

TAKEN FROM:
POSTMODERN PICTUREBOOKS: Play,
Parody, and Self-Referentiality
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Introduction Postmodernism and Picturebooks

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Historically, children's literature has reflected societal values, attitudes, and knowledge. Indeed, Bader described a picturebook as a "social, cultural, historical document" (1). Bakhtin's term, *chronotope*, is useful for understanding how literature reflects the time and space relationships in our world. Chronotopes can be used "as a means for studying the relation between any text and its times, and thus a fundamental tool for a broader social and historical analysis" (Holquist 113). Although not writing specifically about picturebooks, Kristeva emphasized that "texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed" (Allen 36). Lewis also noted that throughout its history, social and cultural changes have impacted the ecology of the picturebook.

Various conceptual and theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain the changes evident in contemporary children's literature. For example, Eliza Dresang's *Radical Change* theory recognizes how temporal and spatial relationships in society "have resulted in historically manifested narrative forms" in literature (Holquist 109), and she proposes that, "connectivity, interactivity and access in the digital world explain the fundamental changes taking place" in current children's and young-adult literature (Dresang 14). Other individuals have noted how the changes in contemporary literature for children and young adults reflect the broader historical, social, and cultural movement referred to as postmodernism (Coles and Hall; Goldstone, "Ordering the Chaos," "Whaz Up"; Lewis; McCallum; Yearwood).

Postmodernism is often used as a general term to describe the changes, tendencies and/or developments that have occurred in philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and music during the last half of the twentieth century. Flieger, and Coles and Hall, among others, have written about the confusion, vagueness, and lack of consensus that surround a definition of postmodernism. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism is "a critical revisiting, and ironic dialogue with the past" (4). Writing specifically about literature, Watson described postmodernism as "more of an extension of modernism than a reaction against it" (55). Flieger explained that differences in opinion on postmodernism originate from different views on modernism. He described four positions on postmodernism, "as reaction,

as denial, as residue, or as intensification of modernism" (28), and stated that these positions share five common beliefs about the characteristics of postmodernism. Two of these joint views relate to the discussion of most of the picturebooks in this book: "a questioning of the concept of originality, with an emphasis on citation, iterability, borrowings, intertextuality; [and] a ludic, ironic, or parodic quality corresponding in part to the uneasiness about legitimate or authoritative values" (29).

Hassan created a chart with contrasting terms to distinguish modernism from postmodernism. Several of the features or concepts associated with postmodernism are applicable to discussions about postmodern picturebooks: play, chance, anarchy, text/intertext, process/performance/happening, participation, combination, scriptable (writerly), and indeterminacy (99–100). Lewis also identified several key features that characterize living in the postmodern world: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, irony, hybridization, and performance and participation (88–91). Grieve wrote that, "ontological plurality or instability is the governing dynamic of postmodernism" (15). Similarly, Coles and Hall stated that one undisputed feature of postmodernism is its "rejection of unity, homogeneity, totality and closure" (114). Consistent with the spirit or tendency of postmodernism itself, many of the features identified above are synergistic and interrelated in nature.

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 99). Indeed, two of the postmodern characteristics identified by Goldstone, "greater power given to the reader/viewer encouraging cocreation with the author or artist" and "nonlinearity" ("Whaz Up" 363), are most evident in the picturebooks discussed in this book. Postmodern fiction is "interested in the nature of fiction and the processes of storytelling, and it employs metafictional devices . . . for undermining expectations or for exposing the fictional nature of fictions" (Lewis 94). Waugh has identified various techniques authors use to create metafictional texts. Lewis described five strategies or devices evident in postmodern picturebooks (and novels): boundary breaking, excess, indeterminacy, parody, and performance (94–98). To Anstey and Bull, contemporary postmodern picturebooks exhibit the following characteristics: "variations in design and layout," "variations in the grammar of the author and illustrator," indeterminacy, contesting discourses, intertextuality, and multiple meanings and audiences (336–338).

Coles and Hall wrote about the breaking down of barriers, the playfulness and the "self-conscious, self-referential posture and style of postmodernism" (112). They explained how the "playfulness, parody, pastiche, and irony, as well as doubling, intertextuality and other metafictional devices" evident in postmodern texts are also exhibited in children's "cultural diet" of movies, television shows, computer and video games (112). Grieve also wrote about the innovative play of postmodern devices in postmodern picturebooks: "the use of metafiction; the manipulation of the whole physical space of a book;

parody and intertextuality" (16). Nikolajeva stated that many selections of contemporary children's literature are "exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity and metafiction" (222).

The features of contemporary postmodern picturebooks identified by Watson are similar to those listed above. According to Watson, postmodernism literature

extends the techniques of modernism: not only do we find multiple viewpoints, intertextuality, indeterminacy, breaking of genre boundaries, eclecticism, collage, but in postmodern works there is also a deliberate revealing of their constructedness (metafiction techniques) and a delight in games (in postmodernism criticism 'ludism' and 'ludic'). Postmodern discourses make great use of parody, pastiche, and surrealism, and there is a pervasive use of metafiction. (55)

To Watson, postmodern picturebooks "provide the most accessible examples of postmodern eclecticism: the breaking of boundaries, the abandonment of linear chronology, the emphasis on the constructedness of texts, the intermingling and parodying of genres" (55–56). McCallum also wrote about how metafiction writing has thrived within postmodernism and stated that common features of both postmodernism and metafiction include "narrative fragmentation and discontinuity, disorder and chaos, code mixing and absurdity" as well as openness, playfulness and parody (400).

Finally, synthesizing the work of several theorists, Sipe and McGuire identified six characteristics of postmodern picturebooks:

1. blurring the distinctions between popular and "high" culture, the categories of traditional literary genres, and the boundaries among author, narrator, and reader
2. subversion of literary traditions and conventions and undermining the traditional distinction between the story and the outside "real" world
3. intertextuality (present in all texts) is made explicit and manifold, often taking the form of pastiche, a wry, layered blend of texts from many sources
4. multiplicity of meanings, so that there are multiple pathways through the narrative, a high degree of ambiguity, and nonresolution or open-ended endings
5. playfulness, in which readers are invited to treat the text as a semiotic playground
6. self-referentiality, which refuses to allow readers to have a vicarious lived-through experience, offering instead a metafictional stance by drawing attention to the text as a text rather than as a secondary world (Benton)

As is evident by the above review of the literature, there is much overlap and commonality amongst those theorists and researchers who have written about the particular features or characteristics of postmodern picturebooks. Further, some of the postmodern characteristics described above are more encompassing (e.g., metafiction, blurring) and could subsume some of the specific postmodern attributes (e.g., parody).

With all of these varying (though related) perspectives, it is difficult to say with certainty the specific characteristics that are necessary in order for a picturebook to be classified as postmodern. However, if we did so, we would be creating a binary (postmodern—not postmodern) that is actually antithetical to the spirit of postmodernism itself. Therefore, we propose that, given the multiplicity of characteristics we discussed above, it makes more sense to think of picturebooks as located along a continuum of postmodernism. If a book exhibits one or two of the characteristics or qualities, we could say it expresses a few attributes of the postmodern picturebook. If a selection of literature has many of the characteristics or qualities, we would be more likely to classify it as truly postmodern. For example, in our view, a book that expresses virtually all of the qualities discussed above is *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka). Indeed, it is commonly considered to be one of the quintessential postmodern picturebooks (Stevenson 32). One the other hand, a book that is a parody of a traditional fairytale, such as *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch) exhibits only a few characteristics identified as postmodern and so would be located towards the opposite end of the continuum from *The Stinky Cheese Man*. Thus, we could use Scieszka's well-known book as a touchstone when considering the extent to which other picturebooks exhibit postmodern attributes.

In Margaret Meek's words, if "texts teach what [and how] readers learn," (3) we should expect that new types of texts would afford different opportunities for reading in new ways. Postmodern picturebooks are not, of course, the only new types of texts that have arisen in that past fifteen to twenty years. In today's society, most readers are familiar with hypertext, comfortable with all manner of digital formats, and understand the Internet as a multiplicity of (sometimes contradictory) texts that layer onto each other. In his study of the effects of popular culture, Johnson noted that, "multiple threading is the most acclaimed structural convention of modern television programming" (65). He stated that this increased narrative complexity of television shows and films requires viewers to hold multiple threads in their consciousness like a "kind of mental calisthenics" (129). These "new literacies" (Anstey) have contributed significantly to the changed nature of contemporary readers, who are now much more tolerant of the fruitful ambiguities of postmodern picturebooks. Readers are invited to generate multiple, often contradictory interpretations and to become coauthors in ways that traditional picturebooks do not offer, at least to the degree and intensity of postmodern picturebooks. Many of the contributors to this volume write cogently of the characteristics of these new readers, as well

as of the new conceptions of "self" that postmodernism engenders; and several authors report on how children of various ages react to postmodern picturebooks—with surprise, confusion, and ultimately, delight. All in all, these new books encourage a critical, active stance that celebrates a diversity of response rather than univocal interpretation.

David Wiesner's brilliant frontispiece for this book includes a line of fairytale characters "punching in" a time clock for their shifts. The three pigs read newspapers; a wolf holds a steaming beverage, following Grandmother, Red Riding Hood, and the Woodsman, as they await their turns to enter their stories and go to work. Red Riding Hood wears sneakers, but carries her "work shoes" in one hand and her signature cloak in the other. The newspaper headlines make ironic and trenchant comments about both our world and the world of fairy tales. Just visible along the right edge of the slightly opened book is a subtle intertextual reference to another character in Wiesner's own books: a frog from *Tuesday*. We believe that this visual image captures a great deal of what we have just described as the features of postmodern picturebooks: the blurring between story and real life; the playfulness, parody, and intertextuality that are so often present in postmodern texts; and the constructed artifice and the metafiction, self-referential qualities that are perhaps the most salient hallmarks of these unique types of picturebooks. Wiesner also gestures to the ambiguity, multiplicity of meanings, and open-ended nature of postmodern picturebooks, by prompting us to speculate on the "other lives" of storybook characters when they are not laboring to amuse, delight, and enlighten us in their tales. The tables are turned on us as readers: rather than identifying ourselves as "real" and stories as products of human creativity, the frontispiece prompts us to imagine the story characters as the truly real entities, while we desultorily while away our hours in casual reading.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Barbara Kiefer begins the book with an appropriate historical contextualization of picturebooks, tracing the development of postmodern characteristics and speculating on what lies ahead in the development of this protean and ever-changing art form.

As an illustrator of children's books, Martin Salisbury provides a unique perspective, suggesting that labels such as "postmodern" are less important considerations to artists than the work itself. He argues that many derivative picturebooks often result from truly innovative work; that the whole concept of postmodern picturebooks deserves critical examination; and wonders if the postmodern picturebook has a long and rich future, or whether it will disappear into an artistic void.

Eliza Dresang discusses how Radical Change theory and postmodernism identify many of the same elements in contemporary picturebooks, but

each offers different explanations for the changes in children's books that are evident since the early 1990s.

Using Scandinavian postmodern picturebooks, Maria Nikolajeva explores the essential playfulness of these texts, with their embodiments of forms that gesture toward conventions even as they subvert them, and the pleasure of puzzling through multiple layers of meaning and ambiguity.

Karen Coats's chapter intriguingly develops the idea of the "transmodern," distinguishing it from the postmodern, and argues that postmodern picturebooks are better theorized by this construct than by ideas of the postmodern, which always carry with them a nihilistic and oppressive element.

Through an examination of five Australian picturebooks, which in some sense can be described as postmodern, John Stephens explores how the dialogue between internationalism and local concerns has produced a global version of postmodernism, what he calls a postmodern hybridization.

As well as discussing the postmodern qualities of six picturebooks that play with and interrogate their own conditions of existence, Margaret Mackey explores the potential of these texts to teach children about reading in postmodern times.

In her chapter, Bette Goldstone reflects on the reconceptualization of the concept of space in postmodern picturebooks, concluding that they experiment with, expand, and question our fundamental notions of what constitutes real and imagined realities.

Christine Hall contrasts picturebooks that she does not consider to be postmodern with others that do have postmodern characteristics, and argues that postmodern picturebooks have the potential to stimulate children's imaginations in new ways that are sorely needed in a time when concerns have been expressed about the seeming sterility of children's creative energies.

In her chapter, Michèle Anstey discusses heuristics for exploring postmodern picturebooks from an ethnographic perspective. She presents tools for readers to use as they engage in an "archaeological dig" of postmodern picturebooks as historical artefacts.

Susan Lehr's chapter focuses on one author/illustrator—Lauren Child—to analyze the postmodern elements in Child's work, ranging from the nature of her bricolage/collage illustrations to her metafictional and intertextual plot devices.

Through a discussion of several metafictional fairy tale picturebooks, Robyn McCallum discusses the interrelationships among four postmodern strategies that draw attention to the fictional nature of a picturebook: overt intertextuality; inversion of the narrative voice; metaleptic disruptions to the diegetic level of narration; and modal contrasts and disruptions within the pictorial discourse.

The final four chapters of the book focus on children's responses to postmodern picturebooks; a number of these books have been analyzed in previous chapters. Caroline McGuire, Monica Belfatti, and Maria Ghiso

report on third graders (eight-year-olds) puzzling their way through the intricacies and ambiguities of *Bad Day at Riverbend* (Van Allsburg), *Shortcut* (Macaulay), and *Voices in the Park* (Browne) with minimal scaffolding from the teacher. Evelyn Arizpe, Morag Styles, and three graduate students share some of the findings from their research that explored readers' reactions to selected postmodern picturebooks. In particular, they focus on the many forms of playfulness within the metafictional texts themselves, as well as the behavior of the children (ranging in age from five- to eleven-years-old), including their performative physical responses and their articulation of intertextual references. Lawrence R. Sipe's chapter is a case study of a class of first graders (six-year-olds) attempting to fit David Wiesner's *The Three Pigs* into their well-developed schema for this tale; their realization that their preconceived notions of how the story should proceed are not working; and their eventual radical expansion of their idea of a *Three Pigs* story in the light of Wiesner's postmodern text. Finally, Sylvia Pantaleo's chapter focuses on *The Getaaway* by Ed Vere. As well as describing the metafictional character of this postmodern picturebook, she discusses third and fourth grade (eight- and nine-year-old) students' responses to and interpretations of this text, noting how Vere's playful text contributed to the children's literary understanding and appreciation.

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1 What is a Picturebook, Anyway? The Evolution of Form and Substance Through the Postmodern Era and Beyond

Barbara Kiefer

So, what is a picturebook? For much of the twentieth century a picturebook was an artifact of culture that contained visual images and often words. Pictures and words were printed on paper and bound between hard board covers. Picturebooks most generally consisted of thirty-two pages of story, poem, or concept but they included endpapers, information about the book, author, artist, and publisher as well. For most of the century the picturebook was created for the enjoyment of an audience of young children with the object of engaging them in a pleasurable experience. The picturebook's material content reflected societal norms and its physical form was the result of the printing technology available to produce and sell it.

Various scholars have explored the essence of the modern picturebook. In her historical study of American children's picturebooks that focused mainly on the twentieth century, Barbara Bader provided an expansive definition:

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost an experience for a child.

As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. (1)

Many others have built upon or extended Bader's definition. Nodelman and Reimer classify picturebooks as forms of literature and provided a thoroughly developed scheme for how pictures provide information about stories. "Pictures can help people of all ages to understand words" (277). Nodelman also suggests that the relationship between pictures and text is always an ironic one; that is, "the words tell us what the pictures do not show, and the pictures show us what the words do not tell us" (222). Nikolajeva and Scott underscore the dual quality of images and words when they state, "The unique character of picturebooks as an art form is based on a combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal" (1).