

Gutter Talk and More

Picturebook Paratexts, Illustration, and Design at Storytime

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In the summer of 2001, the Eric Carle Museum of Picturebook Art (www.carlemuseum.org) was still more than a year away from its grand opening in Amherst, Mass., and I was four credits shy of completing my MA in children's literature at Simmons College.

I'd spent the prior academic year traveling back and forth between my home in western Massachusetts and Simmons' campus in Boston to take classes. Although it tickled me that the bus line I used to commute across the state was named for Peter Pan, and although I'd put those many hours on the turnpike to good use by completing course readings, I was looking for an opportunity to pursue an independent study closer to home to round out my degree and launch me into a career path. When I heard that The Carle had an information office close to home in Northampton, I was intrigued. I took my then four-year-old son Rory to the office's weekly, volunteer-led storytime and decided to throw my hat in the ring to see what I might be able to do to help The Carle while achieving my goals.

That day, I had the good fortune of meeting The Carle's founding director Nick Clark, and together we devised a slate of projects for me to carry out. This work not only allowed me to complete my degree, it also established the foundation for my development of the "whole book approach," a storytime model

that The Carle has embraced as a cornerstone of its educational and professional development programming and that I've delighted in using and disseminating throughout my tenure with the museum.

Put simply, the whole book approach is an interactive storytime model that invites children to engage with the picturebook as a visual art form by allowing the oral reading of the text to be punctuated by questions and responses to illustration, design elements, and what scholars Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott refer to as "picturebook paratexts."¹ In their book *How Picturebooks Work*, they devote an entire chapter to picturebook paratexts, noting the following:

Almost nothing has been written about the paratexts of picturebooks such as titles, covers or endpapers. These elements are however, still more important in picturebooks than in novels. If the cover of a novel serves as a decoration and can at best contribute to the general first impact, the cover of a picturebook is often an integral part of the narrative, especially when the cover picture does not repeat any of the pictures inside the book. The narrative can indeed start on the cover, and it can go beyond the last page to the back of the cover. Endpapers can convey essential information, and pictures on the title pages can both complement and



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contradict the narrative . . . the contribution of paratexts to the picturebook is clearly highly significant, especially since they frequently carry a substantial percentage of the book's verbal and visual information.²

Because of my graduate studies, I knew about the importance of considering all of the parts of a picturebook (text, art, design, and production elements) in my own writing, reading, and evaluation. But when I started leading storytimes in The Carle's information office, I initially maintained the sort of approach I'd used as a volunteer in my son's preschool or in the public library where I worked part-time—I chose a theme to link the books, songs, fingerplays, and craft activity I'd planned for the day. Children sat and listened to the books, and engaged in the other activities, and we talked about the books when we were done reading them. It was all quite fun.

But then I started thinking intentionally about the fact that I was leading programs on behalf of an art museum, and I stopped and wondered why I was bothering to structure storytimes around snow or bunnies or planes or giraffes, or whatever theme I'd chosen for the week. I wasn't a classroom teacher, after all, so I didn't have curricular objectives to meet through themes. I was working for an art museum, so shouldn't I instead simply focus on presenting the best picturebooks possible to children and inviting them to share what they thought and wondered about them?

Thinking about the intersection between my life as a mother and my storytime practice also made me think more deeply about how I was leading storytimes that fall. At home, I didn't choose books to read with Rory that were all about the same theme. Nor did we sing songs between books to “stay on task.” We just read books together and talked about them as we did so.

I never asked him to hold his questions and comments until the end of the book. I didn't tell him to let me keep reading the page before flipping back to compare it to its predecessor. His comments, questions, ideas, and reactions were just as important to our reading as the words, pictures, and design of the book were. How could I bring this sort of interactive, child-centered feeling into a group program? How could I allow children to experience something of a home-like feeling of reading aloud in a group setting at a museum or in a library or classroom?

Inspired by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine's Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), an inquiry-based approach to looking at art that The Carle planned to implement in its galleries, I began shifting myself away from thinking about storytime as performance to storytime as book discussion.³ VTS turns the traditional museum docent tour on its head by having the group leader ask visitors open-ended questions about the art on the wall instead of having him tell the group about the art they view.

The discussion is guided by these questions, “What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?”⁴ I certainly knew that I couldn't and shouldn't lead twenty-minute VTS discussions on every page in a picturebook. That would be deadly. But I could shift from what literacy

experts call “performance storytimes” to “co-constructive storytimes.”⁵ In the performance approach, the children and teacher engage in conversation mostly before and after the reading, and the talk that occurs in this approach is mainly analytical. In the co-constructive approach, there is a large amount of talk *during* the reading of the book, and most of the talk involves analyzing the story. This is the sort of model that the Public Library Association (PLA) and ALSC adopted when they embraced dialogic reading as the foundation of their joint Every Child Ready to Read initiative program, and as I learned more about VTS and dialogic reading, I was heartened by the research-based evidence that supported stopping and talking about a book during a reading as ways of enhancing comprehension, engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and literacy skills.⁶

Ultimately, where dialogic reading is often referred to as “hear and say reading,” reflecting the fact that children hear something read aloud or hear a related question and say something in response, I began to articulate the whole book approach as what might be described as “see, hear, and say reading,” by intentionally placing the emphasis of my questions and prompts on the illustration, design and production elements of the picturebook as an art form.⁷ This made sense due to The Carle's focus on visual literacy in its programming and its mission to engage visitors with the art of the picturebook. But this also seemed to make good developmental sense when I considered the children themselves. Most of them, after all, could not read text, but they were working hard at reading pictures. We've all seen babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and emergent readers flipping through the pages of a picturebook “reading” it after all. Children are reading pictures for meaning, for delight, and for information well before they can decode text. In a sense, as I developed the whole book approach for use with pre-readers and with emergent readers, I was trying to meet them where they were and to empower them to realize the potential of the picturebook as an art form that engages them visually and aurally. As I used this model with children who had mastered independent textual reading, I found that I was, in a sense, inviting them back into the artistic realm and encouraging the development of their visual literacy and critical-thinking skills.

My first step in this movement toward co-constructive storytimes was to do away with themes. This was positively liberating! I no longer worried about finding a third giraffe or farm or new baby book to round things out; I simply chose books that I loved. And then I started to think more about why I loved them. After all, if The Carle's objective was to support people's engagement with and appreciation of picturebook art, how could I use storytime as a means to this end? How could I invite children to critically engage with picturebooks while we read them at storytime? Could I create a dynamic at storytime that would allow them to talk and ask questions about what they saw happening in the pictures and how this related to the text as I read aloud? What would happen if I really backed off and let this start happening before the reading of the text in the book proper even began by inviting them to consider picturebook paratexts? And how could I not only facilitate such discussions during a reading, but scaffold their observations and questions with context for the picturebook as an art form?

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My questioning required me to make a bit of a paradigm shift in my thinking about my work as a storytime leader as I began articulating the difference between reading *to* children and reading *with* children, and started to shed myself of the role of storyteller to become a picturebook-discussion facilitator for young children. Don't get me wrong—I am not saying that this approach to reading aloud is the best or only way to read picturebooks with children, and I certainly appreciate the importance of and enjoy performance storytimes. This is just another way of thinking intentionally about storytime as it bridges verbal and visual literacy, and it's been remarkably rewarding work.

The biggest lesson I had to learn in starting to develop and lead whole-book-approach storytimes was to slow down my progression into the book proper—to delay “once upon a time,” in other words, to allow children to read all of the visual parts of the picturebook that precede the verbal text. I started with the endpapers of Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* I simply pointed to them, named them and, following the title's lead, asked children what they saw. At first I simply heard them say that they saw “lots of colors” as they took in Carle's bright horizontal bars of color, and I connected this observation to the book's focus on naming and showing colors to the reader. Then one day, when I slowed down enough to let a child expand upon this observation, I heard, “That's the order of the colors of the animals in the book.”

The other children nodded, but I just sat there dumbly staring at the endpapers. Here was a book I'd read at home and at work hundreds (thousands?) of times, and yet I'd never noticed this. I'd seen that the endpapers comprised Carle's palette, but I'd never recognized that they were a graphic table of contents.

“You're absolutely right,” I responded when I recovered, and I rededicated myself to slowing down and letting storytime become discussion time. I realized that there was a lot I wasn't seeing, and that I needed to give children the time and space to share and explore all that *they* could see. Not only did this enrich their own group reading experiences, it allowed me to see and appreciate picturebooks in ways I couldn't have achieved on my own.



Children have seen prison bars in the stained glass endpapers of Doreen Rappaport and Bryan Collier's *Martin's Big Words* moving our discussion about hope and justice and peace to include attention to struggle and injustice and courage; they've seen the color of the protagonist's dress in Marla Frazee's *Hush, Little Baby*; and they've seen the holes that the caterpillar eats through the foods in the painted tissue papers that decorate the endpapers of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

But back to *Brown Bear* for a moment. During a visiting storytime that I led in a kindergarten classroom a few years ago, just as our discussion about the endpapers was winding down, a little girl piped up and said, “I see a sunset.”

I'd never heard *that* before, and so I asked, “What do you see that makes you say you see a sunset here?”

“At the top it's all dark and then the red and yellow are the setting sun, and then the blue is like water, and the green is grass, and then the purple is flowers, and then the white and black are maybe a road . . .” and she petered out. But this representational reading of a landscape into Carle's abstract endpaper composition set the stage for an hour-and-fifteen minute reading of *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* in that kindergarten classroom, as children imagined the animals depicted in the book frolicking about in the endpaper landscape, seeing each other.

I've found that children much younger than this can also respond to design elements with great gusto. Comparing landscape format and portrait format picturebooks is something that I've invited toddlers and preschoolers to do with great success. They understand and articulate that *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* adopts a landscape format because this best echoes the form of the caterpillar itself and because the horizontal orientation of the book bespeaks the page-to-page journey of the caterpillar as it makes its way through the foods lined up on successive pages.



It's a small leap for them to realize that most picturebooks about journeys have this format because of the horizontal form's visual implication of movement through time and space in conjunction with the page turns. Think about the Polar Express going on its journey or Peter walking through his neighborhood on a snowy day.

On the other hand, books that adopt a portrait, or vertical, format also invite children to make meaning of form. “That

book is so tall because of the Heightful Tower,” a four-year-old regular attendee of storytime exclaimed when I brought out Ludwig Bemelmans’ *Madeline* to read one morning. Indeed, Bemelmans’ depictions of Parisian cityscapes throughout the book demand the portrait format as the city becomes as much a focus of the book as Madeline herself is.

Black Cat and *Harlem*, illustrated by Christopher Myers, also use the portrait format to accommodate and embrace the heights of the buildings in his work depicting the beauty of urban landscapes. His book *Wings* further necessitates the height of the portrait format as it tells the story of a boy who can fly. “The book goes up because Ikarus goes up to fly,” commented a second grader during one reading.

The Front Cover and Beyond

Jacket art is another accessible picturebook paratext to explore with children. Instead of telling children what I see in a book’s jacket art to scaffold their entry into the reading, I often use VTS questions to ask them what they see. This allows them to build knowledge, ask their own questions—and it offers them a reference point as we progress into the book proper.

“That looks like a pizza box, all square and white,” commented a child when we read William Steig’s *Pete’s a Pizza*. Another child built on this observation by commenting on the roundness of Pete’s head saying, “He does look like a pizza!”



Perhaps the most powerful commentary on jacket art came from a group of second grade students discussing Allan Say’s *Grandfather’s Journey*. VTS questions prompted this group to note the dissonance between the titular word “grandfather” and the youthful figure on the front of the jacket.

“He’s too young to be a grandfather,” one child said.

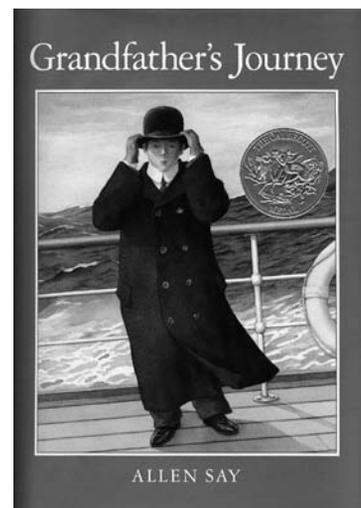
“So maybe that’s when Grandfather was little and the book will be about his whole life,” another offered.

And, indeed, it is—this book is about physical journeys across an ocean and throughout the United States, but it also tells the story of a temporal journey through Grandfather’s lifetime, and about the emotional journey of the mostly offstage narrator (Allan Say himself) coming to understand and appreciate his grandfather and the similarities they share as people navigating a bicultural existence.

On this latter point a child remarked, “Look how the front of the jacket has Grandfather on the ship in the Pacific Ocean,” after we had finished reading the book during an outreach visit

I led in her classroom some years ago on behalf of The Carle. “He really is between Japan and the United States in that picture, and that’s how he always feels even when he’s not on the boat.”

This particularly astute, sensitive remark provoked a discussion in the class about immigration stories from the students’ families which led to the teacher creating a mini-unit about family journeys to embrace her students’ investment in this theme.



Although conventional wisdom suggests that we shouldn’t judge a book by its cover (or jacket), providing children with the time and space to reflect on jacket art can enhance their engagement with picturebooks at the start of a reading and give them rich opportunities to revisit major themes, ideas, and questions at the end of a book.

In evaluating the importance of good jacket design in the picturebook form, here are some questions to consider:

- Why or how does this image (or those images) represent the book as a whole?
- Why do you think the artist used wraparound art? Or why dual image art?
- What meaning can we make of these decisions?
- How does the jacket act as a poster for the book, pulling us in as readers, providing information and provoking questions and anticipation?

Allowing children to consider these same sorts of questions acknowledges that they are learning to read pictures as surely as they are learning to read words and invites them to express what they know and understand, and what they puzzle about at the very beginning of a shared reading. Indeed, I’ve found, time and again, that inviting children to read picturebook paratexts and design elements such as jacket art, the endpapers, and book formats before we even get to the reading of the book proper, creates a tremendous sense of investment in the storytime and in working together to make meaning of words, pictures, and design throughout our shared time.

As I became comfortable with this approach, storytime began to feel a lot less like crowd control or like I was walking a knife edge trying to keep kids’ attention. I attained control by turning a lot of it over to the children themselves: they set the pace for our readings and I began to think of interruptions as signs of engagement—whether comments and questions were provoked by insights or by puzzlements. Of course, I also developed strategies to facilitate our talks since at times children’s comments seemed to come from left field or devolve into what I call “I have a dog” scenarios.

For example, when I turn to the page depicting the white dog in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* I often hear comments like, “I have a dog!” or “My grandma has a dog,” or “I wish I had a dog.”

To handle this sort of response, I try to quickly identify a child who has been quiet throughout the reading, and I employ a quick set of responses and questions to first validate the personal response and then redirect the group back to the book. For example, “I heard you say you have a dog. Is it white like this one?”

Or, if I feel like part of the group is engaged in our discussion but others are starting to lose steam, I fall back on what I call a “1-2-3 page turn,” by saying something like, “We’ve had so much to say about the endpapers, but I think we’re ready to move to the next page as a group. Everyone count to three with me and I’ll turn the page.” I’ve found that providing children with this semblance of control is much more effective than shushing the group or simply turning the page on my own and telling them to pay attention.

Turning to front matter pages (half title, title, dedication, and copyright pages) often affords the group opportunities to make meaning of art that might identify an important motif in the story or might even begin the story with a visual narrative before the start of the verbal text. I once heard illustrator Robert Rayevsky remark at a children’s literature conference at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, “I am an artist, and so if I see empty space on the title page, I want to fill it.” I took this to mean front matter matters, and it certainly does! Look for example at Marla Frazee’s *Hush, Little Baby*, in which the frontispiece illustration opens the story by introducing the family at the heart of the book and the peddler whose wares (a mockingbird, looking glass, dog named rover, etc.) will be used to hush the baby; the doublespread title page art introduces the conflict (that the little girl is jealous of the attention her baby brother gets from Mama and Papa) with its composition separating the little girl on the verso page from her family on the recto page, with the gutter between them; and the dedication page shows the girl’s willful, emotional response when she gives the baby’s cradle an angry shove and makes him cry. This visual narrative transforms what reads like a delirious, sleep-deprived parent’s catalog of bribes to sooth a crying baby into an actual story. Without these pages, we don’t know why the baby is crying, or where the girl would get the idea of approaching the peddler for things to try to calm her baby brother.

When reading this book with children, we often end up having a very rich discussion about what the little girl should do when she is clearly beside herself with jealousy on the title page. Children usually end up saying something like, “She should use her words and tell her mom she wants attention.”

At this point, I like to turn the book to myself saying, “Let me just take a peek at the next page to see what she does.” I then turn to the dedication page, register my shock at the shoved cradle, close the book and say, “Oh dear! She made a bad choice. We can’t read this book. This is too naughty.”

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I, of course, do read this book with them, but this technique of turning the book to myself works like a charm in both underscoring the power of the sequential narrative and in heightening the group’s engagement. They definitely want to see the naughty thing that the girl has done, and they become acutely invested in allying themselves with her as she seeks out ways to right her wrong on subsequent pages.

But more often than not, I don’t need to implement these strategies. By using picturebook paratexts to invite and validate children’s responses to the books and actively seeking to provoke their engagement with the book as a visual art form, I routinely get comments that spark lively, vibrant conversations with a group.

For example, if I merely invite a group to “watch the gutter” while reading Chris Raschka’s *Yo! Yes?* I get children clamoring to describe how Raschka, like Frazee in the earlier discussed doublespread title page illustration from *Hush, Little Baby*, not only accommodates the gutter, but uses it to inject dramatic tension in his story about two boys who are strangers but become friends by book’s end. One boy is on the verso page, the other on the recto, with the gutter separating them. This holds true until the boy on the recto page accepts the other’s overture of friendship and he crosses the gutter to join his new friend of the verso page. This line of discussion and observation often opens the door to a discussion about expressive versus descriptive use of color as children observe how the background color that Raschka uses shifts from cool blues to warm yellow by the end.

Often, however, I get the most exciting responses to picturebooks when I do absolutely nothing to prompt responses other than read the text and show the pictures. Comments like, “I know it’s a flamingo, but it looks like an elephant.”

I was reading Eric Carle’s *10 Little Rubber Ducks* to a group of children and adults at The Carle, and although I pride myself on leading interactive storytimes and thinking on my feet when questions and comments seem to come from left field, I was stumped by this child’s comment. Holding the book out to face the group in front of me I wondered if two creatures could be more dissimilar in appearance than a flamingo and an

elephant. I mean, really. I resorted to VTS questions and asked, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

“Well, the neck is all curved like an elephant’s trunk, and the body is like the elephant’s head looking sideways.”

“Yes,” another child piped up, “and the bent-up leg could sort of be like a tusk.”

I looked at the picture and suddenly could see the elephantine profile for myself. We spent the rest of the storytime talking about the other pictures in the book, breaking them down into their shapes to see what might be hidden within Carle’s brightly colored collages. I read the words of the story too, but the child who’d seen the flamingo’s inner elephant opened up a new way to consider the book’s pictures even as they worked alongside the words of the story. While the kindergarten class that I mentioned earlier had taken an abstraction and read representation into it with their vision of a sunset sky, this child took representational art and broke it down to abstract parts, inviting the group to do the same and setting the stage for some remarkable visual thinking.

Sometimes allowing children the time and space to talk about what they see during storytime reveals not their insights, but points of confusion. *Brown Bear* was the source of a particularly fascinating discussion about art that bleeds off the page when I read this book with a group of preschoolers. I had planned to use questions to prompt a discussion about how Carle accommodates the gutter of the book in this doublespread composition by shifting the teacher’s face over to the recto page instead of having the gutter bisect her face, but instead this picture provided an opening for discussing something else—how art can bleed off a page.

We take it for granted that they don’t simply see a close-up illustration of someone’s face as a disembodied head, or as in *Brown Bear*, in the case of the picture of the teacher, a very strangely coifed woman. This picture always gets a big reaction—“She looks mean!” is a frequent response, or, “Why is she so angry?” or, “Her lipstick is funny!”

I’d heard all of these comments and slight variations many times. But in one preschool classroom a little boy looked at the picture of the teacher and announced, “She has a really flat hairdo.”

I immediately understood his misperception and bit my tongue to keep from laughing out loud as I wondered how many other children have struggled with this page’s composition and have come to similar conclusions about one teacher’s bad hair day.

You see, this picture, unlike all of the others preceding it, allows the figure to break the page. The teacher is depicted as near-to life-size, allowing the viewer to see her only from the shoulders up to the base of her hairdo. I look at this picture and imagine that she has a bun in the back that forces the hair at the front of her head to poof up. But the child looking at this picture thought that the teacher had a flat-top because we cannot see the top of the poof; we must imagine it rising up beyond the confines of the page.

“Hmmm . . .” I said. “Look at the bottom of the picture. Does her body end right there, or does she have more body outside of the picture?”

“No one just has shoulders. You’d be dead,” another child said to me with a withering look.

“Right,” I continued. “So, does she have to have such a flat hairdo, or can you imagine a style that goes up beyond the edge of the top of the page?”



Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? Illustrated by Eric Carle. Copyright ©1967. All rights reserved. Image reproduced with permission.

“She has an Afro!” another child said.

“No. She has Texas hair,” said yet another preschooler—did I detect a slight drawl? I can’t be sure.

On the flip side of this visual perception quandary, sometimes a doublespread shows too much for children to grasp, rather than too little. Continuous narrative and simultaneous succession are the terms used to describe a series of pictures of a single character in a single doublespread or page opening.

Many young children completely misunderstand this convention and instead of seeing one Curious George gallivanting about the facing pages, they think that there are suddenly many tailless monkeys making mischief.

“Lots and lots of Georges!” one toddler said during a storytime when I read this classic picturebook. And, really, there *are* lots of Georges right there on the pages, right? Who’s to blame a toddler for not understanding that this is just one George depicted over time and throughout space?

At just under four years old, my daughter Emilia had a similar misperception of the sequence of pictures in *And Tango Makes Three* on the page that depicts the hatching egg. She didn’t understand that the many eggs in a row were actually one egg depicted in a time sequence and showing the hatching of baby Tango.

“Now those daddies have lots of eggs for babies!” she exclaimed.

Even separate illustrations of the same character on facing pages can pose a challenge to children learning to understand the conventions of sequential art in picturebooks. While reading Ezra Jack Keats's book *The Snowy Day* at a Carle Museum storytime, I paused at the page opening depicting Peter climbing up "a great big heaping pile of snow" and sliding down the other side. In standard left-to-right progression, the verso page shows the climbing action while the recto shows the sliding. I invited children to act out these motions with their hands, but then a 3-year-old boy announced, "Look. It looks like that boy's mother and father had two little boys."

Two boys out on a snowy day? Or one boy out on a snowy day?

Two daddy penguins with many babies? Or two daddy penguins with one baby?

One teacher having a really bad hair day? One teacher rockin' some serious Texas hair?

Helping children to tease out the visual cues that determine the answers to these questions is a crucial part of helping them to understand how pictures work with words to tell the stories in their books. After all, think of what a different story *Curious Georges* or *And Tango and Her Dozen Siblings Make Fifteen* would be. Because I believe that children are learning to read pictures as surely as they are learning to read words, I want whole-book-approach storytimes to give them the opportunity to build their picture reading skills by inviting them to talk about things they don't understand in addition to what they do grasp. After all, if children get hung up on misperceptions about visual narratives, how will they be able to follow the interdependent verbal narratives of picturebooks?

One day I was reading Mo Willems' *Knuffle Bunny* at storytime, and a young child looked quite perplexed when I read the words, "She did everything she could to show how unhappy she was."⁸ "Why does she have so many arms?" he asked, looking at the picture of Trixie's daddy carrying her, hollering and flailing about, through the park and without her bunny.

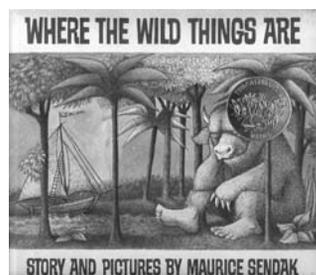
He had clearly misunderstood that Willems was drawing upon the comic art convention of showing multiple, blurred limbs with motion lines to indicate fast movement. Instead, this preschooler thought that Trixie was so upset that she sprouted new appendages! Before I could say anything, another, slightly older child said, "She just has two arms like us, but she's wagging them all around," and then we all waved our own arms about to see how they looked blurry as well.

My goal in engaging children with the whole book isn't to undermine what Hugh Walpole, in his "Reading: An Essay" describes as "ecstatic reading," when one becomes completely absorbed in a book, versus "critical reading" when one is more detached from the book in order to engage in analysis.⁹ Arthur Krystal expands on this duality in an essay from Anne Fadiman's edited collection *Rereadings: Seventeen Writers Revisit Books They Love*, saying,

Walpole conveniently forgot that reading evolves (devolves?) into the more or less critical. Schooling and swooning don't mesh, and once we begin to differentiate the rhetorical devices that stylistically and thematically inform different narratives, the innocence, the thrill, and the trusting acceptance disappear. Replaced, to be sure, by the edifying feeling that one is learning something valuable. And of course, there is pleasure to be had from analysis, but it is a more complicated pleasure than giving oneself over completely to stories. However you slice it, reading critically is a more solemn affair than reading ecstatically.¹⁰

After thinking a lot about this, I've decided to question this presumed duality between ecstatic and critical reading. I see my work as aimed at fostering what might be called ecstatic criticism as I try to support children's engagement with the picturebook as an art form. Much of this work involves getting out of the way and slowing down the pace of the reading, in part by directing children's attention to paratexts, design, and illustration and seeing what these visual aspects of the book provoke in children as they merge what they see with what they hear by drawing on prior knowledge and forming what is called the composite text in their minds.

Over the past nine years, I've seen the engagement that this sort of inquiry has provoked in students in outreach programs with more than twenty-five thousand participants to date and in storytimes at The Carle. The children who tend to have a harder time during traditional storytimes seem to get a lot out of thinking visually, stopping and starting the narrative, and working with the group as a whole. The aural learners in the group, however, sometimes are resistant. "Can't you just *reeeead* the book?!" I've heard on occasion. "We are reading the book, we're reading the pictures too," is my standard response.



I had such a back-and-forth with a third grader during an outreach storytime on behalf of The Carle. She told me she'd already read *Where the Wild Things Are* "a million times" and was resistant to my efforts to encourage her and her classmates to watch the airframes

around the pictures. But as we moved forward with reading the book (its words, pictures, and yes, those changing airframes that direct the design of the pages), I started to see a light go on in her eyes.

"They're getting bigger!" she exclaimed after we'd turned a few pages to see the airframes diminish as the pictures take up more and more space on the verso page and then spill over onto the recto, culminating in the three full-bleed doublespreads at the heart of the book before the white space returns and the pictures shrink in size.

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spoke of the Reys' contribution to children's literature by quoting her mentor, Erik Erikson:

It is human to have a long childhood; it is civilized to have an even longer childhood. . . .Margret and Hans Rey have contributed to that 'longer childhood' for each of us. By giving us books that pull children onto the laps of parents and grandparents, Curious George and the Reys have given us generations of childhood.¹³

Those who were able to see the Curious George exhibit were able to share a longer childhood, so to speak, with their children and grandchildren. If there were no children to hide behind, they found a very fascinating exhibit in which the Reys' story was exquisitely told.

The Jewish Museum has borrowed more than one hundred items from the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, housed in the McCain Library and Archives at the University of Southern Mississippi, to bring the Reys' complete story to the New York audience. How appropriate for the show to be in the heart of the city they first called home in the United States. ☺

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Note: The de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi is the source of all items from the H. A. and Margret Rey Papers in the citations that follow.

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12. H. A. Rey, letter to Sally Grimes (dated May 6, 1975), H. A. and Margret Rey Papers, Box 210/Folder 1.
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"The pictures don't do that in my book at home," she reported, fascinated at this discovery and unable to believe that she'd missed such an integral part of the book's design in her millions of prior readings. I like to think that this was an opportunity to stretch her and others like her as learners, even as the techniques I use foster success in students who typically have a harder time sitting and staying engaged with a reading that does not emphasize the visual elements of a picturebook or promote discussion during a reading.

We spent the rest of that storytime talking about pictures breaking the page and about how a frame around a picture on a page can make you feel like you're on the outside looking in, but a picture without a frame can make you feel like you are right inside the picture world, a participant rather than a spectator. And I guess that's ultimately what I want children to be in whole-book-approach storytimes—participants, rather than spectators, ecstatic critics engaging with all that picturebooks have to offer and delighting in what they hear and see. ☺

References and Notes

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