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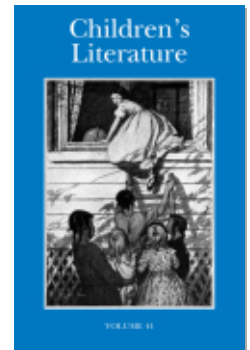
Chaperoning Words: Meaning-Making in Comics and Picture Books

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Joe Sutliff Sanders

Play this game with me.

Here are three quotations about either comics or picture books. I've removed the nouns that give away which one. See if you can guess which quotations are about which kind of book.

"The _____ format demands complementary words and images, revealed in a controlled sequence that exploits 'the drama of the turning of the page.'"¹

"The most essential code in reading a _____ is its sequential nature."²

". . . in the best examples of the art form, words and pictures blend to achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other."³

As these three defaced quotations hint, scholarship on comics and picture books frequently overlaps, often even as that scholarship tries to define what makes each form unique. The above quotations wield ideas such as complementarity, the page turn, and sequentiality to explain only one form, but all three of these ideas have played an important role in theorizing both. And a look at much of the best scholarship on the two forms only further muddies the water. For example, Nathalie op de Beeck has written about how creators of picture books rely on children to "decode" the formal tools of these books ("Wanda's Wonderland" 124), and Angela Yannicopoulou has said virtually the same thing about creators of comics (170). William Moebius has explained how, in picture books, "word and image constitute separate plates sliding and scraping along against each other" (143–44), but Charles Hatfield has argued that in comics, words and images "can be played against each other," creating a "tension between codes [that] is fundamental to the art form" (37).⁴ Additionally, Hatfield writes that words and images in comics can "ironize" one another, echoing one of Perry Nodelman's major points about picture books (Nodelman, *Words* 222).⁵ Elsewhere, op de Beeck (*Suspended Animation* ix) and Hilary Chute ("Comics as Literature" 456) explain how picture books and comics, respectively, both work to combine high and low culture at specific historical mo-

ments; and Thierry Groensteen (*System of Comics* 11), op de Beeck (*Suspended* ix–x), and Moebius (141) all explain how the sequential natures of their chosen forms help readers to fill in gaps in a process that produces meaning.

It's a mess.

And yet we know that comics and picture books are different. With the exception of some provocative instances of overlap between the two, it is actually quite easy to point to a book and say with confidence that it belongs in one group and not the other. It's when we begin to theorize comics and picture books that the problem consistently surfaces.

One of the most familiar theoretical strategies for tackling this problem centers on the formal qualities of comics and picture books. In a recent symposium published in the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Nodelman and op de Beeck join Michael Joseph, Philip Nel, and Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. in attempting to theorize the difference between the two. In all but one instance, these attempts center on form. Nodelman's essay, for example, works from the self-deprecating premise that because he is a specialist in picture books, the formal qualities of comics often befuddle him. Nevertheless, it is form to which Nodelman ultimately appeals, explaining that "it is the basic conventions typically identifying a text as either a comic or picture book that I propose to focus on here" ("Picture Book Guy" 437). Michael Joseph, too, makes the form of comics and picture books the centerpiece of his examination, pointing out how "the graphic novel persistently invites all of its readers to consider the book object beyond its function as a transparent container of text," something that picture books invite only "among certain adult readers—primarily specialists and connoisseurs" (456). Joseph Thomas's essay explores how Shel Silverstein, by playing with genre conventions, reworked a comic strip into a picture book, and Thomas reads that change through form. For example, he explains how Silverstein's change results in "a rather dirty joke" that becomes evident in a two-page picture book spread but "just plain doesn't exist in the comic form, as it depends on the nature of the book itself to exist" (484–85). Thomas's conclusion—that genre boundaries should be seen as invitations to play rather than as rules to prevent creative refiguring—links well with Philip Nel's argument that "Comics and picture books differ in degree, rather than in kind" ("Same Genus" 445), a conclusion Nel draws based on attention to three formal aspects. These essays—so current that their electronic ink was still wet as my own article was on its way to the printer—illustrate that the most

obvious, indeed the most logical way to argue for the separation (or overlap) of comics and picture books is to center one's argument on their formal qualities.

But it is possible to theorize the two by only flirting with form. Indeed, a need for such an approach is hinted at even in Nodelman's essay: "Surely, then, the structural conventions of these two forms of storytelling—so easy to take for granted as simply the ways things usually are—imply specific values, specific ideologies, and cultural assumptions that need further consideration" ("Picture Book Guy" 443). And op de Beeck's contribution to the symposium concurs. Although she observes of comics and picture books that "formally one may be said to be a subset of the other," she immediately goes on to argue that the real reasons for the separation of the two are "philosophical and ideological" ("On Comics-Style Picture Books" 468). Op de Beeck's essay, like all the others in the symposium, is short (a virtue from which my own essay will not suffer), probably so that the entire symposium can be fit into one issue, so she presents this point but does not pursue it, beginning to sketch how larger ideas about childhood might underwrite the other differences—including formal ones—between the two she and others have noted. Thus there is a hint, but only a hint, in the symposium that while form is inevitable when discussing the differences between comics and picture books, the best way to theorize those differences will not end with form.

In this vein, I propose a strategy for understanding comics and picture books that begins with form, specifically the production of meaning in texts that combine images and what Roland Barthes has called "linguistic messages." However, trying to distinguish between the two using only formal observations would lead inevitably back to the definitional quagmire that Nel correctly identifies. Therefore, it is my suggestion that we consider this *formal similarity* between the two in the context of the *different reading situations* that they anticipate. This key formal similarity allows insights about the decidedly different ideologies in which the two kinds of books participate. Thus, one of the goals of this essay is to demonstrate that comics and picture books are in fact different from each other; to paraphrase Nel, one goal is to show that they are not separated by degree, but by type. But understanding the philosophies of meaning-making from which comics and picture books emerge will do more than help define the two kinds of books. It will also help explain their parallel histories, especially as those histories traverse children's cultures. Along the way, it will also explain a broad

range of formal qualities that arise from the ideological and historical situations of comics and picture books. Central to the solution I am proposing to the tangle of theory is attention to how each form limits the meanings possible in images, thereby encoding, enlisting, and distributing power with particular consequences for solitary and cooperative reading experiences.

Fixing Meaning

The first step in articulating the differences between comics and picture books is recognizing a bizarre subtractive process by which juxtaposed words and images produce meaning. This process is at work in every instance in which words and images are put together. Not only does it function in comics and picture books (and film, painting, television, video games, and a host of other media), it is even true of image/text combinations that do not purport to be art, such as juxtapositions of photographs and captions in newspapers or glossy advertisements in magazines. The most illuminating analysis of this meaning-making process comes from the work of Roland Barthes, especially the first three chapters of *The Responsibility of Forms*. Over the course of these chapters, Barthes develops his argument that images are always perceived through a process that results in a narrowing of meaning. The selection of meaning according to culturally loaded signs is important not only because it helps to produce meaning, but also because—and this point will be crucial for defining both comics and picture books—it suppresses meaning. From Barthes' perspective, an image can and does mean far more than its producers intend. The sea of possible meanings is terrifying, sublime in the Burkean sense that it is too enormous to be comprehended. As a result, Barthes argues, "in every society a certain number of techniques are developed in order to *fix* the floating chain of signifieds, to combat the terror of uncertain signs: the linguistic message is one of these techniques" (28; original emphasis).⁶ When images and language appear together, they interact in ways that produce meaning by closing off the meanings that are possible. Both comics and picture books feature a mingling of language and image, and so, from a Barthesian perspective, both would be sites in which "linguistic messages" work to limit the sublime meaning of images.

Although Barthes was mainly interested in how adults experience such texts, some research on picture books suggests that language's ability to reduce the range of meanings in an image may also hold true for how children read. Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles, for example,

draw on a large body of interviews with young children to investigate how they read picture books, and the results rely heavily on how words and images interact:

Greg ([age] 6), already a keen reader, was one of the few young children who was able to take this step back when asked what he looked at first in a picture. "I look at the picture to give me a clue of what's happening. And then I read the story, the words." Jim (7) looks first at the writing within the illustration: "I look if they have speech bubbles and then I read the bit that it says, then read the writing and then look at the picture."

Arizpe and Styles find the words of one ten-year-old boy especially insightful: "First I look at the picture just for a short while," he told his interviewers, "then I read the text, then I take a longer look at the picture and see what's happening in it and see if there's anything going on" (191). The back-and-forth process described by these children, Arizpe and Styles argue, is evidence that the production of meaning in picture books comes from an iterative process through which language helps to fix the meaning of the images.

Efforts to separate comics from picture books often founder on the crucial similarity of how both forms combine words and images, but a closer look at how words fix the meaning of images can in fact provide a pivotal distinction between the two. If the words are, as Barthes holds, the aesthetic element that limits meaning in both kinds of image/texts, there is still a question that remains to be answered: Who chaperones the words as they do their work? The words, after all, don't do anything on their own; they require a reader who deciphers them and perceives their guidance in interpreting the image. Who activates those words? Who performs them? Who engages them as they make finite the previously sublime image? In determining who chaperones the words, a reliable and fertile difference emerges between comics and picture books: in general, if the book anticipates a solitary reader who chaperones the words as they go about their work of fixing the meaning of the images, that book is a comic; if the book instead anticipates a reader who chaperones the words as they are communicated to a listening reader, that book is a picture book.

Who Speaks, Who Listens

Let's begin with picture books. Certainly there are exceptions to this rule, but the form of picture books seems to anticipate that they will be

read by at least two human beings simultaneously, one of them speaking the words and looking at the images, the other listening to the words and looking at the images.⁷ This is the design of picture books, a design with ideological implications. When picture books are read in keeping with this design, the process by which a speaking reader chaperones the words becomes quickly obvious: even if the speaker reads all of the words and reads them all correctly—neither of which should be assumed—the speaker inevitably *performs* the words in a way that narrows their meaning even as the words fix the meaning of the images. Think of a librarian who is a master storyteller performing a well-rehearsed reading to a room full of children or a doting uncle reading a childhood favorite to a cherished niece. These speaking readers have interpretations—narrowed meaning—of the words that become evident as the words are spoken. But think, too, of the frustrated parent reading the latest hack merchandising tie-in to a frustrating child. This speaking reader, too, has an interpretation. It may be a poorly conceived, inexpertly executed interpretation, but it nonetheless shapes the words that shape the images. The distribution of agency between the speaker and the words is negotiable; there are reading instances in which the speaking reader strives to perform the words as they seem to long to be performed, and there are reading instances in which the speaking reader not only resists or ignores the book's instructions, but even changes or deletes the words themselves. This is why I call the process "chaperoning." In the process of chaperoning the words as they attempt their work of fixing the meaning of the images, the speaking reader is sometimes indulgent, sometimes intractable. But in all cases, it is that speaking reader who accompanies, shapes, aids, or in countless other ways interferes with the words.

The reading relationship between speaking reader and listening reader around which picture books are designed has noticeable ideological implications, some of which Perry Nodelman has already begun to explore. His close reading of picture books for very young readers explains how illustrations instruct an infant on how to parse images in a Western tradition. Nodelman's reading touches on the sea of possible meanings that Barthes identifies, for example in the child's comprehension that one "must learn to look for specific, significant objects rather than do what seems to be more natural for prelinguistic beings and give equal attention to the entire picture plane" (*Words* 30). But he goes on to point out that "Theoretically, of course, hearing an adult speak those words might cause a child to search out the named

object . . . in the picture" (31). Here, Nodelman mentions in passing what seems to me exactly the step of interpretation that makes a picture book a picture book: the words direct interpretation of the meaning of the sublime image, and the words come to the listening/viewing reader through the speaking/viewing reader. Picture books are books that combine words and images, as do comics, and it is the speaking reader, as Nodelman's example illustrates, who chaperones the words as the words fix the meaning of the images.

Comics, on the other hand, are for readers who read to themselves, which means that the solitary reader chaperones the words. Mel Gibson confirms the difference in reading situations, explaining that "comics are seen as independent reading, whereas picturebooks are usually perused with assistance from an adult, suggesting that the former are for those with superior reading skills" (104).⁸ The solitary act of reading comics to oneself is so basic to comics scholarship that it often goes unnamed, as in Robert S. Petersen's essay on the role of subvocalization in comics. His argument, that visual representations of sound in comics affect the speed at which one reads a comic because readers tend to subvocalize as they read silently, takes for granted that comics anticipate a reader who is not only independent but silent, a far cry from the prototypical scene of reading picture books.⁹ If we take for granted, therefore, that words do fix the meaning of images in image/texts such as comics, we must also agree that the words are chaperoned by the presumably silent, solitary reader: there isn't anyone else involved in the immediate reading process. Comics, then, are books that combine words and images, as do picture books, and it is the solitary reader who chaperones the words as the words fix the meaning of the images.

The Serious Business of Affectionate Reading

This distinction of who chaperones the words as they fix the meaning of the images explains and even catalyzes many of the other, more obvious differences between comics and picture books. It has an immediate impact, for instance, on the formal differences between comics and picture books that tend to be the starting place for efforts to distinguish between them. Picture books have the shape that they do, for example, because their design anticipates a dual readership in which a speaking reader will chaperone the words. They are often horizontal rather than vertical, and even when they are vertical, they tend to be

oversized. These shapes make the sharing of picture books easier, so that a speaking reader might spread the book over two laps while performing the words for the listening reader. Comics traditionally have been published in magazine format and, like magazines for adults, are shaped for easy individual management rather than sharing between readers. Another formal difference that grows out of this distinction is the relative durability of the two forms. Comics, like most magazines, anticipate a skilled reader who can absorb the content on first reading, which is why they traditionally have been published in a cheap, disposable format.¹⁰ Picture books, however, anticipate a readership that will return to the book again and again as the listening reader learns the patterns of fixing meaning chaperoned by the speaking reader. Picture books therefore have a more durable form: even when they are not printed in hardback, their paper stock is sturdy enough to stand up to the repeated readings that this dual audience requires.

But this distinction also—and, to my mind, more interestingly—points to fundamental movements of power at work in the reading of comics and picture books. One of these kinds of books—picture books—has multiple simultaneous readers, and one of those readers—the one looking at the text and reading it out loud—has at least the primary opportunity to shape these words that, in turn, shape the images. What is at stake in each step of this process from the narrowing of the images' meaning through the pronouncement and performance of the words is inevitably power: the words have power over the images, and the speaker has power over the words. It is important to keep in mind that the words do not have *total* power over the images, and it is similarly significant that the speaker of the words does not have *total* power over the words, their meaning, or how that meaning will be interpreted by the listener, but the procedure of restricting meaning is nonetheless a procedure defined by power. Therefore, the traditional reading venues for comics and picture books are based on the exercise of power, specifically of power over meaning. Picture books offer that power over the shaping of meaning to the reader of the book who speaks the words aloud, the reader usually assumed to be an adult. The implications of that structural investment of power in a proficient—probably adult—reader who is activating the picture book along with a listening—probably child—reader are far reaching. They are so great that for the next several pages, I will need to focus on picture books exclusively.

Consider, for example, the consequences of the structural power in picture books for affection and education, two uses that are not

otherwise obviously related. Kenneth Kidd touches on these uses when he says that “the picture book might be understood as a site of psychosocial engagement between parent and child, and between child and adult-author—engagement that is at once play and serious business” (213). Kidd’s point throughout his essay is that picture book creators such as Maurice Sendak have been part of a broad cultural conversation about the psychological formation of children, and it is key that picture books attempt to exercise their power in a site that is both instructional and delightful. The scenario in which a listening/viewing child hears a speaking/viewing adult while the latter exercises power over the words that exercise power over the images is one that has to do, for scholars such as Kidd, with the work of learning and the joy of companionship. Thus the picture book traditionally has been “linked with developing literacy . . . something that can help foster a child’s understanding, especially when shared with an adult” (Gibson 102, 104). That traditional link also appears today, as experts giving advice about literacy urge parents to “Make book-sharing time a special time for closeness between you and your child” (“Early Literacy”). According to educational literature, closeness is not incidental to the task of learning to read, but crucial. Thus, although one expert agrees that parents “may often hear the phrase, ‘Read with your child 15 minutes a day,’ or ‘Read with your child 20 minutes a day,’” she goes on to advise that “[i]t is more important for the interaction between you and your child to be positive than it is to be long” (Ghoting). Scholars of both literacy and literature recognize that picture books equally serve the use of offering adults and children affectionate time together and the use of helping adults induct children into literacy; increasingly, scholarship argues that the two uses are intertwined. But literacy is, of course, also the process of learning how to decipher the meanings of images, a process abetted by looking at an image and hearing a performance of words that in turn help to fix the meaning of that image. As these experts indicate, the experience of hearing a picture book read is part of the process of becoming literate, especially where “literate” means understanding meaning in the way limited by words that are themselves limited by the performance of the speaking adult. Thus literacy, affection, and picture books are connected through the exercise of power in the making of meaning practiced by reading picture books.

The centrality of power to the affectionate, instructive relationship between readers and picture books has implications extending beyond literacy. One of the aspects of the field to which children’s literature scholars have become highly alert is nostalgia, a warm emotion that

privileges the position of the reminiscing adult over the frequently painful present reality of actual children. Children's literature that embraces nostalgia is generally read as disingenuous, flattering adult (mis)remembrance at the expense of speaking to the needs of the supposed child audience. The realization that analysis of picture books has routinely identified a nostalgic tenor within the form is, then, an uncomfortable one at best. William Moebius views that nostalgia as a crucial problem to overcome for the study of picture books, warning that "It is easy to be captivated by the lovable and endearing creatures that inhabit the modern picturebook" (141) and that only by escaping such captivation can adults speak insightfully about picture books; he doesn't even ask whether children can hope to escape it. Op de Beeck has taken a different approach, making the presence of nostalgia in the genetic code of modern picture books the target of her investigation. "The picture book," she explains, "is a commodity with built-in nostalgia. People are conditioned, by educators and the marketplace, to associate the picture book with ephemeral, wonderful childhood" (*Suspended* 6).

Moebius poses the nostalgia inherent in picture books as a problem, and op de Beeck makes it an object of study, but the reason that nostalgia is so dear to picture books as a form only becomes clear when they are understood as texts that regularly make meaning with an adult chaperone. Nostalgia is an attitude toward childhood that privileges the scrying adult: a nostalgic adult selects from and interprets the real and imagined events of the past, looking back over the sea of memories and fixing its meaning by attending to only some of the possible significations. Tellingly, nostalgia names a past that suits the needs of the subject in the present. Whether the interpretation of the past is utterly in keeping with the facts of the past, whether the meaning selected is the meaning that was originally present, the act of nostalgic recollection is one of selecting some and ignoring the rest, to paraphrase Barthes' explanation of how words narrow the meaning of images. Nostalgia therefore asks adults to read the past in the same way picture books ask literate readers to shape the meaning of words and images. Both nostalgia and picture books put proficient readers in the position of narrowing the meaning of the artifacts of childhood, whether those artifacts are the sublime image or the sublime past. Picture books are so prone to nostalgia because both rely on a specific way of fixing meaning.¹¹

The Objects and Objectives of Childhood

Inevitably, an object that is so shot through with instruction, emotion, and nostalgia will be pressed to serve the process of acculturation, a process inextricably tied to power. Scholarship about picture books has frequently touched on their role in acculturation. Consider for example the frequent observation that in the West, when picture books tell stories, their narratives unfold from left to right (even action within single images tends to unfold in this direction), mirroring the direction of reading words in Western cultures.¹² Considering the integral role picture books are presumed to play in the acquisition of literacy, one might say that they not only mirror the direction of reading, they draw the listening/viewing reader into literacy, along the way naturalizing the Western tradition of reading visual fields from left to right. Nodelman has also observed that picture books take for granted and thereby teach values of the culture into which their readers are being incorporated. Thus, for example, picture books that appear to do nothing more than name brightly illustrated, shiny objects “also work to convey the message that order and brightness and cleanliness are desirable qualities—that they are *attractive* and therefore especially worthy of our visual attention” (*Words* 34; original emphasis). Nodelman can therefore conclude that “a parent’s expectation that a child will find this specific sort of image enjoyable acts as a form of moral education” (34) and that through picture books, “children have learned much that they are not conscious of learning” (36). Op de Beeck adds, “In their thematic form and content, and in their tangible materiality, picture books provide means by which the contemporary subject can understand and inhabit the nation” (*Suspended* xvi).

But whether it is structuring the direction of the flow of the narrative and images, valuing brightness and cleanliness, or pursuing any of the other tasks of introducing children to culture, the acculturation process of picture books is predicated on the consumption of mediated words and images. The affectionate, educative scene of speaking and hearing picture books is underwritten by the fixing of meaning that comes from the interaction of words and images and the further narrowing of meaning through the spoken performance of those words. All the acculturative properties of picture books are prefigured in the chain of power relationships inherent in the way meaning is fixed by picture books. As empowered proficient readers chaperone the words that exercise the power of limiting the meaning of the images, they

model a process of fixing meaning that is identical with the process of acculturation, of learning the hierarchy of objects in the perceived world, of investing privileged objects with limited meaning. That picture books work so well in so many ways to induct listening readers into a culture ruled by adults is no accident: the process of limiting meaning according to adult readings is in the bones of the form.

Picture books, the objects of childhood, therefore enable two of the chief objectives of this culturally loaded period called childhood: nostalgia and acculturation. Nostalgia, the rewriting of childhood according to the longing of adults, and acculturation, the attempted indoctrination of children into a social order over which adults have dominance, are both built into the nature of picture books, and they have been part of the form since the modern picture book's formative years. Op de Beeck highlights the self-sustaining loop of picture books, nostalgia, and sales during the early twentieth century:

Evaluating pictorial texts through a contemporary critical lens—and bearing in mind that the purveyors of these texts tend to represent a dominant Anglo- or European American middle class with specific anxieties around leisure, labor, citizenship, and immigration—gives insight into early twentieth-century tastes, hopes, and fears constellated around cherished, even sacred notions of childhood and U.S. citizenship. (*Suspended* xvi)

For op de Beeck, “tastes, hopes, and fears” created a perfect storm that could drive picture book sales. The “sacred notions of childhood” that formed the heart of that storm acted reciprocally with nostalgia and acculturation, ensuring sales for picture books that flattered adults' selective remembrances of their own childhoods and invited child readers into a symbolic order prefigured in the books' design and execution. Financially successful picture books therefore helped to shape children in ways that reaffirmed adults and, in doing so, accepted the role that the adult-dominated market asked of them.

But all this is not to say that the adults—flattered by nostalgia, affirmed by acculturation, and comforted by a thriving picture book market that agreed with their “sacred notions”—were themselves untouched by the meaning-making power of picture books. Even as the proficient reader enjoyed the power of limiting the meaning of words, picture books constructed a limited view of reality that had and continues to have implications for adult readers, too. The common language between nostalgia, acculturation, and marketing was a care-

fully scripted idea of childhood itself, and even as picture books and their publishers found themselves rewarded if they adhered to that idea, they also participated in the act of fixing the meaning of childhood *for adults*. When op de Beeck proclaims that “To think about the picture book is to think about the child” (*Suspended* xi), she is arguing in part that picture books struggle to shape the children who hear and view them, but she is also hinting that picture books have the capacity to shape adults—to capture the possible meanings of childhood, narrow them, and fix those meanings for adult readers. Op de Beeck argues that the early twentieth-century “definition of childhood . . . remains prevalent today”; she points to the modern development of reading levels—today a major part of marketing and education—as part of the effort to tell adults how to think of children. “Ultimately,” she writes, “children were redefined as market groups distinct from adult readers, with books scientifically calibrated to their age-related needs” (18). Op de Beeck’s insights illuminate a much earlier observation by Nodelman, who applauds Kenneth Marantz’s comment that parents are mistaken to privilege as more “suitable” Disney’s version of *Snow White* over the picture book version written and illustrated by Paul Heins and Trina Shart Hyman. Nodelman then takes Marantz’s case a step further:

Many adults do believe that figures like Walt Disney’s cardboard heroine *are* more suitable. Years of familiarity have persuaded them to identify such colorful and relatively simple images with the tastes and interests of children. I suspect, therefore, that it is not actually the symbolism or the complexity of books like . . . Hyman’s *Snow White* that make them seem unsuitable for young children but rather that they look unlike the vast majority of picture books: their pictures are not in a style that we have conventionally come to identify as childlike. (*Words* 38; original emphasis)

Viewed backward through op de Beeck, Nodelman’s observation points to the continuing role of picture books and other iterations of children’s visual culture in instructing adults on what picture books ought to be like and, as a consequence, what children, with whom they are iconically linked, ought to be.

Reading both op de Beeck and Nodelman through the theory that picture books are defined by a specific way of chaperoning the narrowing of meaning, the cultural work of picture books becomes even more convoluted, but it ends with the same conclusion. Picture books govern the experience of adults, because adults who are looking for an affec-

tionate, educational, and morally salubrious reading experience with children will be inclined to choose the more “suitable” book, even if, as becomes clear through the arguments of op de Beeck and Nodelman, picture books themselves play a crucial role in determining suitability. What’s happening here, then, is that picture books are affecting the adults, fixing for them the meaning of key terms—“suitable,” “appropriate,” “childlike”—about books and children. That picture books do this even as adults perform and thereby narrow the meaning of the words in those books is more than ironic; it is the cost of the power that picture books offer adults as adults exercise power over words. Picture books do offer power to adult readers who perform the words on the page, but participation in the execution of a picture book also asks the speaking reader to perceive reality as filtered by the book itself.

Comics Are Hated in Congregations, Picture Books One by One

With so much at stake for both children and adults, it can hardly come as a surprise that picture books have prompted controversy over the last century, and I will look at some noteworthy examples shortly. What is surprising, though, is that when picture books cause an uproar, they do so individually, not as a class. Given the similarities between comics and picture books, any glance at the history of comics shows how remarkable this is: when societies around the world have shown outrage at comics, they have tended to attack comics as a medium, as a form that is wrong at the core, rather than on an issue-by-issue or even a title-by-title basis. John A. Lent’s overview of the international debate about the suitability of comics for children is the best summary of the tendency to decry comics as a class. Lent points to outrage over comics in Canada in the 1940s (70, 74); Australia (72, 73) and Germany (71) following the end of the Second World War; and the United States (70), Britain (70, 73), Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan in the 1950s (75), an infamous track record from any perspective. In the US, mid-century concern over comics led to the formation of the Comics Code Authority, a regulating body with enormous power to restrict the distribution of comics. The CCA’s impact on American comics is difficult to exaggerate: over decades and through multiple revisions, it was successful in restricting the language and content of comics across the country. But given the similarity of comics and picture books, it is significant that the country has never had a Picture Books Code Authority. Just as something in the design of comics invites the need to censor them as a class, something about picture books diverts that need.

Adults certainly do get very upset about picture books; nonetheless, they tend to single out individual books for their ire, not argue that the whole industry must go. Leonard S. Marcus's rich history of US children's literature reveals this pattern almost inadvertently. He describes, for example, the Sturm und Drang surrounding the publication of Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson's *The Story of Ferdinand* in 1936. Marcus writes that the book "became a lightning rod for political controversy among adult readers for whom the Spanish Civil War . . . was an issue of passionate concern." Marcus quotes the book's author as saying, "It was attacked by everybody! . . . It was called 'Red propaganda,' a bitter satire of pacifism, on the one hand, and a pro-Fascist tract on the other" (126).¹³ Marcus also recalls a minor outbreak of adult anxiety over *The Two Reds*, published in 1950 (193), and a much more significant eruption over *The Rabbits' Wedding*, published in 1958. He writes of *The Rabbits' Wedding*—interestingly, skipping over *The Two Reds*—that "Not since *The Story of Ferdinand* . . . had a book for young children created a comparable furor" (215). The next note Marcus makes in the history of controversial picture books is about *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate*, both appearing in 1990. He explains that "the two books incited the greatest public uproar over a picture book since Garth Williams's *The Rabbits' Wedding*, with its supposed depiction of a biracial marriage, and prompted numerous book challenges and bannings at schools and libraries around the nation" (302–03).

It is certainly important and telling that these books provoked such a reaction, but it is probably more revealing that they came years to decades apart and with little sense that the people complaining about the books saw any reason to connect new complaints to old. From 1936 to 1990, Marcus registers only four high points of adult hysteria in America, one of which, concerning *The Two Reds*, he either forgets or plays down in telling about the "furor" over *The Rabbits' Wedding*. And in each reported instance, the outcry was focused on individual books, not a class of books. What's more, these four discrete moments of outrage take place over the same decades in which the Comics Code Authority maintained its power over the entire mainstream US comics industry. Outbreaks of hysteria about picture books, unlike hysteria over comics, have historically been both rare and specific.

The difference between how adults complain about comics and about picture books is one of the few dramatic differences between the two, and again, we can best understand that difference by paying attention to who is chaperoning the words of each form. Because picture books rely on a chaperone who is probably a caregiver, teacher,

or other adult who holds some degree of power over the listening child, picture books as a class do not require society-wide monitoring; they will be monitored individually in the moment of their reading. Because picture books anticipate an adult chaperoning the words and therefore manipulating the meaning of the book, there is perhaps an assumption that only a rare picture book could be so debasing that its corruptive potential might elude or overwhelm the capability of the adult who chaperones the words. Thus, a hue and cry may be raised to alert other adults to an especially dangerous individual picture book, but the form itself has a built-in system for monitoring, mediating, and even suppressing potentially subversive messages, so there is no need to be concerned about picture books as a class. As the adult performs and therefore fixes the meaning of the words, those words can be manipulated, mocked, or even ignored. Further, since picture books play into the power structure that privileges adults—enter again nostalgia and acculturation—picture books carry with them a reward for adults who will shepherd children in a culturally approved direction rather than pass along versions of reality that will disrupt existing concepts of childhood. Picture books rely on speaking readers who have it in their best interest to preserve the “suitability” of picture books for children. Viewed from this perspective, adult hysteria over comics as a group but picture books only individually makes some sense: comics anticipate a child who reads without adult supervision; picture books anticipate an adult who will monitor and fix meaning in ways “appropriate” for child listeners.

A strange consequence of how the chaperoning of words informs reactions to picture books can be found, though it is obscured, in Marcus’s explanation of the controversy surrounding *The Two Reds*. He reports that “the village elders of the children’s book world closed ranks around a book they considered praiseworthy” (193), despite the very real threat of McCarthyism, but he observes that those “elders” seemed to have little to fear from an America otherwise willing to blacklist anyone under suspicion of communist sympathies.¹⁴ Marcus goes on to explain who did and did not suffer from connections with communism:

As a group, however, the authors and illustrators of children’s trade books suffered far less for their affiliations (real or merely suspected) with leftist political organizations, including even the Communist Party, than did Hollywood screenwriters, novelists, and playwrights for adults, radio and television entertainers and

backstage personnel, and other arts professionals. Public school teachers and librarians likewise lost their jobs by the thousands on the basis of their political views and affiliations, and the authors of textbooks came under severe government scrutiny. But the people responsible for creating the children's books that librarians purchased with public funds and that parents and grandparents gave as gifts to the children they loved were viewed by the new government overlords of ideological purity as of too little consequence to be worthy even of investigation. (194)

The distinction Marcus draws between the groups of children's book professionals who did and did not suffer under McCarthyism is insightful. But declaring the creators of children's books "of too little consequence" is too hasty an explanation of why they were not persecuted, especially when teachers and librarians were. Obviously the literature itself was of enough consequence to draw attention, as the history of *The Two Reds* attests. And considering the primary role picture books played in the processes of education, nostalgia, and acculturation, certainly controlling children's literature would have been important to "government overlords of ideological purity." If those overlords considered the creators of lowbrow culture such as film and television important, surely the creators of children's literature were important, too. If Marcus means that the importance (and therefore "consequence") of the creators was diminished because the work they produced was for children, that explanation cannot stand. Children's literature was exactly the kind of cultural artifact in which overlords of ideological purity would have been interested.

But if we read the phrase "of too little consequence" slightly askew, it may still explain why creators were left alone even as—and this is crucial—teachers and librarians were fired "by the thousands." The reason that creators of children's books were ignored may have been because then, as now, the creators of children's books were not ultimately the adults who delivered the messages of picture books to children. Similarly, the reason that teachers and librarians were given so *much* attention is that they were the adults entrusted with the mediation of picture books. Teachers and librarians, the people outside the home who read picture books to children, were trusted to shape the meaning of words and therefore images, and if their politics were suspect, they had to be removed from their positions of power in the acculturating venue of picture book reading.¹⁵ When "the authors and illustrators of children's trade books" were ignored, it wasn't because

their literature, with its crucial role in the process of acculturation and the maintenance of adult power, was unimportant. They were ignored because they were far removed from the actual activation of picture books. Adults whom the nation hired to assist with literacy and acculturation, however, were inevitably in the crosshairs of the witch hunt: they were the ones entrusted with the act of reading out loud, with the process of politically loaded meaning-making.

With Great Solitude Comes Great Threat

But if picture books are to be defined by how they expect to be read, so too are comics. Whereas picture books anticipate being read aloud by a proficient reader/viewer to a preliterate listener/viewer, comics resist allowing multiple simultaneous readers; indeed, they encourage solitary reading. The process of using the words to narrow the meaning of the images is one undertaken in solitude, with only one reader chaperoning the words as they exercise their power. Again, the difference is not incidental; it is transformative.

As with picture books, the anticipated mode of meaning-making for comics dictates multiple aspects of form. As my students love to remind me, comics are hard to read out loud. This is perhaps the most important rule there is to understanding the form of comics. Comics are, in fact, extremely awkward to read out loud. The multi-panel pages that comics tend to favor anticipate a reader who knows and will follow a predictable pattern through the panels. The least intrusive way for a speaking reader of comics to communicate to a listening reader both the rate and order of transition between panels is through the decidedly inelegant means of pointing. Further, whereas picture books use speaker tags to make clear to a listening audience which character is attached to which bit of dialogue, comics use visual pointers—those angular objects attached to the ovals of word balloons—to demonstrate who is speaking when, and that visual cue works very well for a silent, solitary reader. Again, the least intrusive way to communicate a change of speaker when reading a comic aloud is to point, a gesture that blocks part of the image and becomes increasingly cumbersome when, as often happens in comics, multiple speakers produce multiple word balloons within the same panel. Certainly comics can be read out loud, but they aren't designed for that use. Comics are hard to read out loud because they are designed for a solitary reader who will do the work of combining words and pictures.

From this distinction also follows a host of more politically loaded characteristics of comics. Gibson, for example, has confirmed what most of us grew up knowing: although picture books traditionally have been valued for their role in literacy, “comics are often stigmatized” (104), very often by the same teachers and librarians who praise picture books. The time-honored cliché of a child hiding a comic book behind a text-book is an eloquent image in this sense: comics are understood to come between children and learning, “competing with or even obstructing . . . literacy,” as Charles Hatfield and Craig Svonkin put it (431). As Gibson points out, this is an ironic complaint, as comics require a reader who has achieved an advanced degree of literacy, so a child reading a comic is ipso facto a child who has succeeded in learning. But the reason that the cliché about comics as working against education persists in spite of the obvious irony is simple: children reading comics may be exercising literacy, but they are not doing so with a text or a mediator who will see to it that those children make meaning in ways that fit with existing adult prejudices. Because comics give to solitary readers the power of chaperoning words as they fix the meaning of images, they fail to offer to adults the potent cocktail of literacy, nostalgia, and acculturation that picture books do. Just as picture books have been linked to adult mediators in ways that empower adults, comics traditionally have been seen as a threat to the power of adults—again, because comics are for solitary, unmonitored readers who are making meaning without the immediate involvement of adults.

Historically, one adult group, librarians, has been especially opposed to the way that comics distribute power, and not without reason. Marcus’s history of children’s literature in the US contains many references to comics, and one of his most reliable refrains is how librarians, who gladly recommended and bestowed awards upon picture books, historically opposed comics. He offers a long “list of offenses cited by librarians in their critique of this new incursion into their domain,” and that last phrase—“incursion into their domain”—nicely sums up the loss of power that comics represented to adults such as librarians (137). And comics’ “incursion” must have seemed especially threatening to librarians, considering how McCarthy-era paranoia revealed their vulnerability to McCarthy-era public whim; and keep in mind that librarians found themselves vulnerable even when they were avoiding comics in favor of picture books, a form that required an adult intermediary. Comics could only have been perceived as more dangerous, as they removed the adult intermediary and handed to solitary child readers

the power of chaperoning words. If librarians could lose their jobs by mediating meaning imperfectly, how much more censure could they invite by loaning to children books whose interpretation was under no adult supervision whatsoever?

Comics also represented a threat to librarians by refusing to behave in ways that fit within the structures that valued librarians' work. Picture books, "linked with developing literacy" (Gibson 102), fit within those structures well, but comics, which Marcus reports that librarians characterized as "subliterary" (137), were presumed to oppose literacy and therefore the librarians who championed it. In this way, comics posed a threat not only to librarians' job security, but also to the library mission of the day, a mission that picture books supported. Finally, even the physical object of the comic book, one that served a solitary, unmonitored reader well, resisted the authority of librarians. Because comics were disposable, nondurable commodities, the physical object of comics itself placed them out of librarians' control. As ephemera, objects designed to be read and thrown away, the physical object of the comic book could not survive in a public library.¹⁶ Indeed, a comic book's physical shape made it difficult to shelve in a public library.¹⁷ Picture books, however, came in shapes that could stand up on a shelf, with covers that could bear call number labels. It's hardly surprising that librarians felt that comics were a threat, for they appeared ill suited for both the mission and the space of the library.¹⁸ The fact that, according to Marcus, so many librarians viewed the popularity of comics as a threat to their own domains was not accidental, but a direct result of the fact that comics' form, content, and process of meaning-making resisted the power invested in librarians' position of authority.

Words and Other Linguistic Tools

In working from the opening supposition that both comics and picture books are visual texts in which *words* narrow meaning, I have been ignoring a long-running trend in both forms that seems to disrupt the neat distinction I am making: some of the most interesting, artistically successful, and indeed popular comics and picture books have no words. If I am defining comics as books that have a solitary reader who chaperones the words as they fix the meaning of the images and picture books as books that have a speaking reader who chaperones the words while another reader listens and watches, then a book that has no words would seem to exist entirely outside the structure of this theory.

My answer to this problem is so counterintuitive that it borders on the perverse: Wordless books don't change this distinction because there is no such thing as a wordless book. I don't mean here to take the petulant stand that if a book has only images, then it isn't a book; rather, I am arguing that there is no process of reading performed by a human being who has entered into language that does not involve words, especially if we define "words" as broadly as theory allows. I began my argument with Barthes, and this understanding of "words" is already anticipated in the broad definition of language he uses in *The Responsibility of Forms*. When he writes that "the linguistic message is one of these techniques," the techniques "developed in order to *fix* the floating change of signifieds" (28; original emphasis), he leaves open linguistic messages that are not "language" in the strictest sense. To put it another way, for Barthes, printed words are not the only tools cultures use to narrow the meaning of images. And in the time since he published his ideas, cognitive scientists have suggested that even messages that do not look like words come to operate as words. As Antonio R. Damasio writes,

In addition to the story that signifies the act of knowing and attributes it to the newly minted core self, the human brain also generates an automatic verbal version of the story. I have no way of stopping that verbal translation, [and] neither do you. Whatever plays in the nonverbal tracks of our minds is rapidly translated in words and sentences. That is in the nature of the human, languaged creature. (185)

Even when there are no words on the page, there are, for a reader who has entered into language, still linguistic structures present, and those structures work to fix the meaning of the images.¹⁹

This broad definition of "words" opens up a range of other aspects of comics and picture books to be considered when looking for how meaning is fixed. I have proposed that words narrow the meaning of images, and I have argued that paying attention to who wields the words is central to defining each kind of book. But there are other formal aspects of these two kinds of books that also play a role in the shaping of the meaning of the images. Barthes hints as much when he mentions that a linguistic message is only "one of" the techniques that cultures use to fix the sublime meaning of images. Thierry Groensteen's work on comics is grounded in linguistic theory, and as a result, his widely influential *The System of Comics* provides several examples of formal, language-like tools comics use to limit meaning. The link between Groensteen and Barthes becomes obvious early in Groensteen's book, as he talks about scholarship on the nature of comics:

the objective must be to define the sufficiently encompassing categories for the majority, or the totality, of linguistic processes and the observable tropes in the field that can be explained by these concepts. In elaborating the concepts of spatio-topia, arthrology, and braiding, all three of which draw upon the macro-semiotic, I am obligated to realize this program. (*System 6*)

“Spatio-topia” (which, at risk of oversimplification, can be defined as the use of space on a page governed by layout), “arthrology” (the sequential aspect of comics), and “braiding” (the way otherwise discrete images in a comic—for example, separate panels—connect with each other to make meaning) are all visual aspects of comics’ grammar.²⁰ Therefore, Groensteen can write of how comics’ “codes weave themselves inside a comics image in a specific fashion, which places the image in a narrative chain” (7), and key to the operation of those codes are purely visual terms such as spatio-topia, arthrology, braiding, gridding (144), and “iconic solidarity” (18).

A number of other comics scholars have added to the list of visual aspects of comics that participate in meaning-making and thereby help to fix the meaning of the images.²¹ Rather than provide an exhaustive list, I want to make the point that, once we realize that even wordless comics and picture books are perceived through language and “linguistic processes” that narrow the meaning of the images, all sorts of other aspects of the two forms reveal themselves as likewise exercising power over images. All of the “codes” Groensteen identifies can be likewise applied with only minor adjustments to picture books—and all of the “codes” that William Moebius identifies as shaping meaning in picture books can be applied to comics. In fact, this is why the more the two kinds of books are theorized, the muddier the distinctions between them become: both use language and other codes to narrow the meaning of images. The difference, as I have repeatedly opined, is not which limiting agents are present or absent, but whom the book anticipates as the chaperone of those limiting agents.

One of the most important limiting agents is also one of the few reliable formal differences between comics and picture books that previous scholarship has been able to identify. Op de Beeck has given this distinction its most succinct expression: “Page-to-page closure sets the picture book apart from the graphic narrative form of the comic strip, which depends on panel-to-panel exposition” (*Suspended* xiv).^{22, 23} Even this excellent observation really only works best when qualified, of course: comics *tend* to use multiple panels per page, with closure between them;

picture books *tend* to use full-page or double-page images, with closure coming at the gutter or during the page turn. For example, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' comic book *Watchmen* uses single pages with nine panels per page throughout most of its twelve chapters, but it then uses massive single panels per page for one chapter—as though it were a picture book. Similarly, Peter Spier's Caldecott-winning illustrations in the picture book *Noah's Ark* frequently use double-page spreads to evoke the emotional status of the inhabitants of the Ark, but they also sometimes use multi-panel single pages to express the passage of time on board the Ark—as though Spier's book were a comic. If the authors and illustrators of these masterpieces of each form can use both techniques without upsetting readers (and the extraordinary acclaim that both *Watchmen* and *Noah's Ark* have enjoyed indicate that readers tend to be able to parse the mixed techniques), then even this distinction is only broadly accurate. But op de Beeck is right that comics *tend* to work one way and picture books another, and it is this difference that my own students most often use when they argue for why a book such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* should be understood as a comic rather than a picture book (against, for whatever they are worth, its author's express wishes).²⁴ This formal distinction is more reliable than most others . . . but why does this trend exist at all, especially given that there are countless exceptions to the rule, demonstrating that either form *could* work according to the tendencies of the other? The answer lies in how each kind of book anticipates that it will be accessed by the listening/viewing child, who otherwise exists outside the centers of power set up by meaning-making in comics and picture books.

Because the speaking reader of picture books has both initial and performative access to the words in those books, a great deal of the power in the meaning-making process of picture books lies outside the immediate purview of the listening reader. But research on children reading picture books has consistently revealed that there is one task in the process of interpreting them at which children are much better than are adults: noticing details. Arizpe and Styles have found a great deal of evidence for this observation in their interviews with children reading picture books. They discovered that children frequently noticed and drew meaning from formal aspects of images, such as illustrators' chosen media and technique as well as "the use of shadows, line and, perhaps most frequently, colour" (199). Nikolajeva has also conjectured that the more complex the illustrations on a double-page spread of a picture book are, the better children are at reading them, especially

as compared with adults: “Here, young children show extreme competence, studying the images carefully, while adults, focusing on verbal codes, feel an urge to go further onto the next doublespread” (31). Robert Lawson, in a Caldecott acceptance speech rife with important insights on how some influential children’s illustrators have thought about comics and picture books, writes that he makes a point of giving his picture book illustrations as much detail as possible, “For I know that some little unconsidered phrase or detail is going to mean a lot to some child” (278). One of my own students, Shannon Wilson, cannily putting together children’s skill with details and op de Beeck’s summary of the page/panel distinction between picture books and comics, observes,

In traditional picture books, each page offers only a small portion of the narrative, the image showing only one instant in the narrative. With a page turn in between every one to two images showing only one to two instances, the fluidity of the text is frequently broken. In a comic book, the reader sees multiple narrative instances per page with only a gutter between them, offering a more quick paced, fluid reading experience. . . . [D]oes the slowed pace caused by frequent page-turns in picture books allow the reader to find more detail in the text and image? (N. pag.)

If the answer to Wilson’s question is “Yes,” then the tendency of picture books to use single-panel pages or spreads might indicate an awareness on the part of the form that adults, who are not as good at noticing details, spend most of their time per spread looking at text, while the highly skilled child reader/listeners have a great deal of time per spread to exercise their skill and seek pleasure in absorbing the details of the image. Considering how insistent I have been on the need to remain alert to the distribution of power in these reading experiences, it is tempting to call this arrangement empowering for the child readers, but I’m not sure that’s exactly the right name for what picture books do. It’s perhaps more accurate to say that picture books have a sense of their readership, and they are giving to the listening readers—the ones who don’t have the power of chaperoning the words as the words reshape the images—a type of book that will reward the kind of reading that children are good at. It’s not so much empowering as it is art, cannily playing to and rewarding a certain kind of reading.

The Picture Book that Wasn’t a Comic

At the center of the distinction I am drawing between comics and picture books, the distinction that relies on noting who chaperones the

words as the words fix the meaning of the images, is power, and one last example can demonstrate how power has already informed the distinction between the two forms in the history of children's literature. Virginia Lee Burton, writing in the July–August 1941 issue of *The Horn Book* (remarkably, the same issue containing Robert Lawson's Caldecott acceptance speech in which he spoke directly to the prevalent prejudice against comics by children's literature professionals), made a rare and pointed case for how her newest picture book should be received—a picture book very few people read today. In that same year, Burton's book, today available in a new edition under her preferred title, *Calico the Wonder Horse, or, the Saga of Stewy Stinker*, appeared on bookshelves. *Calico* was a strange and, as we will see in a moment, brave attempt for a picture book. With multiple panels per page, garish paper stock, a heroic horse, and a mustache-twirling villain, *Calico* had the look of a comic that happened to have been printed on a press usually reserved for picture books. *Calico* is a provocative instance of overlap between comics and picture books. Similarly interesting, though, is Burton's essay, which gives an insight into how one of the field's most important creators saw picture books, especially as opposed to comics.

On the surface, Burton's *Horn Book* essay, titled "Symphony in Comics," is an amiable reflection on how excellent art—that's the "symphony" part—can be made from low inspiration—namely, comics. But as Marcus has revealed, Burton's tone covers "a chronic insecurity" (151) over what the book meant for her career. In her essay, she explains how her first picture book (*Choo Choo*) was written for her four-year-old son Aris, and her second (*Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*) was written for her younger son Michael "when he was about the same age" ("Symphony" 307). She recounts how she started her next book, planning to write for Aris again, but the now nine-year-old boy showed no interest. Marcus, partly on the strength of interviews with Burton's editor at the time, conjectures that her son's lack of interest sparked a significant crisis of confidence for the successful author/illustrator of children's picture books: "As Burton's own sons grew beyond the picture-book age, the artist grew less and less sure of her ability to communicate with young children" (151). Marcus focuses mainly on the professional implications of Burton's crisis, but if it is true, as I have been arguing, that picture books must be defined according to their reliance on a reading relationship that provides power to adult readers even as it defines children and childhood in politically significant ways, there is also a more domestic crisis at risk in Burton's experience of creating her "symphony in comics."

When Burton felt her children losing interest in picture books, she found herself on the outside of a power relationship to which she had been previously indispensable, and the fear she experienced becomes clear both between the lines of her *Horn Book* essay and through the history of children's publishing that Marcus recounts. He identifies something Burton herself does not say but that her audience—and for *Horn Book*, that audience would have consisted largely of teachers and librarians—would have known: a truth about picture books that is tied to the chaperoning of words as well as the role picture books are assumed to play in literacy and acculturation. When Marcus writes that Aris and Michael were growing “beyond the picture-book age,” what he means is that they were leaving the age at which they could be expected to participate in the reading of picture books in the way they are meant to be read. Already well on the road to reading, the boys were less keen to listen to a picture book, to look at the pictures, and to be instructed in the ways of traditional literacy rather than exercising their existing literacy themselves.²⁵ Instead, as Burton explains, her boys were passionate about comic books, a form that asks for a solitary reader. Comics therefore may have represented to Burton not just a professional threat, but an in-house reminder that her children were leaving her orbit, as both the creator of children's picture books and the adult who formerly engaged her children in the loaded experience of reading picture books together. And the exclusion of Burton from her sons' reading experience as they took on the role of chaperoning the words of the books they read echoes in her essay. She begins by writing that “I have found out by sad experience that the best way to write or draw a book for children is to work with them,” indicating the closeness inherent in the relationship between adult and child over the artistic object of the picture book. But when Aris showed a decided lack of interest in her picture book project, Burton realized that comics and other serial fiction “absorbed him completely; not only him but all the other boys his age” (307). Then, with what Marcus calls “the detachment of an ethnographer chronicling the curious practices of a remote tribal society” (151), Burton confides that “Here was something to look into. What was it that held them so enthralled? Comic books were like currency. They could be traded for toys. They were collected like treasures. There must be a reason for it” (307). Marcus's comment about Burton's “detachment” is meant as a joke, but it hints at a potent truth. In writing and illustrating picture books, Burton explains her role as one of closeness with children, and when she switches to talk-

ing about comics, her words make plain her sense that she is on the outside of the relationship looking in. Burton's "insecurity," as Marcus puts it, is the product of her accurate sense that comics represent a way of reading and a closed community into which she is not invited.

Burton's insecurity as she brushed up against the dividing line between comics and picture books legitimately extended beyond her own home. She was keenly aware of the profound distaste of her readers for comics as well as librarians' sense that picture books were an accomplice in the task of teaching literacy and culture to children. As a result, her "Symphony in Comics" must be read as a carefully considered attempt to nudge librarians and award-givers toward receiving her book in a certain way and, pointedly, not another. Marcus has said that *Calico* "represented the determined effort to 'compete against' the runaway popularity of the comics. Far from being one more such piece of ephemera, *Calico*, she reported, had grown out of an intensive year of study and experimentation with the comics genre" (150). And Burton certainly would have been justified in worrying about whether librarians might read *Calico* as a comic rather than as a picture book. Grace Allen Hogarth, the book's editor, had already received acute condemnation from Anne Carroll Moore—who was instrumental in the development of children's librarianship and who was behind a trendsetting pamphlet of recommended titles for children—on the basis that one of Hogarth's previous picture books was too much like a comic strip (Marcus 151). Both Burton and her publisher, then, must have seen the publication of *Calico* as a gamble that had to be hedged by writing to librarians through *Horn Book* and telling them how to perceive the book.

Tellingly, *Calico* was a rare misfire in Burton's career, failing to garner significant sales or awards. It was preceded in 1939 by the much more traditional *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* and followed in 1942 by *The Little House*, a Caldecott medalist (an award given by, to return to a group of characters who have loomed large in this history, the American Library Association). Whereas Marcus recognizes the aesthetic experimentation of *Calico*, he writes that *The Little House* was "laid out in a conventional picture-book design and format" (151); Burton followed the experimentation of *Calico* with the conventional—and, not coincidentally, classic—*Little House*. This three-book sequence in Burton's career says a great deal about the perceived, indeed enforced, distinction between comics and picture books. The picture books that looked nothing like comics became instant classics; *Calico* was largely

forgotten. Librarians' distaste for comics, founded on a sense that comics opposed literacy and eluded librarian control, may have been the reason. Burton's *Horn Book* essay is a thinly veiled attempt to fend off that distaste; as such, it provides an important insight into the distinctions between comics and picture books.

Conclusion, or, If It Hadn't Been for Those Meddling Kids . . .

I began this essay by showing the trouble that arises when theory approaches comics and picture books. Despite the obvious differences between the two, nearly all of the formal terms most commonly used to define one can also easily be applied to the other. Still, in one of the common observations about both forms—that words and images work together to create meaning—lies the first step in a path toward distinguishing the two. That path follows Barthes' proposal that images have a broad potential for meaning that is narrowed and controlled through "linguistic messages," and it continues through the common observation that comics anticipate a solitary reader and picture books do not. From there, paying attention to whether the narrowing messages of a book are designed for a chaperone who is a solitary reader or a reader speaking to an audience reveals a more consistent boundary between the two forms. But this distinction has implications that are social as well as formal. Because the narrowing of meaning is fundamentally an exercise of power, whether a form presents a speaking reader or a solitary reader with the role of chaperone for the narrowing elements has consequences for the social dimensions of children's literature. Those consequences manifest in the patterns of education, affection, nostalgia, and literary history in which comics and picture books participated throughout the twentieth century. Emphasizing the performance of chaperoning that comics and picture books foresee for their readers offers a unified solution to the tangle of theory.

However, when actual children approach comics and picture books, the tangle draws tight again. After all, actual children don't remain within the positions their books imply. My own children memorized their favorite picture books and recited them to me on many occasions, echoing but reinterpreting—which is to say, further narrowing—the words I had chaperoned. Children also often browse picture books at public libraries, bookstores, or the homes of friends, and even if they can't read the words, well, I've already established that the other artistic elements of picture books similarly narrow the meaning of the

images, so if they have even the dimmest awareness of the impact of shape, line, color, and pacing (and I suspect they have quite a cunning awareness of a wide range of aesthetics), they are chaperoning key elements themselves. Children of later elementary years sometimes read picture books to younger children as part of reading buddy programs, meaning that children of a young age find themselves working in the position of chaperone normally understood to belong to adults. Such a reading experience does not magically turn the book into a comic book, even if it does reject the standard reading relationship built into picture books.

In other words, although I do think that comics and picture books anticipate certain kinds of readers, one of the delightful areas of research that remains is to discover what happens to these power dynamics when children slide between the positions their books have prescribed for them. Does an advanced elementary student reading a picture book to a kindergarten student thwart the adult-child power hierarchy encoded in picture books, or is the older child merely rehearsing a position in that hierarchy that the book imagines for her? Is the child silently reading a picture book to herself rerouting the circuitry of power in picture books, or is she confirming an internalized dual audience that previous affectionate reading experiences have modeled for her? When my own children perform their version of my own performance of a picture book, have they usurped my power or paid homage to it? Picture books are deeply invested in what Foucault would term “discipline,” as they help to define for adults what appropriate childhood will be. Therefore, are children who read contrary to the positions to which their books invite them escaping, inverting, or practicing discipline?

Because comics and picture books tend to anticipate readers who experience the narrowing of meaning in different ways, there is a rule for telling the difference between the two. Fortunately, children don’t feel any obligation to follow it.

Notes

I am very grateful to this journal’s two anonymous reviewers, especially for the ideas in my conclusion, and I am indebted to Melendra Sutliff Sanders for more than one of the insights on librarians. I also want to thank Shaun Baker, Crystal Bandel, Sean Cochran, Whitney Davis, and Emily Midkiff, former students in a course on comics and picture books who read a late draft of this essay and provided copious advice on how to improve it long after they were supposed to be shut of me. Learning from students who understand the material well enough to give me advice on it has been one of my most rewarding experiences as a “teacher.”

¹This one is about picture books: Op de Beeck, *Suspended* xiii.

²This one is also about picture books: Nikolajeva 29.

³This one is about comics: Harvey 75–76.

⁴And note that Perry Nodelman, a self-described “picture book guy,” cites with approval Hatfield’s interpretation of comics as defined by tension (“Picture Book Guy” 439) . . . despite the opinion of Moebius, a fellow picture book scholar.

⁵The same idea surfaces in Shaun Tan’s recent comments on “a strong interest in irony, something that naturally emerges from discrepancies between word and image within the comic medium itself” (6). Considering that Tan has repeatedly called his own works picture books but is writing here about how his books may also be read as comics *because of their use of irony*, his idea that irony is natural in comics will not help a reader grappling with the overlap between the two forms.

⁶Barthes explains two techniques through which words can fix the meaning of images: anchoring and relaying. He gives the lion’s share of his attention to anchoring, and he mentions in passing that comics are more likely to use relaying. However, comics scholars have not been willing to follow Barthes’ lead exclusively (see, e.g., Abbott; and Kukkonen). Indeed, given that Barthes was far more interested in explaining what the combination of words and pictures meant for film than what it meant for comics—and he didn’t write about picture books at all—I’m going to stay away from his distinction between anchoring and relaying in order to focus on his broader comment about both, which is that cultures use structures such as language to narrow the possible meanings that images may have.

⁷Note that Arizpe and Styles’s book ignores this truism about picture books. Their interviews seem to be entirely with reading-age children, and the questions they ask those children are about how they read the books to themselves, a surprising project given that picture books are generally considered to be a form read by a proficient reader to a preliterate reader, not an emerging reader to her- or himself. These questions sit oddly alongside traditional picture book scholarship, which takes for granted that picture books are read to children rather than *by* them. But these questions also foreshadow the complicated consumption of the two forms that I will explore in my conclusion: picture books and comics *anticipate* specific readers and structure their narrowing of meaning accordingly, but children do not always read the way books—and adults—tell them to.

⁸The idea that picture books are for a proficient reader to read aloud to a preliterate reader has become so widespread in children’s literature scholarship that a full list of relevant references would become quickly tedious. However, it is worth noting that in his essay for the *ChLAQ* symposium on comics and picture books, Nodelman reiterates a point he has made implicitly and explicitly throughout his groundbreaking career on picture books: picture books, he writes, feature “an accompanying and paradoxical sense of a double addressee, both an implied child reader and an implied adult reader who chooses or shares the texts with the implied child . . .” (“Picture Book Guy” 444). Here, Nodelman reiterates the common observation that picture books are read by two simultaneous audiences with a specific relationship. Further, in the phrase “chooses or shares the texts,” he points to the primary agency given to the speaking reader, an agency that pays dividends in my definition of the two kinds of books.

⁹It strikes me that Michael Joseph’s essay on highbrow “graphic novels” might be read as working from similar assumptions. Joseph’s point is that the books he examines remind readers of the physical presence of books, that they foreground rather than obscure the way a book contains and communicates ideas. Probably the reading experience Joseph highlights is one best negotiated in solitude, as a private and likely silent reader repeatedly adjusts her perception of—or “blindness” to—“the book’s material characteristics” (457).

¹⁰Indeed, although this essay focuses on comics and picture books as they are conceived in the forms established during the early to mid-twentieth century, the fact that

comics became part of popular culture through newspapers and picture books through a trade book market also speaks to the comparative disposability of the two forms.

¹¹Comics as a form do not have the same historical connections with nostalgia that picture books do, but there is room to explore what nostalgia might mean in the reading venue of comic books. In many popular cases (the work of Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, and Grant Morrison, for example), comics seem to anticipate a reader who remembers firsthand a set of characters, creators, formal devices, and even tones now lost or out of fashion. Perhaps, then, nostalgia in comics must be understood not through a theory of words and images on a page, but through the history of the comics collectors, conventions, and specialty shops, all of whom colluded to create a culture in which comics readers could have access to a broader history that makes nostalgia possible. But again, nostalgia is rarely encoded in the form of comics in the same way that it is in picture books.

¹²See Nikolajeva 33 for what is perhaps the most recent observation of this fact.

¹³Phil Nel echoes Leaf's bafflement over the clearly contradictory complaints in a very useful blog post decades after the uproar itself ("Ferdinand at 75").

¹⁴Julia L. Mickenberg's history of children's literature and radical ideas makes a similar observation: "The more common experience for leftist cultural workers was to find something of a refuge in the children's literature field, which, except in rare instances, tended to operate below the radar of red-hunters" (127).

¹⁵Marcus also mentions the authors of textbooks as targeted by McCarthy-era paranoia. Textbooks are a form beyond the scope of my study, but it is one that I suspect anticipates periods of unmediated reading during which children are presumed to create and absorb the meaning of words on their own. Textbooks were therefore in a position to give information to children through words that children would chaperone without adult supervision, so it makes sense that they were subject to the scrutiny Marcus describes.

¹⁶This relationship is much messier earlier in the genealogy of comic books. Comic books—the magazine-style floppies—were originally compiled of old comic strips, and comic strips themselves featured prominently in the middle-class homes of early twentieth-century America. There, comic strips were read by adults and children, sometimes together, sometimes alone, sometimes silently, sometimes aloud. Marcus's comment about librarians' perception of the "subliterary" quality of comics refers directly to the emergence of magazine-style comics, not comic strips, so what link did librarians admit or reject between literacy and the comic strips of the bourgeois home?

¹⁷It is also no accident that the period during which US librarians began embracing comics in the library—the late 1990s and early 2000s—is exactly the period during which square-bound trade editions of comics became reliably available. These trade album editions, often called "graphic novels," have a form that can stand up to the repeated readings endured by a book in a public library, and the square binding allows for the sort of labeling required by standard cataloging.

¹⁸Interestingly, long before a significant number of them were willing to support graphic novels, librarians *did* hand out prose novels, a form that also routinely anticipated a solitary reader. There are several possible reasons for this exception to the prejudice that extended to comics. First, prose was more clearly related to literacy than were comics, simply because the kind of literacy recognized as legitimate required the skill of reading printed words, a skill sharpened and rewarded by prose novels. Second, whereas novels were, by the first half of the century, recognized as the choice of literate, cultured readers, many aspects of comics (their trademark violence and thin plots, for example) were hallmarks of subliterary texts. It is also possible that librarians saw novels as texts for solitary readers over which they as professionals had significant control: not only were the physical objects of novels more amenable to the organizational strategies of libraries, but librarians had been selecting, recommending, and reviewing children's novels since the late nineteenth century, and they had been bestowing awards on their favorite prose novels since at least the first quarter of the twentieth century. Finally, Groensteen has

suggested that comics attract ire simply because they have images ("Why Are Comics" 33). Picture books, of course, also have images, so Groensteen's explanation isn't fully satisfying, but he may be on to something. Perhaps the ubiquity of images in comics facilitated their perception as subliterary, as easier to read than prose and therefore not participating in the advancement of literacy at which both picture books (which were for children who couldn't read prose anyway) and novels (which required a facility with the written word akin to the kind of literacy taught in classrooms) excelled.

¹⁹Anita Silvey relates a relevant personal experience with "the selling sample" of Chris Van Allsburg's *Jumanji*: "... only the drawings are in place because the words still needed to be finalized. Even without a line of text, you can 'read' the story in the art, all of it created with the lowly pencil."

²⁰Indeed, Groensteen has repeatedly downplayed the importance of actual words in comics (see *System 9* for an early example).

²¹See, for example, Hilary Chute's work on how "[c]omics frames provide psychic order . . ." ("History" 343).

²²And, lest we become too comfortable with how conveniently this insight sets the two apart, she follows this sentence by writing, "Both the picture book and the comic qualify as species of graphic narrative" (*Suspended* xiv).

²³Nodelman's newest essay on the subject echoes op de Beeck's observation, even offering the idea that comic pages are like mosaics, whereas picture books are more like captioned paintings on a museum wall ("Picture Book Guy" 438).

²⁴And my students aren't alone. Mel Gibson repeatedly and unapologetically refers to *The Arrival* as a graphic novel (102, 107).

²⁵Joseph has come to a similar conclusion about reading ages and picture books: "At the cusp of adolescence, when children have gained intermediary reading competence, many will tend to reject picture books precisely because the genre symbolizes a stage of development, or a childish identity, they feel they have outgrown. Rejecting picture books has become a rite of passage" (454).

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