

Tyler Jenkins

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Question 1: Choose three picture books you consider to be postmodern. Examine what defines them as such.

Student Number: 2004748

Course: Illustration BA

Word count:2660

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A postmodern picturebook is a unique type of illustrated book. A picturebook can be described as postmodern if it has certain characteristics such as non-linear or non-traditional narrative, intertextuality where there are references to other stories, or awareness of itself as a book or a story (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2010). Postmodern picturebooks also play with expectations and break rules, by having “multiple narratives, indeterminacy, symbolic representation, interesting illustrative techniques...” (Edge-Partington, 2010, p. ii). Postmodern picturebooks often have a creative, non-traditional layout.

Postmodern picture books can also be defined as such if they follow the characteristics of metafiction. Currie (2013) defines metafiction as fiction with “self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge, ironic self-distance” (p. 1). However, this does not fully describe metafiction, and not all metafiction has these traits. Scholes, (2013) claims that writers of metafiction take the perspectives of the fictional process itself and allude to the artificial world of the story (Scholes, 2013). An example could be character in the *Dandy* and *Beano* Comic books who talk to the reader, try to get out of the frame or allude that they are just characters to be read for entertainment. Looking into comic books there is a lot of comparisons to make for postmodern children’s books and comics, comics such as *Beano* use fourth wall breaks to introduce characters throughout, having them show up in different sections to speak about their stories, or using text to convey excitement and tone where there is little words spoken. Another great example of children’s books that have a postmodern influence is pop up books, that use the actual artwork to create jump scares or interactive sections. I believe the sole purpose of a postmodern picture book is to explore that medium as an art piece, using hidden messages, tone to express emotion to the viewer and colour to show the mood of a scene.

Book one: *Chester’s Masterpiece* (Watt, 2010) is based on the character called Chester. As the book starts the reader is immediately introduced to Chester causing hassle for the author/illustrator Melanie Watt. The character is represented in the book by a red marker pen where he can be seen crossing out words and alternating the story having a back-and-forth dialogue between character and author. This is a perfect example of metafiction which

means the character has a knowledge of its own existence. Currie (2013) defines metafiction as fiction with “self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge, ironic self-distance”

The whole book itself has become a chaotic mess as the original story has been ‘ruined’ by Chester but this can aid the argument of it being postmodern as it does not follow under the category of a linear story. Chester has even taken over the front cover by claiming he is the author and had “no help from Melanie Watt” (Watt, 2010, Front cover). The cover and back of the book varies from other picture books, in that Chester has scribbled all over the information that is usually on the covers. He has renamed the book and changed the author to himself and made notes all over the bibliographic information.

The author/illustrator brings Chester to life by having him ruin a second book in ‘*Chester’s Back*’ (Watt, 2013). This continues with the self-awareness that Chester had in the first book. Chester is even more boisterous in the second book, because he had ‘fan mail’ after the first book which boosted his ego. By telling the readers that Chester has received fan mail, Watt invented an existence for Chester outside of the book. As Chester thinks he is an illustrator himself, and he illustrated the books instead of Melanie Watt, it could be implied that Chester thinks he created himself. A deeper meaning behind this could be Chester trying to rationalise the fact of his own existence and rebelling against the idea that he was the product of someone else’s imagination. As a way of taking control over his existence, he is taking charge of his own story.

It could be said that the author is communicating through her character. Illustrators often have to balance what they enjoy doing and what publishers want, so they might feel they have little say or control over their work. Chester could be a manifestation of this.

When comparing *Chester’s Masterpiece* to a more traditional picturebook such as *Tiger Who came to Tea* (Kerr, 1968), the most obvious difference is the artistic style. The tones in the older books seem more muted, where in modern books such as *Chester’s Masterpiece* they tend to be bolder and brighter. This could be because traditionally, children were read bedtime stories, so the illustrations were more relaxing.

Book two: *Black and White* by David Macaulay (1990) follows the story of four separate accounts of passengers whose train ride was brought to a halt. When opening the book, the reader is encountered by a 'warning' message. "Warning: This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended" (Macaulay, 1990, p. Cover page). This lets the viewer know that this book is not like any other children's book, forcing the reader to concentrate on hidden features and the story itself. Challenging the expectation of the reader is one feature of postmodern picturebooks.

When looking at the book's layout, the differences between a standard children's book become apparent using text and the flow of the story to convey four different stories in one, which could be read as four separate stories, or as one interconnected story, or to read and re-read it in different ways. To distinguish the possible stories, there are four characters in the book, each represented through an equal sized frame on each double page spread, with each character's frame illustrated in a different style to represent that character. As put by Michele (2002), "*Black and White* is an excellent site for demonstrating how there can be more than one way of reading text" (p. 454). Each story makes sense as a stand-alone story, but there are some common elements that can be found in the illustrations. In one story, a cow holds up the line. This could be the same cow as in story four. This could suggest that the stories are happening at the same time, but this is not necessarily the case depending on the readers' own interpretation. There are also parts of one picture drifting into the frame of the other, "words become pictures and pictures become words— it happens when they throw the newspaper [pieces] around" (Dresang, 2010, p. 45). This suggests that they are on the same train platform at the same time, but this contradicts the warning label that the stories "do not necessarily occur at the same time" (Macaulay, 1990, p. Cover page). The book plays with the readers' expectations of how a story is constructed. This allows the book to break the rules in a playful way. The title of the book could refer to the newspapers within the story, but it could also be hinting that not everything is as black and white as it seems.

Postmodern picturebooks often contain social commentaries and reflect societal changes (Michele, 2002). An example of this in *Black and White* is the story that looked at the impact that two working parents can have on children. An act written around the same time as the book pointed out that “the number of... two-parent households in which the single parent or both parents work is increasing significantly” (The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 cited in Poduval & Poduval, 2009 p. 54). This shows that at the time *Black and White* was published, more and more parents were in work compared to previous decades. Another example of a social commentary is the focus that the adults have in their newspapers to the point that they do not notice anything else around them. The father absentmindedly pours milk on the dog’s head because he can’t tear away from the newspaper, and a robber is able to go about his business in the background without anyone paying him attention. In addition to this, there are children wearing newspaper clothes. This could be seen as way for the children to get attention from their parents.

Black and White contains different meanings within the text and pictures. This is another aspect of postmodern picturebooks “There is a need to consider the possible meanings of a text, how they are constructing the reader and the world around him or her in particular ways, and why this construction is being made” (Michele, 2002, p. 546). There may be different meanings for different audiences. Traditionally picturebooks are for young readers, but older readers and adults can also take meaning from this book. The stories within a story and the shared event of cows on a track could be interpreted as a commentary of the life’s interconnectedness.

Although there are some sophisticated themes in the book such as ritualistic cycle or work, it is presented in a way that can still be interpreted by children. This could be because young children usually enjoy reading stories with many possibilities, different voices, and multiple versions (Watson & Styles, 1996). Furthermore, children can understand humour even before they are able to read (Watson & Styles, 1996).

After looking into the book, a few theories came to mind as to why the book is laid out as four separate stories. The panel ‘Udder Chaos’ follows the tale of a robber attempting to escape unseen. In my theory the three other panels are first-hand accounts of what

happened on that day having the three other parties giving statements to the police. I believe this is backed up by two main requiring factors in each of the stories, with the train and the cows linking each story together. The symbolism of the newspaper could easily be tied into the fact that the media cannot always be 100% black or white and could be even more prevalent with the modern times and the use of sentences such as 'fake news'. Although this may seem a little over the top for a children's book, I believe that is the beauty of a postmodern picture book they no longer only tell a story it can be considered a modern masterpiece to express thoughts and feelings through different texts and emotions, leaving the real answer to the imagination of the reader. I see '*Black and White*' by David Macaulay (1990) as a portable art gallery for all ages.

Book 3: *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr Seuss, originally published in 1957 is a chaotic story about a cat who comes to play when the mother leaves the house. Although *The Cat in the Hat* has not been described as a postmodern picturebook in literature about the topic, I will argue that it could be described as such as there are various features of the book which fit the definition of a postmodern picturebook.

The first asset of the book that links with it being postmodern is that the title page shows the cat holding several items at once. This gives a clue as to what is going to happen next in the book, making the title page part of the story. Another clue in the book is that the font changes on p.61 when the mother comes home but only for the word 'should', in the sentences "should we tell her about?" and "what should we do?". This draws attention to the word 'should', which could be to emphasise how to choose between right and wrong, because what they should do, might not be what they will do. It then ends with a question to the reader, "What would you do?" (p.61). This gets the reader to interact with the story and can continue the story themselves, as it is left to the reader to decide if the mother is told or not.

In a lot of books written at that time, the narrator is the author or an authority figure within the book. *The Cat in the Hat* breaks this by having the young boy as a narrator, which can be seen as an unreliable narrator as it is coming from a child's point of view, so the whole

story could be exaggerated or just a figment of the child's imagination. The unreliable author is an aspect of postmodernist literature (Martin, 2013).

In postmodern picture books, the pictures can correspond to the text, enhance the text, or contradict the text. Pictures in picture books do more than just illustrate a story, they actively tell the story. "The interplay between text and image is very important and the reader is required to fill in the gaps in order to make sense of the story" (Edge-Partington, 2010, p. ii). The layout in *The Cat in the Hat* challenges the expectations of picturebooks from that time, as picturebooks usually separated the pictures from the texts (Nikolajeva, 2008). In *The Cat in the Hat*, the layout is different in that the text is integrated within the pictures, making the text part of the artwork. Like other postmodern picture *The Cat in the Hat* is more of an art piece rather than just a story. On several pages, the text is presented in a unusual shape. The shape of the text can represent how the characters are feeling and create more meaning. For example, on page 3 the words "sit, sit, sit sit" move down diagonally. The repetition of the word 'sit' could allude to how the characters are bored and have to sit, with nothing else happening. The downward shape of the lines could bring awareness to the action of having to remain sitting and feel down about it. The lines above and below the diagonal 'sit' create a Z shape. This could be to represent their boredom, as Z's are often used to show when someone is bored, tired or sleepy. This is further represented by the sleeping fish in the bowl.

I have mentioned that postmodern picturebooks are more like pieces of art. On the first page, Dr Seuss brings artistry into the text with a hand drawn letter T to begin the story. This could be the author's way of bringing a modern twist to the traditional method of starting books with a larger first letter. The author also brings artistry into the way he shows sounds such as 'bump' as these are drawn as words using a cartoon-like typography.

Pictures are an essential part of postmodern picturebooks, adding an extra layer of imagery and symbolism to the story. The chaos seen in the pictures could have a deeper meaning about a character who revolts against authority, but then having to conform to society's expectations at the end when cleaning up at the end.

After researching into postmodern picture books I have discovered that the three main components are layout, text and design. Classic books tend to stick to a basic format and use their knowledge of the arts to convey the story, having a more controlled approach and not opting to use a stylistic style unique to the specific artist. But looking into postmodern books they all seem to show the similarities of treating the book like a piece of art to be admired rather than the story itself

They use different text to bring life to the page having the words jump around use different font and use colour to convey a sense of emotion in the storyteller's voice. Another key asset is making the audience know that the characters are aware of their own existence. I like this touch because I think it helps mould fact and fiction perfectly creating a sense of wonder leaving the audience believing the tale could be almost true. I chose three books which I believed convey this message the best.

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