

Research in Practice

dissertation proposal

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Course- Illustration BA

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Module- Research in Practice

Module Code- (ADAD5004)

Word Count- 2,742

Three Words: Iconotext, Wordless, Surrealism

In this dissertation proposal I will be analysing the components of picture books that push boundaries with their narrative. My research will endeavour to explore three key words; Iconotext, wordless and surrealism. My practice is very much narrative driven, I enjoy rendering lively scenes drawing inspiration from animals, nature and people that I have met. I am intrigued by illustrators that utilise creative ways to communicate stories considering the relationship between word and image in picture books, and the use of irony in narrative.

Iconotext

Iconotext refers to the relationship between visual and textual narration, this term was coined by Kristin Hallberg in 1983 (Hallberg cited by Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000). Picture books often have a harmonious relationship, where the word and image convey the same narrative, however a dissonance between word and text can produce a deeper and more multi-dimensional narrative. A dissonance of Iconotext can otherwise be referred to as counterpoint, where image and text is contradictory and a harmonious relationship between word and text is referred to as complementary (Sailsbury and Styles 2012). Counterpoint picture books use words and image to yield different information to the reader, dependent on the degree of information an extreme form of counterpointing is termed as contradictory interaction (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000). *Rosie's Walk* is a picture book by author illustrator Pat Hutchins's (figure 1), Hutchins's uses a counterpointing dynamic employing parallel narratives between word and text.

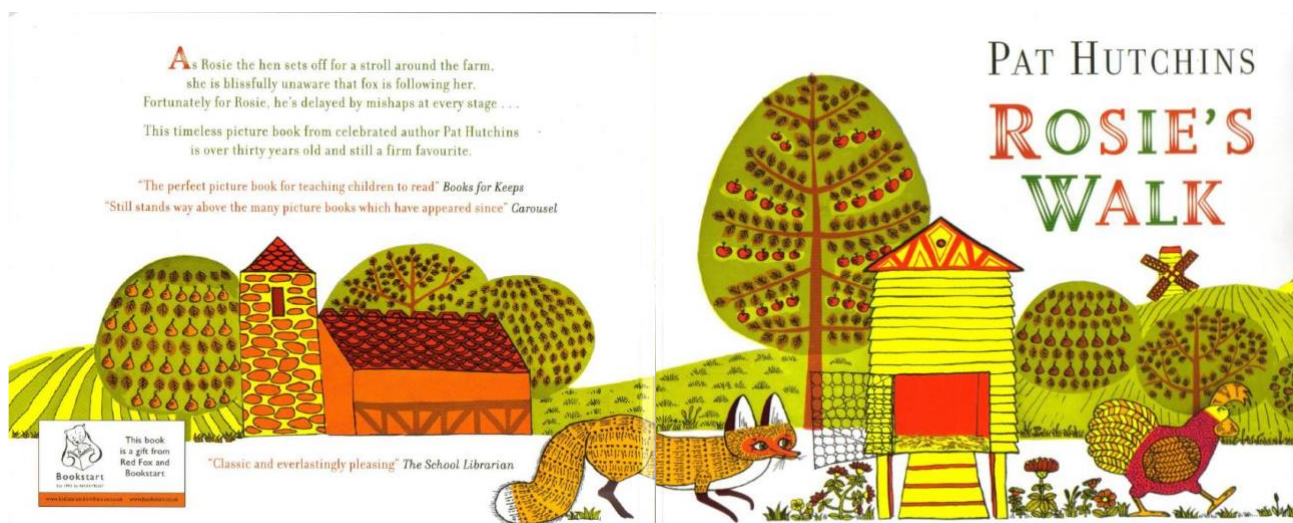


Figure 1. *Rosie's Walk* by author illustrator Pat Hutchins (1968) -front and back cover

Harris (2005) observed whilst reviewing the book that “The use of simple, stylised illustrations against an uncluttered background makes for a very direct mediation between reader and text”. The counterpointing dynamic works well in this instance, as the reader is in a senior position of knowledge since illustrations demonstrates more than the text is saying. This is reminiscent of theatrical pantomimes that incorporate audience participation in the show. “In the panto there is lots of jokes and the line ‘he’s behind you’ is famous as there is always a scene in a panto where someone is looking for something and it is always behind them” (Catriona, 2016).

The written story in *Rosie’s walk*, states that Rosie is just going for a leisurely stroll making her way back home, however, the illustration shows the fox pursuing Rosie along her walk. Unbeknown to Rosie, the Fox experiences mishaps and accidents along the way which hinders his hunt, for example, the fox stands on a rake and hits his face leading to another failing attempt. This relieves the viewer that Rosie did not face her demise, creating a lighter tone to the narrative as seen in figure 2 and 3. This type of pursuit, aches to the scenes of Sideshow Bob attempting to kill Bart in the *Simpsons*, however stands on several rakes hindering his quest as seen in figure 4, this is a common gag seen throughout the comedy genre.

In an interview with Pat Hutchins, she discusses how she treated the story like a silent movie- “where the fox isn’t mentioned at all, the reader knows what is happening but Rosie the hen has no clue” (Hutchins 2017). In each scene, the fox’s pursuit is ever more exaggerated in body language, conversely Rosie maintains the same position throughout the

book. This type of visual language is similar to that of silent movies. Silent movie actor and comedian, Charlie Chaplin was infamous for his expressive body language which enabled him to tell stories without words but still making the audience laugh. “Charlie Chaplin speaks the primal language of movement and he speaks it better than anyone else...” (Kamin, 2008).

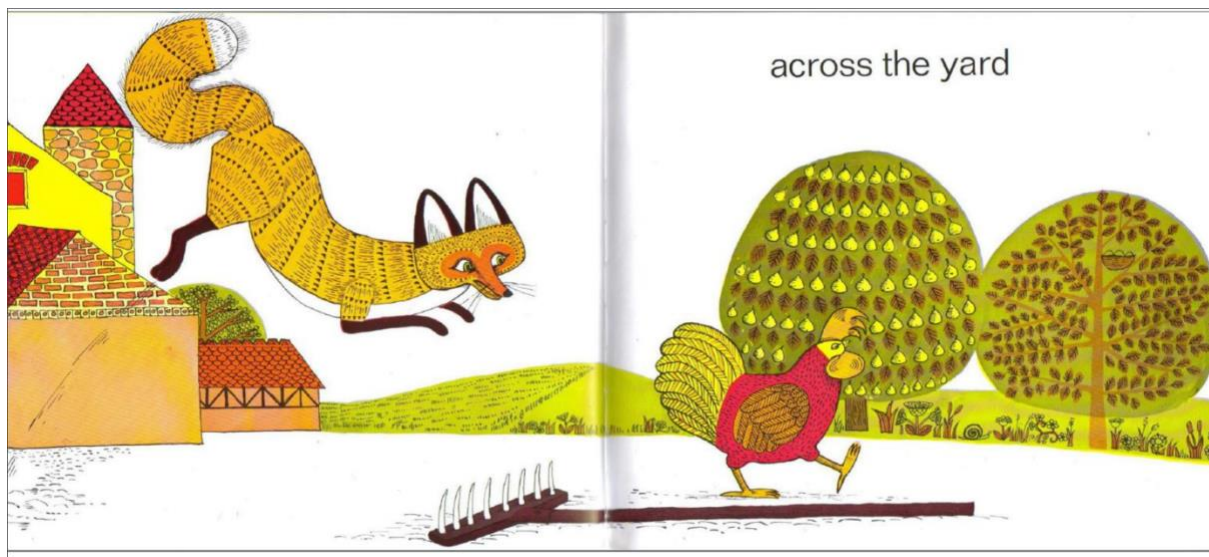


Figure 2. *Rosie's Walk* by author illustrator Pat Hutchins pages 4 & 5



Figure 3. *Rosie's Walk* by author illustrator Pat Hutchins (1968) – pages 6 & 7



Figure 4. Scene from The Simpsons- Sideshow Bob stepping on rakes, season 5, episode 2 (1993)

The book is comprised of sparse text with thirty-two words in a sans serif font, the sentences are quite simple with only essential information given. The lack of information in the text encourages the reader to engage fully with the illustrations to understand the story. This would aid in young reader's story telling skills and reading of visual language to denote narrative. In my future narrative projects, I would like consider using minimal text and a counterpoint dynamic, and to observe the way that the story is told.

Hutchins uses a limited colour palette which comprises of yellow, red, green and black. Both the fox and the chicken are illustrated with striking patterns that are beautifully rendered. The colours are vibrant and lively, which creates a light tone to the narrative. However, if the colours were darker and dull the narrative would change as the atmosphere would be altered. Alas, the last page shows the fox being chased off by bees and the hen arriving home safely as seen in figure 5 and 6.

Through researching counterpoint, I would like to include this dynamic in future books I illustrate. The humour is accessible for all ages with a light and humorous undertone. Moreover, the limited colour palette works very well in this instance, with smaller details the reader has visual stimulation.

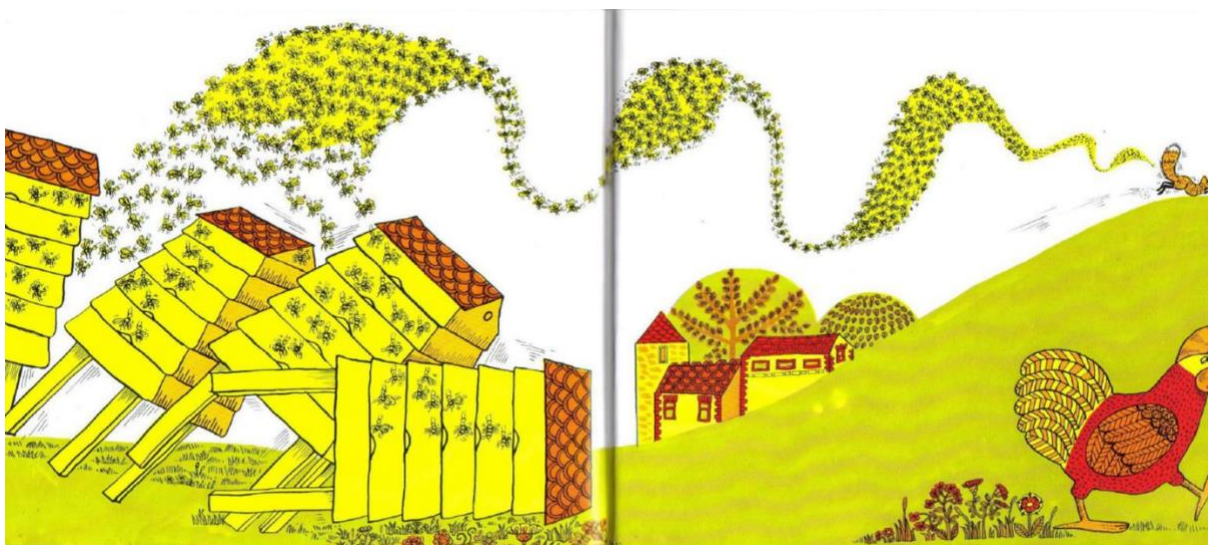


Figure 5. *Rosie's Walk* by author illustrator Pat Hutchins (1968) -pages 26 & 27

and
got back
in time
for dinner.



Figure 6- *Rosie's Walk* by author illustrator Pat Hutchins- page 28

Wordless

Wordless picture books tell the story through pictures, the composition is often sequential with visual cues to aid the reader. In order for wordless books to be “read”, the reader must fully engage with the pictures to decipher the codes and symbols in the narrative. Although, wordless picture books are primarily picture based, it must be understood that they are not always strictly wordless. Serafini (2014) highlighted that books must include textual elements in order to identify the work, for example the author’s name and blurbs. Furthermore, other textual elements such as signs, labels and other parts of décor are defined as intra-iconic text (Beckett and Kümmerring-Meibauer, 2013). Wordless picture books make books more accessible for emergent readers and children who struggle with reading, as they can infer meaning from pictures (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad and Zhang, 2002). This enables the young readers to feel more confident deciphering visual language cues which encourages creative thinking. Nelson, Aku-koç and Johnson (2001) suggested that, “as they invest in the narratives, children develop their sense of story, demonstrate an understanding of sequence, practice oral or written storytelling skills and expand their cognitive abilities”.

An exemplar is *Clown* by Quentin Blake (1995), a beautifully illustrated wordless picture book that tells the story of a little toy clown that is thrown out alongside other toys, they go on an adventure to find a new home for himself and his friends. This wordless picture book is highly acclaimed, and won Blake the Bologna Ragazzi Prize in 1996. The front cover (figure 7) playfully introduces the toy Clown leaping into the air appearing to be

mid-performance in the foreground, with an urban environment loosely illustrated in the background. Blake uses handwritten text for his name and the title, which works in harmony with Blake's loose and lively linework.

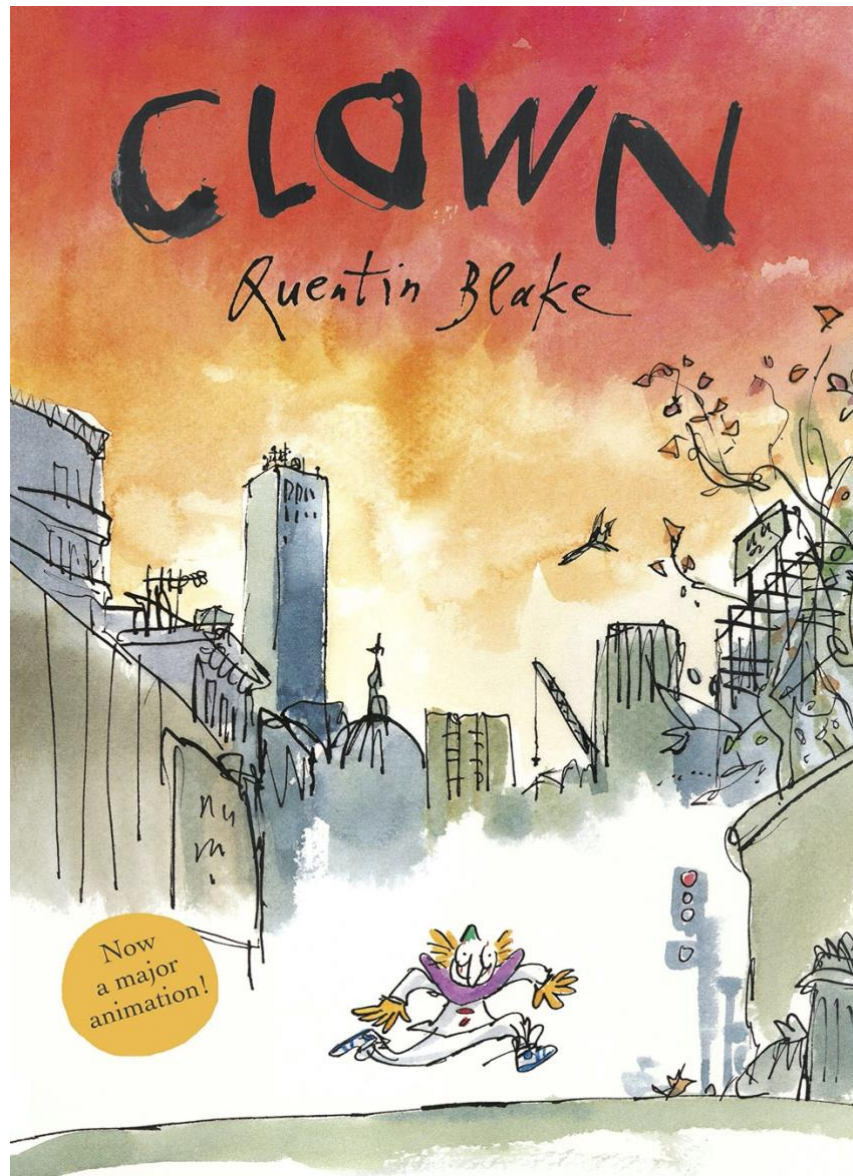


Figure 7. *Clown* by Quentin Blake (1995) front cover

Blake's style of illustration is very gestural, working with ink and dip pen and watercolour which creates a loose quality to his work. His illustrations evoke pathos and humour, in figure 8, it shows the clown coming to life, showing his eyes moving side to side

coming to realise that he is alive. Blake illustrates smaller images called vignettes, this indicates that the proceeding vignettes on that page are sequential, the composition seen in figure 8 leads the eye down the page, reading each image as a sequence. “Quentin describes being an illustrator as like directing a play, and Clown as a miniature mime artist”, Ahmad (2020) suggested.

Blake’s book was published by *House of Illustration* (Ahmad, 2020), initially Blake was going to make *Clown* into a traditional picture book with words, however, he questioned whether words were necessary to explain this situation of rejection, abandoning the text, he used Clown like an actor with expressive facial expressions and gestures, the Clown would say so much, without saying anything at all. The way we display emotions, is nuanced and minutiae, these human-like qualities that one can see in Clown, can be denoted as a form of anthropomorphism attributing human characteristics or behaviour to an animal or object. Children often imagine their toys and teddy bears as living beings, with feelings and emotions. Clown unlocks this world, emphasising what it would be like for a toy to come alive. Doonan (1993) said “When we hold a picture book, we have in our hands a pictured world full of ideas. We play with these ideas and play with our own ideas around the pictured world”. The Clown is a curious character that appears to be always on the move, and wears a white costume with a purple clown collar which is reminiscent of the early French Pierrot clown (figure 9).



Figure 8. *Clown* by Quentin Blake (1995) pages 6 and 7



Figure 9. *Pierrot the Photographer* by Nadar (1854)

The way in which Quentin alternates between framed and unframed will affect the way one reads the image, for example in figure 10, illustrations are confined to a frame, which could conote that the Clown feels confined and scared. However, unframed illustrations capture a more lively dynamic, with the ability to communicate multiple actions, this aids with understanding the pace of the book, for example in figure 11 illustrations are unframed, the Clown is shown performing in front of a dog.



Figure 10. *Clown* by Quentin Blake (1993) – pages 16 & 17



Figure 11. *Clown* by Quentin Blake (1998) – pages 18 & 19

Quentin Blake's illustrations have always been a source of inspiration for my practice. I love how he uses his characters like actors, he illustrates these small interactions that are quaint and beautiful. His gestural mark making, indicates the pace of the character's movement in this instance the media that Blake uses is integral in his notable style. I would like to consider the speed in which I draw and the influence it has on my linework.

Surrealism

French Dadaist writer and critic, André Breton published the *Manifeste of Surrealisme* in 1924, this led to the birth of surrealism, an international movement which brought forth a new wave of art (Voorhies, 2004). However the birth of surrealism originated in late 1910's as a literary movement, automatism, which was thought to unlock the imagination of the subconscious. The surrealism epoch pioneered a new wave of artists depicting bizarre and alternative narratives strongly linked with psychology and philosophy.

Edward Gorey, illustrator and author was infamous for his gothic aesthetic adorned with heavy crosshatched illustrations with macabre humour. *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Edward Gorey was published in 1963 (Miller and Bradford, 2013), with a gothic aesthetic this antithetical abecedarian book fostered an unsettling story of twenty-six children's untimely endings in unusual circumstances. The front cover (figure 12) presents the reader with a tall skeleton figure, dressed in a black drench coat, this slim character is holding an umbrella over the children, ironically connoting that the umbrella is protecting them. Skeletons and skulls have been a symbol of death in art for centuries, "to encounter a skull was to face mortality at full force" (Sleigh, 2020), this visual lexicon denotes to the reader that the character death is present over the children. The character depicting 'death' is not present in any other illustrations throughout the book, however death foreshadows the inevitable. Gorey balances the sombre themes of death with other illustrations that do not directly depict death. For example in Figure 13, the text tells us the events that Victor was squashed under a train but the accompanying illustrations only sets the scene with Victor looking on

the train track. McCort (2016) stated “Gorey has cast his readers as the villains knowing that we will draw events of their demise within our imagination”. Gorey’s oeuvre is underpinned by philosophical themes of the ineffable, “the value of what is left unsaid”, drawing inspiration from literary surrealist Paul Éluard (Gorey cited by Bellot, 2018).

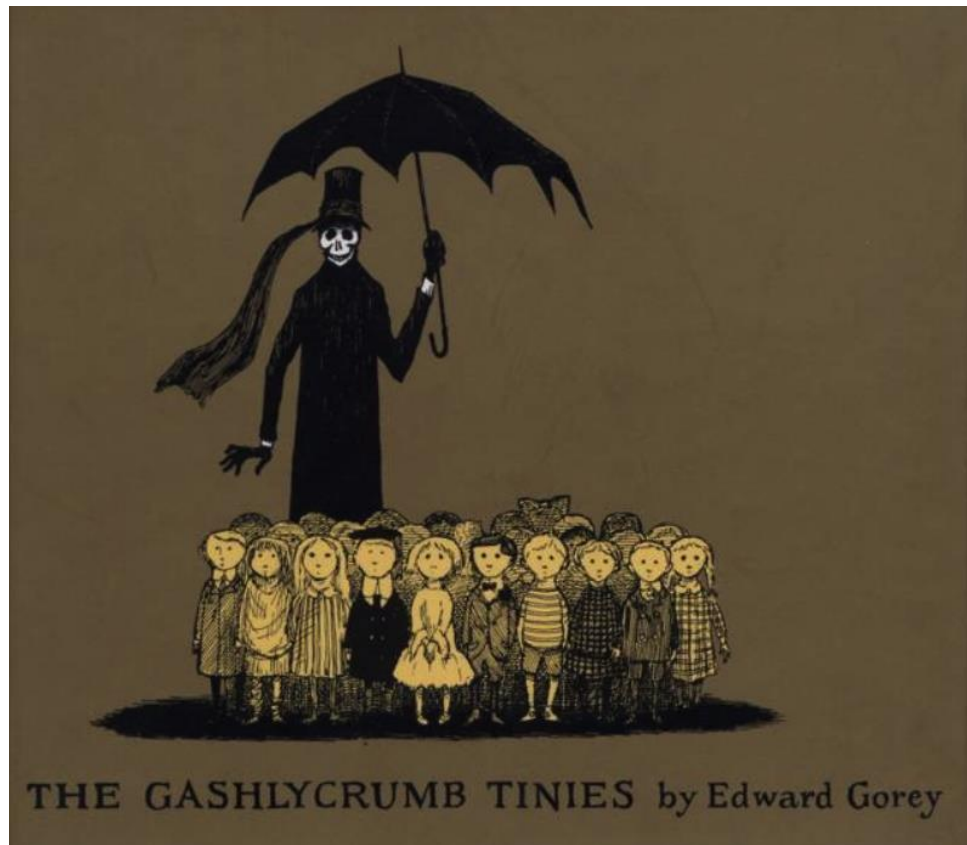


Figure 12. *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Edward Gorey (1963)- front cover

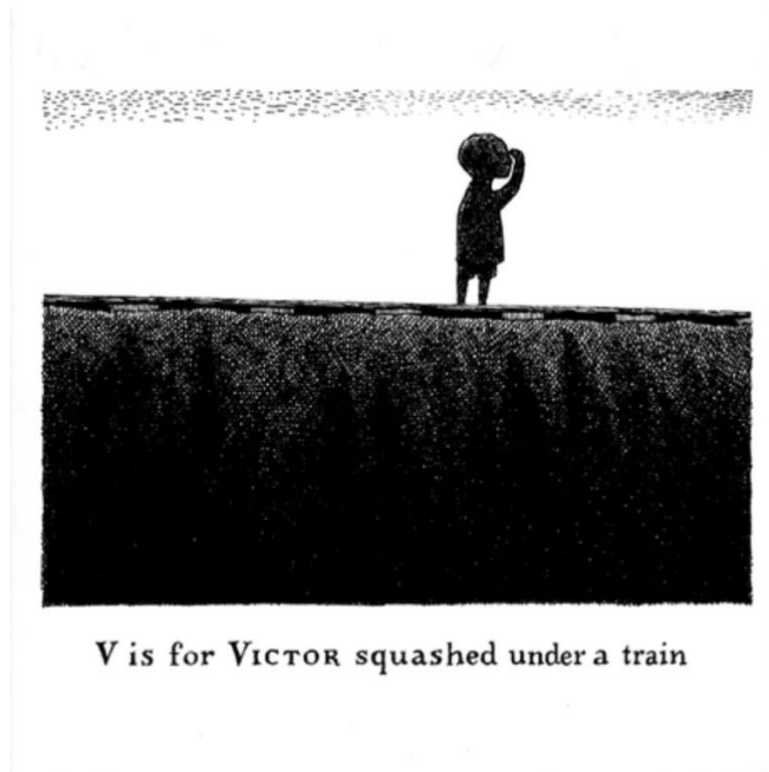


Figure 13. *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Edward Gorey (1963)- page 22

Notably, there is no context to the death of the children, the events that proceed in the book have no perpetrator, per say. Gorey, alleviates the theme of death with humour, this is termed as gallows humour, where one makes light of death, Gorey sarcastically deconstructed cautionary tales that were of that era. This book is a part of *The Vinegar Works: Three Volumes of Moral Instruction* (Gorey as cited by Terry, n.d), Gorey was inspired by the traditional cautionary tales told in the 18th and 19th century, they depict dire punishment for disobedience which instilled fear in children. However, Gorey depicts death with no explanation to why the children came to that demise. Each child dies under bizarre circumstances through no fault of their own, in figure 14, 'U is for Una who slipped down a drain' is a very unlikely experience to happen in the real world. This works well, in detaching the reader from the death, allowing them to have permission to find it ironically funny.

Heinrich Hoffman, published *The Story of Little Suk-A-Thumb* in 1867 (figure 15) depicting a young boy who had his thumbs chopped off by the red legged scissor man. When his mother discovers that this has occurred, her response is “I knew he’d come to naughty little Suck-A-Thumb”. This is indicative that the mother had already told her son not to suck his thumb, and this was the result of not listening to her. Stories such as these have been told for centuries to scare children into not doing things deemed wrong by parents. Hoffman’s cautionary tale is written in poem format, with rhyming dactylic couplets, Gorey also employs the same template through *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*;

“A is for Amy who fell down the stairs
B is for Basil assaulted by bears
C is for Clara who wasted away
D is for Desmond thrown out of a Sleigh”

(Gorey, 1963).



U is for UNA who slipped down a drain

Figure 14. *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Edward Gorey (1963)- page 21



Figure 15. The English Struwwelpeter, "The Story of Little Suk-A-Thumb," by Heinrich Hoffman, 1867.

Nodelman (2001), suggested that alphabet books serve as a device to expose young readers to the basics of language, encouraging correlation between letters and words. They often have an overarching theme, that simultaneously educates young readers on new topics. However, Gorey distorts the traditional use of alphabet books with his macabre approach and gloomy pictures, creating an 'anti-alphabet' satirising the genre of children's books. The theme of death in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, makes it evident that it is not

appropriate for children nor is it intended to be, he transgresses the social boundaries of sensitive topics.

I am particularly intrigued by illustrators that retell tales from the past, this distortion of folk tales creates an ironic effect from the reader's perspective. Gorey illustrates the ineffable, intended for an older audience, however using a format of alphabet books understates the theme of death.

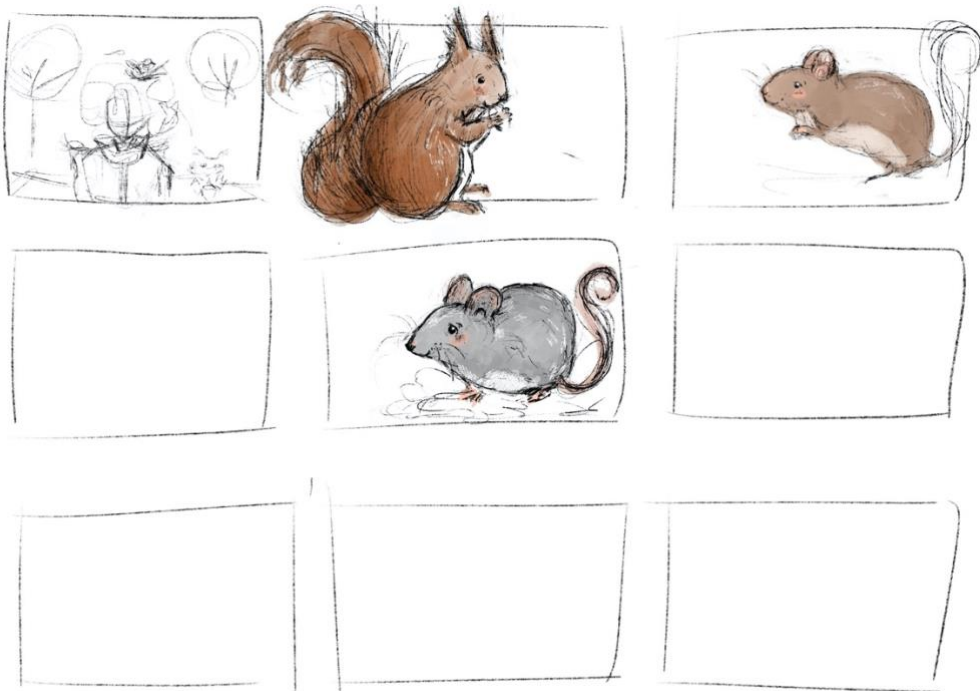
The three key words that I have analysed highlight the nuanced complexities of picture books, distorting linear and traditional means of conveying visual lexicons. Through analysing the workings of Quentin Blake, it has furthered my interest in wordless picture books and devices that are used to successfully communicate the complexities of the narrative. Blake's use of vignettes alongside his gestural mark making alternates the dynamic of the book, employing such composition is reminiscent of stop motion animations. The use of vignettes enables Blake to show smaller interactions with characters without occupying too much space in the book. As such, I would like to investigate further into different way of composing illustrations in picture books, referencing other illustrators that experiment with the format. Moreover, from analysing the work of Edward Gorey I would to further research how different art movements have influenced the work of illustrators, for example dadaism, cubism and art nouveau. Furthermore, I am particularly interested in anthropomorphism, Heller (2008) stated "The art of anthropomorphism is almost as old as image making... substituting kindred animal characteristics for human ones". I enjoy

creating animals with human-like personalities, drawing inspiration from other illustrators such as Beatrix Potter.

A core theme of my practice is drawing inspiration from nature and animals, I like to observe relationships between animals and people and the way in which we have adopted them into our world. I would like to experiment with materials that allows for more gestural marks such as ink and pen, similarly to Blake, to increase movement and character in my illustrations.

Regarding my practice, I would like to experiment with anthropomorphism further as well as building on and developing my current style with muted colours and textured rendering. I have brainstormed potential stories that I would like to continue, the first being mice and other woodland creatures that complete tasks and chores around the house unbeknown to the owner. Below are thumbnail sketches that I am going to develop further next year.

Through my research, it has raised many questions that I would like to continue into my dissertation. How do illustrators depict humour through visual lexicons with reference to word and text relationship? The sophisticated means of visually displaying illustrations has a large impact in the way that they are perceived. Other sub-questions have arisen from my research; how do illustrators deal with sensitive topics such as disaster? How does child-developmental psychology influence both the literary and illustration world?





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