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Postmodernism in Picture Books

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“Everybody knows the story of the Three Little Pigs. Or at least they think they do. But I’ll let
you in on a little secret. Nobody knows the real story, because nobody has ever heard my side of
the story. ... I don’t know how this whole Big Bad Wolf thing got started, but it’s all
wrong.” -from Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s The True Story of the Three Little Pigs

Picture books were, once upon a time, books that told a story and taught a lesson, from left to
right, from cover to cover, with text that explained the illustrations and illustrations that fit with
the text. There were no interrupting narrators, conversations between characters and readers, or
“true” retellings of fairy tales. Enter the postmodern picture book. In this paper, I will discuss
scholarly characteristics ascribed to postmodern picture books, and I will also mention debates
surrounding the idea that there are postmodern picture books or that postmodern picture books
are a dying trend, wherein the idea of “postmodernesque” picture books is theorized. I will then
discuss several recent examples of postmodernism and the postmodernesque in picture books.

Postmodernism in picture books has been discussed by various authors increasingly in the
past decade. The postmodern picture book has been called a new subgenre (Goldstone, 2004),
and conversely it has been discussed as being a trend that is becoming “a thing of the
past” (Hutcheon, 2002, cited in Allan, 2013). But what exactly is postmodernism in picture
books? And why is it important to discuss postmodernism in picture books at all? Attempts at
defining postmodernism are inherently ironic since postmodernism is associated with rejecting
notions of universal truths and embracing fragmentation, anti-authoritarianism, and multiple
definitions or explanations. The mentality is that it’s a postmodern world, and everything is
subjective. It is more fruitful, then, to describe characteristics of postmodernism in picture books. In fact, picture books, with their dual narratives of text and illustration, are ideally situated to embrace postmodernism since one aspect of the genre is irony, easily achieved through contradicting words and pictures. Goldstone outlines five such characteristics of picture books that suggest various postmodern concepts: multiple story lines and perspectives suggest nonlinearity, playfulness borders on the absurd, irony lends itself to tone and contradictory story lines, self-referentiality exposes the artistic act of the book’s creation, and the reader is invited to tell the story along with the author (198). The last two characteristics manifest themselves in what I will henceforth refer to as “metafictive devices,” which can include an interrupting narrator or character, characters moving outside of the frame, and characters or authors depicted drawing the illustrations or writing the text.

According to LIS scholar Eliza Dresang’s “radical change” theory, postmodernism in picture books describes a radical departure from traditional picture books, which she correlates with radical changes in technology and in children born in a “digital age” (1999). These new children’s books may have some of the following characteristics: graphics in new forms and formats, nonlinear or non-sequential elements, multiple layers of meaning, interactive formats, multiple perspectives, previously unheard voices, youth who speak for themselves, subjects previously forbidden, settings previously overlooked, characters portrayed in new complex ways, and unresolved endings. These are all in line with concepts of postmodernism.
In *The Hidden Adult*, however, Perry Nodelman disagrees with Dresang’s term “radical change,” because he says that even though these books seem open in a postmodern way, they still lead to universal-style understandings and assumptions. He notes that it is important to consider the many similarities between postmodern picture books and their predecessors, because these newer books often lead to the same conventional morals and understandings of traditional books. For example, David Macauley’s *Black and White* is the watershed postmodern picture book, featuring multiple perspectives and nonlinear storytelling. The ultimate understanding that the reader comes to, however, is that a criminal mastermind eluded justice under the noses of people going about business as usual, hardly a “radical” notion. He says that even though there are differences in storytelling format, picture books retain many important similarities with their predecessors, which means that culture has not shifted so radically as some would argue.

Dresang does run the risk of readers assuming that she is saying that digital technologies caused these changes in picture books, which is too simple an explanation that ignores cultural influences of postmodernism. This kind of technological determinism is not what she is arguing, but rather that these changes in picture books coincide with technological changes. These scholarly debates are certainly interesting, but both Dresang and Nodelman have pointed to differences in storytelling, which is more the concern of this paper than the semantics of theory.

In a review of Dresang’s book on radical change theory, Anne Lundin even notes that “radical change equals postmodernism to this critic’s eyes,” but that perhaps Dresang’s terms are more friendly to her audience of “teachers, students, librarians, and ... a larger world” than the scholarly-sounding “postmodernism”. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will refer to both “postmodern picture books” and “postmodernism-influenced picture books” interchangeably.
Some authors have posited that postmodernism had its peak in picture books in the 1990s and is on its way out. Some current picture books incorporate postmodern elements that are beginning to feel gimmicky, although children readers just find them funny. Some picture books, however, incorporate just a few elements of postmodernism, creating what Cherie Allan calls “postmodernesque” picture books. Instead of challenging the naturalized universal truths as in postmodernism, this new postmodernesque genre challenges aspects of the postmodern world, such as globalization, mass media, and consumerism. Postmodernesque picture books do this using the now-familiar formats of postmodernism-influenced picture books.

Why even talk about picture books this way? Literary critique is a valuable skill that librarians can bring to awards committees, ensuring that the awards given by library associations are some of the highest honors, cementing librarians’ value to the literary community. Furthermore, picture books are tools of cultural socialization or “socializing agents,” (Goldstone, 198) and critiques of picture books can help us spot emerging trends, helping us to stay current in our skills and knowledge. More importantly, awareness of trends can help librarians find gaps in the literature for children, and call for publishers to publish more books about multicultural characters for example, or for more books with protagonists that challenge the status quo. Goldstone also argues that genre knowledge (about postmodernism as a genre) is important to enjoy and learn from picture books because such knowledge enables the reader to understand the unique qualities of a book, to interpret the dual interaction between text and picture, and to build vocabulary and beliefs about how that book should work. “Understanding genre builds a frame
of reference or schemata, which, in turn, leads to deeper comprehension and metacognitive
insights into the particular genre. It is this kind of knowledge that empowers students to
independently investigate new texts” (198). Goldstone is arguing that postmodern picture books
be considered a subgenre within picture books, but her same arguments about the importance of
genre knowledge could also be used for Allan’s new “postmodernesque” genre.

Goldstone discusses Jan Brett’s illustrations, referencing their dual story lines. Brett
illustrates the authors’ texts with traditional linear pictures, but also adds illustrations that are set
apart from the primary plot (as in Comet’s Nine Lives and The Mitten) and Goldstone notes that
“these are not stories for passive readers.” Readers must notice these secondary stories and
decide how the stories contradict or support each other (199). In Words About Pictures,
Nodelman discusses the concept of the implied or ideal reader for which authors and illustrators
produce picture books. This reader needs prior knowledge to understand picture books, which
can be quite a complex process, as Nodelman illustrates when he discusses how a child
understands the difference between a drawing of a banana and a real banana, but declares “that’s
a banana” for both. This is an example of language knowledge, but postmodern picture books
require knowledge of the possible structure of the text, including multiple perspectives or story
lines, deliberate contradiction between text and pictures, and metafictive devices.

The five characteristics that Goldstone outlines (listed above) provide a useful guide for
understanding picture books influenced by postmodernism, which can allow librarians to teach
children and students (the implied readers) how to use the semiotic codes so that they become
“ideal” readers. Goldstone notes that revealing the special structure of postmodern picture books will “promote successful text interaction, and in turn, provide confidence for readers to venture into new reading challenges” (203). Using Goldstone’s characteristics of a postmodern subgenre and Allan’s “postmodernesque” framework, I will examine several recent picture books and draw comparisons to a few older picture books that are widely considered to be postmodern.

In the wordless picture book *Inside Outside* (2013), Lizi Boyd creates a cozy world for the child protagonist and his/her dog. The child and dog play inside the house on one spread and outside the house on the next, as the seasons change. Die cuts serve as windows and allow the reader to look inside and outside the house, while birds outside become drawings of birds tacked to the wall inside as the page is turned. These die cut windows, along with the wordless format, invite readers to invent their own stories about what the child and dog are doing. At first glance, the book seems linear. It begins in winter and progresses through the seasons and completes the cycle with the book ending in winter. Both sets of endpapers, however, show a spring landscape with one mouse hidden in the scene, whereas two mice have been hidden on each spread throughout the rest of the book. One could argue, though perhaps it is a stretch, that the book is not telling a linear story, but that it captures various moments in time and that the winter in which it begins is the very same winter in which it ends. The invitation for the reader to tell the story along with the author, as well as the possible nonlinearity, are two postmodern characteristics, but this book does not use irony, self-referentiality, or humor. It is quite its own in its use of craft paper and muted colors, harkening back to days before mass media took all of our attention away from the simple pleasures inside and outside our homes. It thus lends itself quite
well to Allan’s “postmodernesque” description if it is read as advocacy for the simple pleasure of play.

Jon Klassen’s *This Is Not My Hat* (2012) and *I Want My Hat Back* (2011) both employ minimalist doses of irony. The illustrations use subtle changes in line and color to contradict the text. In both books, there is a character whose hat is stolen (a big fish and a big bear), which becomes the major conflict of each story. Because of the minimalist illustrations, readers are invited to figure out what the fish or the bear might be feeling since it is not overtly illustrated. Insightful readers (most readers) will be able to compensate for the minimal drawings and put their own emotions into the characters (just as they do when they are playing with stuffed animals, for example). In both books, the character that steals the hat gets eaten at the end, although it is a bit more subtle in *This Is Not My Hat*, in which the thieving fish swims into tall plants, and the big fish follows him in, only to emerge with the hat and without the little fish. In an interview with Amazon.com from December 5, 2012, Klassen says that the ending of *This Is Not My Hat* “is very much implied” and it is on the reader to decide what happens to the little fish. This confirms that the ending is somewhat unresolved, providing the reader with power to participate in the telling of the story, one of the characteristics of postmodern picture books. Klassen’s most recent publication *The Dark* (2013), was one in which he collaborated with another author. And who better to pair up with than Lemony Snicket, whose *Series of Unfortunate Events* novels relied heavily on a self-referential narrator, which continuously calls attention to the fact that this story is constructed?
Another wordless book, *Journey* (2013) by Aaron Becker, tells a story of a lonely girl who enters a magical world with a red piece of chalk, by drawing a door on her bedroom wall. She continues to draw objects that become real in this magical world--a balloon, a magic carpet, a bike--and is finally joined on the tandem bicycle by a boy with purple chalk. Examining this book through the lens of postmodernism reveals how the book calls attention to its own creation through a metafictive device (the girl is drawing some of the book’s illustrations). *Journey* also has a (somewhat) unresolved ending, and employs intertextuality in its references to *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. It is another critique of mass media and technology, because the girl escapes from a lonely world where her family ignores her for their tech devices, which is, again, one of the postmodernesque characteristics identified by Cherie Allan (142).

The title of David Ezra Stein’s *Interrupting Chicken* says it all: metafictive device ahead! This story-within-a-story involves Papa Chicken reading bedtime folktales to the Little Read Chicken, who knows each story so well that she interrupts Papa to shout out the ending of the story (“Don’t panic! It was just an acorn” to Chicken Little). Children like it for its humor and parents like it because it teaches manners (and also because it’s funny). The illustrations artfully differentiate between the bedtime stories and the main story using different medium and style. These characteristics provide multiple perspectives while simultaneously drawing the readers’ attention to the constructedness of the stories, making *Interrupting Chicken* a postmodern picture book, although not really a postmodernesque book since it does not critique the postmodern world.
In another scholarly article, Cherie Allan explores time in picture books and more specifically identifies two of Goldstone’s aspects: calling attention to the book’s creation and giving storytelling power to the reader.

Metalepsis is defined by Gerard Genette (Genette 1980, pp.234-235) as the transgression of logical and hierarchical relations between different levels of narration. Heise sees such transgressions occurring as systematic violations of the boundaries between a frame narrative and its embedded stories, thereby destabilising the narrator’s control of that story (Heise, p.59) particularly when the boundaries between nesting and nested narratives are crossed by characters or other textual elements (p.60). Further, Heise suggests that conventional print typography and the book format have placed a number of constraints on how temporality has been presented. Increasingly, however, postmodern novelists use typographical experimentation to provide multiple reading itineraries and temporalities. For example, Brooke-Rose's novel Thru (1975) has a number of pages formatted in a manner similar to that of a crossword puzzle (Heise, p.62). While each of these three strategies is variously employed in postmodern picture books the unique characteristics of the picture book, with its dual codes of signification and its brevity, not to mention the youthfulness of its implied reader, dictate that such strategies will be utilised differently.

David Wiesner uses metalepsis in the often cited postmodern picture book The Three Pigs (2001). The first diversion from the original story comes when the wolf huffs and puffs so hard that he blows the first pig out of the story and into the reader’s space. When the third pig joins the other two, the main story pauses even while the third person narration continues and gets smaller or disappears behind pages being folded and blown away. David Macauley’s Black and White also plays with time, as two of the four story lines occur before the other two even though they are being told simultaneously (four panels on each spread).

Frank Viva’s A Long Way Away (2013) experiments with the structure of the picture book, and thus with temporality as Allan discusses above. Viva’s picture book is to be held vertically, and the first end papers feature a yellow arrow that indicates the reader should flip the pages up,
since the story is told up and down instead of from left to right. This story uses sparse text and
digital illustrations on matte paper to describe an alien’s journey away from home, through
space, down to Earth, and into the deep black waters of the ocean. Turn to the last end paper, and
you see another arrow, this time indicating to turn the pages from top to bottom. Then you see
that it is another story about the journey from deep sea back to space. The structure itself is
postmodern, denying the “accepted” way of telling a story in a picture book, and it is through
this denial that this book shines. The two-way story creates an uncertainty in the second story: is
it the alien returning home, or is it a new story of a sea creature traveling to space? It may also be
considered a very loose critique of globalization and technology. Among all of the progress
(ships and planes) he sees on Earth, the alien still just wants to go home to his family. It is easy
to spot temporal or structural strategies similar to what Allan outlines in many new picture
books: Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs (2012), Palazzo Inverse (2010), It’s a Book (2010),
Press Here (2011), The Day the Crayons Quit (2013), Three Hens and a Peacock (2011), That is
NOT a Good Idea (2013), Limelight Larry (2011) and the list goes on.

Roger Sutton of the Horn Book Magazine found Jon Scieszka and Mac Barnett’s Battle
Bunny (2013) a bit too gimmicky, but conceded that it would be popular among “man-children,”
although I would broaden that category to include “anybody who likes their books funny.” The
authorial pair have written a faux pre-reader called The Birthday Bunny, produced to look like a
child has used a pencil to cross out and rewrite a lot of the text and to illustrate over the original
illustrations in order to create their very own story, Battle Bunny. Instead of a story about a
bunny receiving birthday presents, the “revised” book tells of a bunny who seeks revenge against
an evil ne’er do well bunny. This metafictive device takes the reader out of the story and forces her to ponder the implied fictional child who has revised the story: why did the kid write in his book, what was he supposed to be doing with the book, and is he gonna get in trouble for all of those violent illustrations, not to mention for drawing in a book at all? I find it delightful and refreshing. Sutton thinks the joke and the point (that pre-readers don’t have to be boring or cutesy) does not work well in a lengthy forty pages, but no one has done it before and I applaud the authors’ commitment (to their joke and their point).

Jon Scieszka, of course, has two very popular picture books from the 1990s that are often discussed in the scholarly literature on postmodernism in picture books: *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (1989) and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1991). These are interesting in that they were the hallmarks of a trend toward “fractured fairy tales,” and, with their contradicting pictures and metafictive storytelling devices (i.e. an interrupting narrator in *Stinky Cheese Man*), hallmarks of a trend toward postmodernism. As we see more and more of these books that incorporate metafictive devices, multiple perspectives, irony/contradictions, and so on, we may grow more and more tired of the most obvious incarnations. Jon Scieszka, heralded for his books in the 1990s and recipient of numerous awards including New York Times’ Best Illustrated Book citation (for *Three Little Pigs* and *Stinky Cheese Man*) and ALA Notable Children’s Books citations, is now apparently producing jokes that tire before the book ends. Meanwhile, more subdued books like those done by Klassen (who notably also collaborated with Mac Barnett on the Caldecott Honor book *Extra Yarn*) are now lauded; it is
these more minimalist books that presume sophistication in children’s abilities to read and comprehend postmodernism in picture books.

Not all children, however, may have had the exposure to enough books to have the skills needed to enjoy them, especially these newer, subtler versions. Goldstone outlines several points that can serve as a guide to educators in helping children to understand these books:

• The reader should recognize that he/she now has the power to determine which story line to follow and in what order. These books destroy the most elemental proposition that books should be held upright, read left to right, and in a sequential manner.

• The reader should not expect to be immersed in the time and space of the story world. Readers are conscious that the story world is juxtaposed to reality.

• Readers are no longer invisible observers of the story’s events. Characters may move into the reader’s space and/or talk to the audience. Readers work with the author to build a meaningful text.

• Readers are presented with a story told from multiple perspectives. There is not necessarily one lens through which to view the story.

• Readers must actively make connections within the text. How do the story lines, the multiple narrators, and the illustrations connect to or disconnect with one another? A central question in a postmodern picture book is “How do these seemingly unconnected parts connect?” rather than “What comes next?” (203)

Librarians should note that this type of instruction may also be an early form of information literacy instruction, and can easily be employed in school libraries. Helping readers to understand these points can provide them with the reading confidence needed to “venture into new reading challenges” (Goldstone, 203).

Postmodernism’s influence on picture books is undeniable, whether the picture book as a whole is postmodern as in Macauley’s Black and White, or whether it incorporates only small
postmodern elements as in Boyd’s *Inside Outside*. It is likely too early to draw conclusions about whether postmodern picture books are indicative of the recent decades, or whether they are their own new genre, or both, although enough time has passed to do decade-by-decade studies (i.e., postmodern picture books of the 1980s compared with those of the 1990s). It is even more difficult to determine whether we can predict that “postmodernesque” picture books will find their footing as the next new genre or “radical change” in children’s literature. Books that critique globalization, mass media, and consumerism are likely going to continue to be published, but whether they will supersede the incredibly popular postmodern picture book is yet to be seen. What has emerged as a theme in this paper, is that the excellent books published in the past two or three years incorporate only some elements of postmodernism and do not make it quite as obvious as the excellent picture books from the 1990s and early 2000s. Critics seem to be tired of the same old metafictive devices, but it will be interesting to see if they continue to award honors to books that employ more subtle postmodern elements. It would also be fruitful to monitor the possible trend of the “postmodernesque” picture book, a book that critiques aspects of the postmodern world such as globalization, mass media, and consumerism.
Works Cited


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