

Another example of Child's typographic experimentation is when Herb cries for help. The lettering goes from big to small to signify that Herb is shouting and the exclamation is diagonal to represent the projection of Herb's voice.

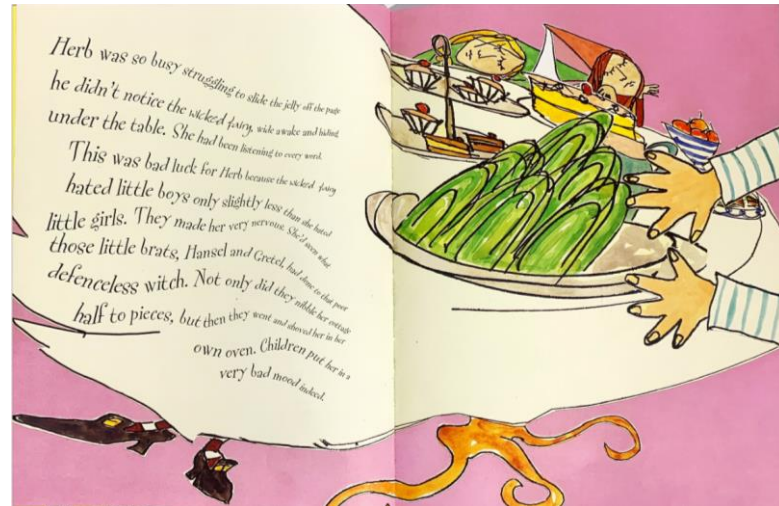


Fig. 3. *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*, Lauren Child, 2000

Emily Gravett's first picturebook, *Wolves* (2005), has been awarded "the Macmillan Prize for Illustration and the Kate Greenaway medal" (Foyles, 2021) and is considered to be postmodern by many for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, *Wolves* utilizes a pastiche of illustrative styles and mediums. The protagonist, a rabbit, is depicted by oil pastels and a "muted" (Gravett, 2015) colour palette; the rabbit is the only full-colour character, meaning he stands out and is easy to follow through the narrative. The illustrations in the background are line drawings, which appear to be charcoal or oil pastel, with minimal shading. Gravett also utilizes collage and texture; for example, the cover of the book that rabbit gets from the library is the texture of a traditional hardback book. Another example are the envelopes at the end of the narrative which are clearly photographed and then digitally manipulated to add the fictional addresses and information. There are also interactive elements – an envelope with a removeable letter, warning the rabbit that his library book is overdue – which creates intrigue in both children and adults alike. These different components complement each other by creating a surreal setting.

Secondly, at the beginning of the narrative, the background of each page is cream (Fig. 4). However, the pages of the book that the rabbit is reading are white and, as the rabbit becomes absorbed by the book, the white pages of rabbit's book get larger, until the background is completely white (Gravett, 2015). This could be seen as metafictional irony as both the rabbit and the reader are immersed in a book – the reader being transported to a different setting. Gravett encapsulates the audience by making it clear that the book within the narrative is a book. By the end of the narrative, the backgrounds are back to cream (Fig. 6) to suggest that the rabbit's library book is over and the narrative continues.



Fig. 4. *Wolves*, Emily Gravett, 2005

Thirdly, Gravett utilizes iconotext throughout the narrative; an example being the form of a wolf in the architecture of the library and, on recto, bold black typography portraying the noun, “wolves” (Gravett, 2005). This literary device makes the narrative interactive as children can spot the pictorial elements that coincide with the text. Fourthly, Gravett has used pictorial intertextuality within the narrative. On verso, a mean-looking wolf is peaking from behind the pages, scowling at the rabbit (Fig. 5). The wolf is clad in a jacket with the hood up, which is highly reminiscent of when the antagonist wolf is pretending to be Grandma, in *Little Red Riding Hood*. This may only be spotted by older children or children with advanced “digital literacy” (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, p. 40) as they have to read “between the lines and the pictures” (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 76). This element

screams postmodernism as a character from a classical tale has been dropped into a contemporary narrative.

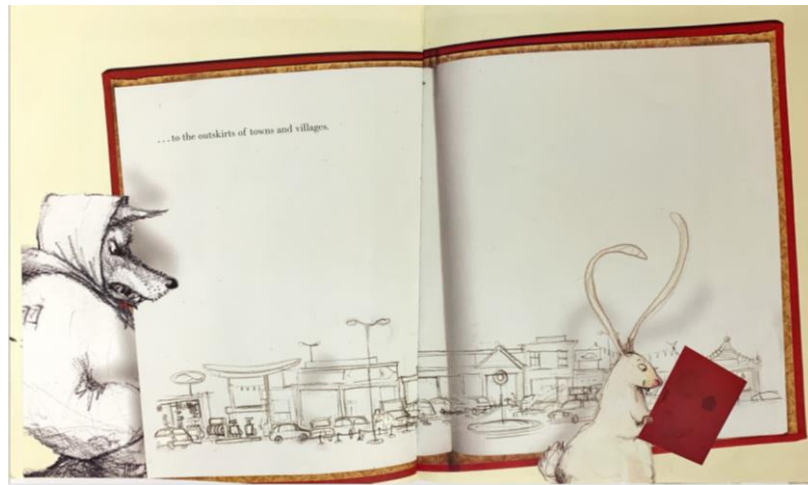


Fig. 5. *Wolves*, Emily Gravett, 2005

Wolves is a unique and clever narrative due to the fact that it is non-fiction intertwined with fiction – linking reality to the imaginary. The narrative follows the rabbit as he is reading and learning about wolves. Therefore, the story is not only factually educational, yet encouraging the expansion of digital literacy skills.

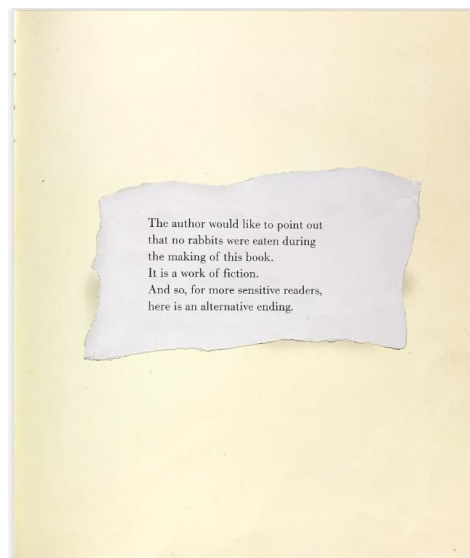


Fig. 6. *Wolves*, Emily Gravett, 2005

The ending of the narrative is metafictional, as the text states that the book is “a work of fiction” (Gravett, 2005) (Fig. 6) which accentuates the “fabric and materiality of the book itself” (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 75). This self-referentiality is what defines postmodernism. In addition, Gravett created an alternate ending portraying indeterminacy – another key factor of postmodern picturebooks. The first ending suggests that the rabbit has been harmed or killed due to the destroyed cover – scratches galore – of rabbit’s library book. However, the latter ending is open-ended, creating ambiguity. The wolf and rabbit share a sandwich (Fig. 7). Therefore, the readers’ imagination can run wild with indefinite possibilities of what happened to the wolf and rabbit once the narrative has ended. The alternate ending illustration has been created using collage. The characters have been ripped up and reconstructed, portraying Gravett’s physical effort to depict a happy ending.



Fig. 7. *Wolves*, Emily Gravett, 2005

The last picturebook to be examined is *The Lost Thing* (2000) by Shaun Tan, an Australian author-illustrator born in 1974 (Famous Authors Editors, 2020). Tan’s picturebooks are renowned for “exploring the ambiguity and potential for multiple meanings in a visual sequence” (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 44).

Firstly, immediately upon opening the picturebook, the reader is greeted by the front flap. Traditionally, the front flap should include a brief overview of the narrative. However, Tan’s is laced

with irony and sarcasm; overall skimming over the description of the narrative, rendering the front flap “quite useless” (Tan, 2000). The use of self-referentiality is a prominent postmodern picturebook literary device that Tan has used successfully. The front flap breaks the fourth wall, with reference to “you” (Tan, 2000), which creates a connection between the reader and the narrator. The reader gets drawn in by the personal feel with the narrator creating a conversation of sorts through the use of rhetorical questions: “how else can you know if it is any good?” (Tan, 2000). Therefore, immersing the reader into the fictional land, that the protagonist calls home, before the narrative has begun. The front flap is clearly metafictional, referring to itself: “this cover flap” (Tan, 2000). Therefore, just by reading the front flap, it is obvious why this picturebook is considered to be postmodern.



Fig. 8. *The Lost Thing*, Shaun Tan, 2000

The layout of Shaun Tan’s picturebook is non-traditional (Fig. 8), alluding to the fact it is postmodern. The illustrations are framed and are mostly square or rectangular with the occasional unconventional shape; such as circles. The text is also framed, contained by lined paper. The background of each page is collaged, constructed by paper resembling browning scientific and futuristic documents, resulting in a busy aesthetic. This layout is unique, well thought out and the “format... creates a playful space” (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008, p. 59), causing intrigue by the

unconventionality. The illustrations are clearly inspired by a combination of artistic genres, including science fiction, contemporary, industrial art and surrealism. The science fiction inspiration can be seen through the creation of the wacky unrealistic creatures and collaged backgrounds – full of diagrams and equations. The creatures can also be perceived as surreal due to the use of everyday objects in some of the creatures' designs; for example, a mug, cage, accordion, lightbulbs. The industrial art inspiration is evident throughout the entire picturebook; the fictional land looks industrious and mechanical through the use of chimneys, smoke, metal pipes, cogs and buttons and the overcrowding of building and people. This shows the playfulness of the narrative due to the amount to uncover and decipher through looking; children need expansive visual literacy skills to understand all of the semiotics. The end papers can be considered to be photomontage due to the photographs of bottle tops that have been digitally manipulated to be decorated with coding, diagrams and text. The merging of artistic genres and movements is perceived as postmodern, as traditionally picturebooks draw inspiration from a singular movement or genre.

Tan's narrative is written in first person with the nameless protagonist telling the story. However, the protagonist can be seen as an obtrusive narrator. He can be overbearing due to the excessive text – uncommon in picturebooks – on certain pages. The busy layout of each page emphasises the obtrusive nature of the narrator as each page already feels overwhelming. The obtrusive narrator frequently breaks the fourth wall – especially at the beginning and end of the story. The narrative starts with, "So you want to hear a story?" (Tan, 2000), creating a personal affiliation between the reader and protagonist.

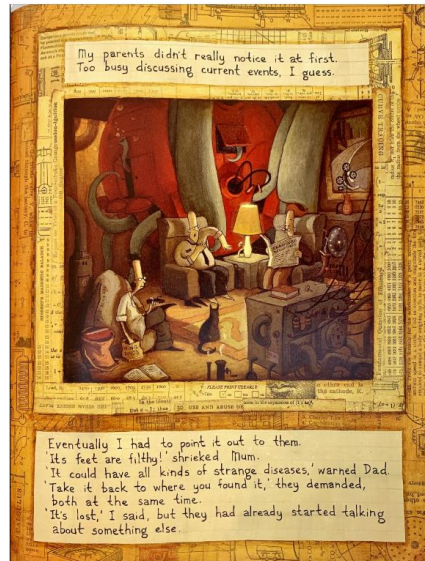


Fig. 9. *The Lost Thing*, Shaun Tan, 2000

It can be argued that Tan has experimented with typography throughout *The Lost Thing*. In a lot of the larger illustrations, Tan has included bits of text to add depth and detail to his drawings. A prime example of this is the illustration of the protagonist sitting in the living room with his parents (Fig. 9). The protagonist's hand is in a bag with the phrase "wing dings" (Tan, 2000) on it. The phrase is interesting as the protagonist is obviously eating the so-called "wing dings" (Tan, 2000). However, Wingdings is a type of font comprised of symbols (Edwards, 2015), which is not only a play on the use of semiotics, but solidifies that Tan took inspiration from technology and science fiction. The Mum is reading a newspaper with the headline "Flamingo Recaptured"; this is an unnecessary detail, nevertheless a metaphorical diamond for children to find and enjoy.

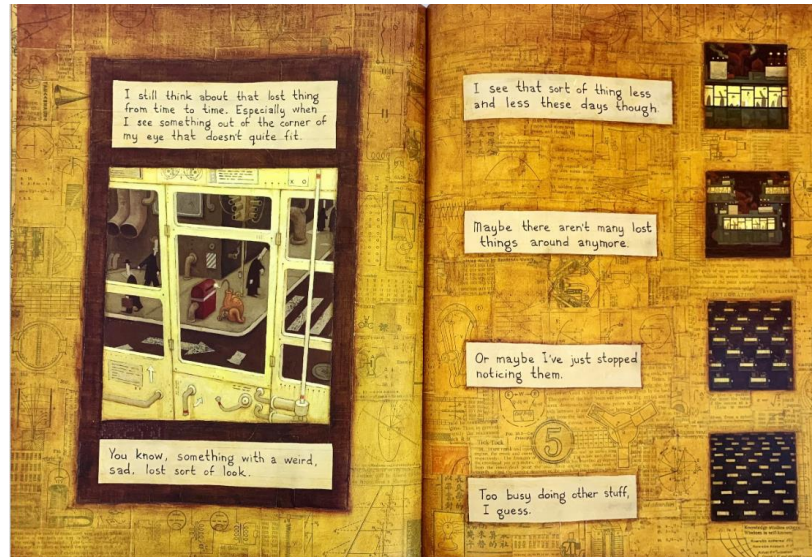


Fig. 10. *The Lost Thing*, Shaun Tan, 2000

The message of the narrative is indeterminate. It can be taken at face-value, just a story about a man finding something lost. However, it can be seen as a metaphor for something entirely different; for example, losing yourself, your personality, losing interest in a hobby. This is assumed due to the last line, “too busy doing other stuff” (Tan, 2000) (Fig. 10). The “other stuff” may be work or university putting people in a constant state of exhaustion so they do not have the time or energy to be themselves or enjoy their hobbies. “Other stuff” could be school, sucking the individuality out of the students, to brainwash them into societal conformity: go to university, get a job, have a family, work some more, retire, die. The ending of the narrative is also indeterminate. There is not a solid conclusion for either the lost creature or the protagonist. Therefore, the open-endings leave room for speculation of their individual futures. This progresses visual literacy skills as children have to combine what they read and saw to create a logical outcome.

In conclusion, I believe the picturebooks discussed are classed as postmodern due to their use of metafictional devices. They have a lot in common; such as the use of textures and indeterminacy. Postmodern picturebooks are important as they challenge children’s visual literacy skills and create refreshing approaches to old stories.

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