

# InFORMed Reading

## Evaluating and Using Picture Books, Beginning Reader Books, and Illustrated Books

Megan Lambert

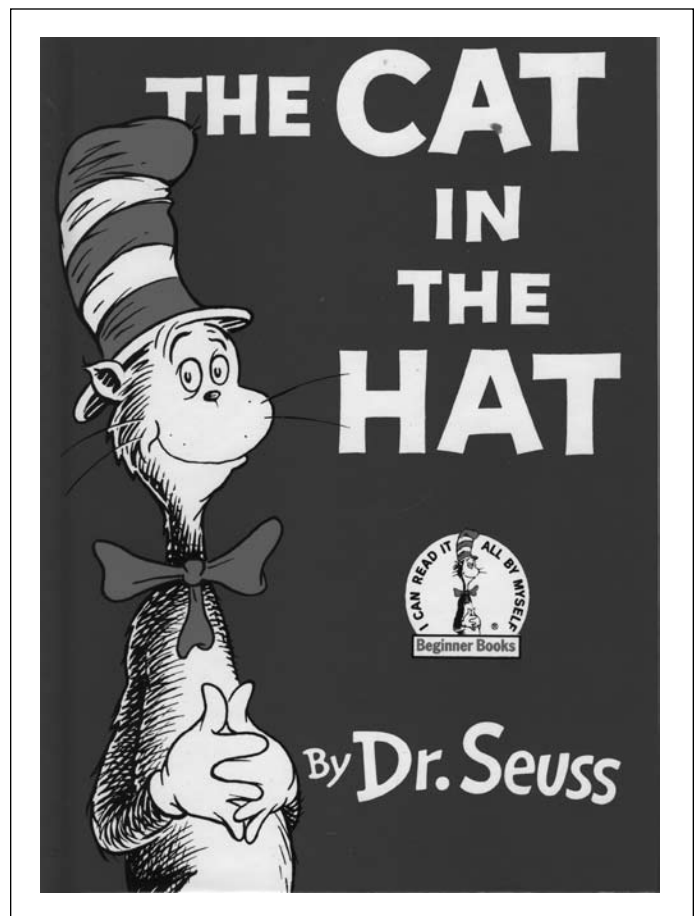
When *The Horn Book Magazine* asked celebrated author Avi to select a book he'd most like to see in the hands of a twenty-second-century child, he chose *The Cat in the Hat* as a "Future Classic" writing. "Since I am primarily a novelist, one might suppose I would choose from the veritable galaxy of star-bright twentieth-century novels to place into the hand of the 2101 child. Truly, there are many of them. But surely our future child will not be reading those novels unless he or she has already become a reader."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Dr. Seuss's name is synonymous with learning to read, largely due to the big splash made by that certain hatted feline; before *The Cat in the Hat*, beginning reader books were not-so-much-Fun with Dick and Jane, leading John Hersey to comment in a 1954 *Life Magazine* article that such titles were populated by "abnormally courteous and unnaturally clean boys and girls." He went on to ask, "Why should [children] not have pictures that widen rather than narrow the associative richness the children give to the world they illustrate—drawings like those wonderfully imaginative geniuses among children's illustrators—Tenniel, Howard Pyle, Dr. Seuss . . ."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Seuss took up this challenge with *The Cat in the Hat*, and the rest is history.

In recognition of the good doctor's key role in the emergence of the beginning reader book as a new category of children's book, in 2004 the American Library Association (ALA) established the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award,

given annually beginning in 2006 to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished contribution to the body of American children's literature known as beginning reader books published in the United States during the preceding year. The award is to recognize the author(s) and illustrator(s) of a beginning reader book who demonstrate great creativity and imagination in his/her/their literary and artistic achievements to engage children in reading.

"A person's a person no matter how small," Theodor Geisel, a.k.a. Dr. Seuss, would say. "Children want the same things we want: to laugh, to be challenged, to be entertained and delighted." Brilliant, playful and always respectful of children, Dr. Seuss charmed his way into the consciousness of four generations of youngsters and parents. In the process, he helped them to read.<sup>3</sup>



Cover image from *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss (Random House, 1957)

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Creating an award for a different category of book begs the question, what makes this category different? This question leads me, and other people who read, use, and write about children's literature to yet more questions including: Can a picture book be a beginning reader book? How is a beginning reader

standard picture book reading experience including three parties—the **picture book, the reader, and the listener and viewer**—and the standard beginning reader book experience as a reading transaction between **the book and the emergent and newly independent reader**.

*This tension between the word-focused reader and the composite text-focused listener/viewer presents the reader with an opportunity to change the dynamic of the picture book experience from one of reading to children to one of reading with children.*

different from an illustrated book? What distinguishes a picture book from an illustrated book?

These questions are important not only for those serving on award committees but also for adults engaging children with books as we consider collection management and organization, reading instruction, storytime programming, and supporting patrons' book selection. We can best address these questions by analyzing the three categories of books already identified (picture, beginning reader, and illustrated) in terms of their different forms and standards of use.

Leaving aside the illustrated book for a moment, one way to think about the differences between picture books and beginning reader books is to think of the

The picture book includes words and pictures that are interdependent: words leave spaces for the pictures to step in a vice versa. Therefore, in the triangular relationship noted in the previous paragraph, the reader reads the words out loud and the listener and viewer hears these words while looking at the corresponding images. This creates what British scholar Jane Doonan calls "the composite text"—the merging of the visual and the verbal to create a joint meaning in the mind of the listener and viewer.<sup>4</sup>

This is contrasted with the beginning reader book experience, in which an emergent or new reader independently decodes text with the support of corresponding images. The focus here is on the words and on pictures supporting words; the fact that the reader is decoding text and must look away from the picture to do so creates a different interaction between word and image—they are not simultaneous partners in making meaning as words and images are in the picture book experience.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that children can't get value out of reading picture books independently (when they are able), or that a beginning reader book could not also occupy the triangular relationship. Furthermore, a picture book with controlled text and attention to page opening composition and typography can function as a beginning reader. Indeed, one of the first Geisel Honor Books was a

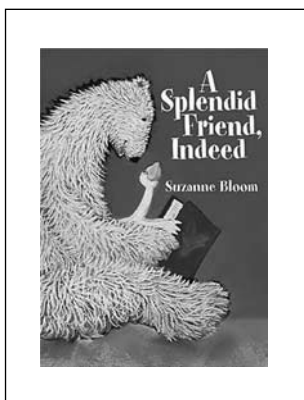
picture book: *A Splendid Friend, Indeed* by Suzanne Bloom.

But by identifying the standard use of these different forms we can better evaluate their merits and better make use of their different potentials. So now let's turn to an exploration of form. T. S. Eliot writes, "When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas, given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl."<sup>6</sup> In other words, limitations inspire creativity. Regarding the beginning reader book and the picture book as controlled forms allows us to evaluate how writers and authors work within the forms or work against them, and so we must first identify the controls.

In her book *From Cover to Cover*, Kathleen Horning identifies some of the hallmarks of the beginning reader book as:

- the use of sight words and compound words;
- the large size of typeface (eighteen points is standard);
- short sentence length (five words or so are standard);
- short line length in which longer sentences are broken up into more than one line;
- and the frequent use of patterned language including the use of alliteration, assonance, and rhyming.<sup>7</sup>

These hallmarks indicate the controls that are placed on the language of a beginning reader book—all in the service of the intended audience of emergent and newly independent readers. Such controls in a picture book text, while possible, are not a necessary limitation of the picture book form. That is, limiting the sophistication of a picture book text is unnecessary due to the presence of the reader (presumably an adult or an independent child reader) in the triangular relationship previously outlined. One reading of William Steig's sublime picture book texts contrasted with the equally sublime and yet controlled language of Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* books will demonstrate this.



Cover image from *A Splendid Friend, Indeed* by Suzanne Bloom (Boyd's Mills Press, 2005)

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Horning also notes that the placement of illustrations on the page of the beginning reader book as well as the presence of ample white space on all page openings are key to the successful design of this form. White space allows the emergent or newly independent reader to rest his eyes, and careful placement of the illustrations in relationship to the text allows for a back-and-forth reference between the words and the corresponding image as the picture supports the decoding and the comprehension of the text.

While the design of page openings in picture books is crucial to a book's success or failure, the same restrictions of form in the beginning reader book do not apply to the picture book. To explore this idea, compare Maurice Sendak's illustrations in the Little Bear series written by Elsa Minarik, to his pictures in *Where the Wild Things Are*. The former are beginning reader books, and the illustrations that Sendak created for them are carefully placed on the pages with ample white space. These illustrations support the text. The latter title is a picture book, and the pictures do not support the text in this book, they (to borrow Sendak's own word) "quicken" it, and some art bleeds off the page, while other images are contained by air frames, all in support of the visual narrative.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most quoted, succinct stab at defining a picture book comes from Barbara Bader's classic work of children's literature criticism, *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*: "the aesthetic success of the picture book hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page."<sup>9</sup>

It's hard to top that in the muddy task of defining what exactly the picture book is and what it isn't, and for the purposes of this piece, I will focus on Bader's first criterion about the picture book form—unless the picture book is wordless (a topic for a different article addressing the narrative potential of sequential illustration) the picture book is a dance between pictures and words, wherein each is an equal partner.

This is a hard sell in some circles, where

the word reigns supreme. Illustrator Marla Frazee once told me about a review of her book with Mary Ann Hoberman, *The Seven Silly Eaters*, which, although positive, failed to recognize the narrative contributions of the art. Hoberman's text never mentions the father in the story, he is solely the creation of Frazee's art, and the story never identifies the protagonist Mrs. Peters as a cellist, though Frazee's pictures cast her in this role; and yet, the review in question chalked these significant narrative contributions up to Hoberman's writing. "The pictures are telling the story too," Frazee said.<sup>10</sup> And indeed they are.

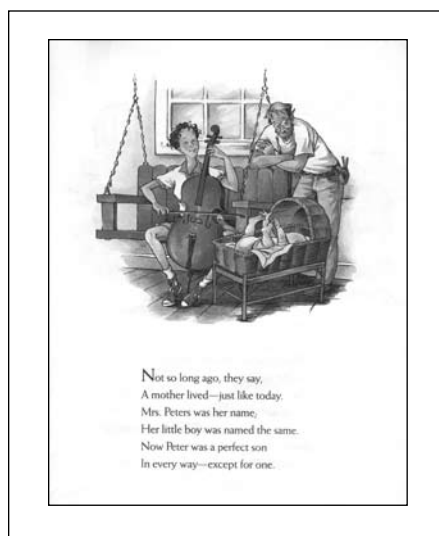


Illustration from *The Seven Silly Eaters* by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustration copyright 1997 by Marla Frazee, reproduced by permission of Harcourt.

This dance between pictures and words in the picture book form offers readers of picture books in the triangular relationship a particular challenge. The reader is text-focused, after all, showing the pictures to a child or a group while reading the words out loud. In a group it is doubtful that she can see the images as she reads, and with one child she cannot look at the image and read the words simultaneously; the reader therefore might be tempted to succumb to the quick pull of the text from page to page. Meanwhile, the child or group listening to her words is simultaneously viewing the art and merging the visual and the verbal to create the composite texts in their minds. In other words, they

are reading pictures as they also attend to the oral reading of the text. This is a more complex, and therefore, a slower process of constructing meaning. I am convinced that this is the root of many "interruptions" during classroom and library circle times and storytimes, or even during readings between an adult and one or just a few children, as children seek to comment on or make sense of what they are seeing and hearing. "Wait! Wait!" "Go back! Go back!" "Read it again!" We've all heard these lines as often as we've said "Once upon a time" and "The end."

This tension between the word-focused reader and the composite text-focused listener-viewer presents the reader with an opportunity to change the dynamic of the picture book experience from one of reading *to* children to one of reading *with* children, and to make use of the "interruptions" as evidence of engagement instead of asking children to wait until the end of the verbal narrative to share their comments, ideas, and questions. This is a prime focus of my work at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in storytime, outreach programs, and professional development trainings, and it centers on the idea that picture book experiences can move from being performances, presentations, or storytelling and into the realm of facilitated discussion about the interaction of words, images, and design in the picture book form. This means that reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* can take twenty minutes instead of five, but the level of engagement is astounding as children are invited to make meaning of verbal and visual narratives.

The museum refers to this interactive method of evaluating and sharing picture books as the Whole Book Approach, which draws upon Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine's Visual Thinking Strategies and the child-focused discovery methods of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education.<sup>11</sup> Its emphasis on a collaborative interpretive process of art and text as opposed to a top-down reading from reader to listener-viewer can be applied to the picture book experience between a single adult and a single child as well. A librarian participating in a Whole Book

Approach workshop at the museum once sheepishly commented something along the lines of, "I can't count how many times I've said to my three-year-old 'just let me read the book' when she is flipping backwards through the pages or interrupting the words to say something about the picture."<sup>12</sup> This mother, librarian, book-lover, and avid reader was trying to give her daughter the pleasure of a sustained verbal narrative, but she was doing so with the picture book form in which the verbal component is only half of the story. Ultimately, the Whole Book Approach suggests that there is a big difference between reading a picture book and finishing a picture book—the former includes reading of the images, text, design, and their interplay, and the later is focused primarily on completing a sustained oral reading of text.

On the other hand, the text of an illustrated book, as in a beginning reader book, takes center stage; however, in this form the text is not subject to the controls demanded by an emergent or newly independent reader and can therefore take on the verbal sophistication of a picture book text. Furthermore, an illustrated book's text usually does not leave the same amount of space for narrative images that a picture book demands. Such texts are therefore more descriptive and less dependent upon pictorial "quickenings," resulting in pictures for illustrated books that are relegated to a more decorative or illuminating role. They offer visual entrée to the words as asides or as moments of pause to reflect upon the verbal narrative; to make a musical metaphor: they don't act as equal partners in a duet—instead they are backup singers.

The standard reading experience of an illustrated book is one of two parties (the book and the reader), along the lines of the second book experience outlined previously between the book and the emergent or newly independent reader. This isn't to say that illustrated books cannot or should not be used as read-aloud material. Indeed, none of the ideas I present here is offered in a prescriptive spirit. Instead, this discussion of form and corresponding standard uses seeks to offer up ideas for evaluation and practice in the reading of diverse forms of children's literature.

After all, the goal of all this thinking about children's literature is, in the end, to connect children with literature. Children's literature demands a certain awkward remove from its intended audience: adults write, illustrate, publish, and often buy the books that children read, and adults often read books out loud for children to hear. This is a tremendous power, and it's one that we adults should be eager to give up by encouraging the child's emergent life as an independent reader. As outlined in the discussion about the Whole Book Approach and reading picture books *with* children instead of reading them *to* children, this can happen within the triangular picture book experience by allowing the child who is listening to the text to become a partner in the reading of the image as he or she constructs the composite text.

Picture books are often identified as the books that teach children to read. Certainly, some picture books can serve this function of the beginning reader book with controlled text and other devices to make decoding and comprehension accessible to new readers. But I think that the primary function of the picture book is to teach children to love books. This may sound a little hokey, but the picture book is the entry point to the world of books in general, while the beginning reader is the entry to independent book experiences. The "I Can Read It Myself" logo featuring the Cat in the Hat, which is placed on the upper-right-hand corner of one beginning reader book imprint, is a marketing device worth listening to. Meanwhile, picture books needn't be left behind as the independent reader moves on to longer sustained verbal narrative: their potential as an art form can extend the picture book's place in a reader's life indefinitely. Nor should we throw up our arms and vow to never read an illustrated book, a nonillustrated book, or a beginning reader book out loud again. We should simply be mindful of evaluating the merits of all the possible books experiences as we evaluate the books themselves in all their different forms. &

*Portions of this paper were included in the keynote address presented by Megan Lambert at the 2006 Integrated Arts Conference at Plymouth State University*

*titled "Silly, Subversive, Serious Stuff: The Work of Dr. Seuss" and in workshop sessions at the same conference titled, "The Dr. Is In: Dr. Seuss in the Classroom."*

## References and Notes

1. Avi, "Future Classics," *The Horn Book Magazine* 76, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 2000): 647.
2. Kathleen Horning, *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 122.
3. ALA, "Theodor Seuss Geisel Award." [www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bookmediaawards](http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bookmediaawards), under Geisel (accessed July 31, 2006).
4. Jane Doonan, *Reading Pictures in Picture Books* (Gloucestershire, U.K.: QY: Publisher?1993), 183.
5. These observations are grounded in my own practice of using picture books with young children and my experience reviewing many different kinds of children's books for various journals. Betty Carter's article "Privacy Please," *The Horn Book Magazine* 81, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2005): 525–34, adapted from her 2003 lecture "Form, Function, and Formats in Children's Literature," has also provided fodder for my thinking and is an excellent resource for further thinking about the ideas raised in this piece.
6. As quoted in Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 133.
7. Chapter 6 of Horning's *From Cover to Cover* examines the beginning reader book.
8. In his essay "The Shape of Music," Sendak writes, "To quicken means, for the illustrator, the task of first comprehending the nature of the text and then of giving life to that comprehension in his own medium, the picture," included in his collection of essays, *Caldecott and Company: Notes on Books and Pictures* (New York: Farrar, 1988), 3.
9. Barbara Bader, *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within* (New York: MacMillan, 1976), 1.
10. Unpublished notes from a private

conversation with illustrator Marla Frazee, February 2005.

11. Visit [www.vue.org](http://www.vue.org) for more information about this innovative approach to viewing and learning through art.
12. Unpublished notes from a participant's comment during a November 2005 workshop led by Instructor of Children's Literature Programs Megan Lambert, "From Cover to Cover: The Whole Book Approach to Exploring and Using the Picture Book As an Art Form" held at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, Amherst, Mass.