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READING C: Extracts from 'Postmodernism and the picturebook'

David Lewis

> WARNING: This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.
>
> (from *Black and White* by David Macaulay)

Introduction

Although young readers of picturebooks might be said to be relatively unsophisticated and unworldly, the same could hardly be said of their writers and illustrators. Those who write, illustrate, design and publish picturebooks live and have their being in the complex contemporary world that we all share; it has been suggested that the makers of picturebooks [...] are doing no more than responding to the tenor of the times and either consciously or unconsciously importing the approaches, techniques and sensibilities of postmodernism into their work.[1] This shift from playfulness to postmodernism is important for a number of reasons. It not only introduces a technical vocabulary into the discussion but explicitly connects picturebooks with larger social and cultural developments. However, despite the fact that the influence of postmodernism on the picturebook is a phenomenon that has been observed and commented upon a number of times in recent years, I believe it remains poorly understood. [...] In what follows, therefore, I describe some of postmodernity's defining features and provide some examples of how these features have influenced writing for adults before returning us to the children's picturebook with an account of the ways in which some picturebooks might be considered to qualify as postmodern. [...]

The key features of postmodernity

Indeterminacy

In the postmodern world we are a lot less sure about the nature of objective reality, our own selves and the products of our hands and minds than we used to be. The more we know about the world the less stable and certain it seems. Instead of our knowledge and understanding growing steadily in a cumulative way, science and philosophy, along with many other disciplines, seem to be telling us that we will never be able to be sure of anything, once and for all, ever again. [...] The human universe too has become a far less stable place. The more we know about other societies and cultures, the more we become attuned to difference and the less confident we become in our judgements of what constitutes normal human behaviour. Literature has responded to such developments by placing an increased emphasis upon undecideable outcomes and irresolvable dilemmas. In place of the obscurities of the modernist text – the difficulties of Joyce, Eliot and Pound – we now have the indeterminacies of the postmodern text. As we shall see, it is not uncommon for readers of the postmodern to be left not knowing which way to turn.

Fragmentation

Postmodernism suspects totalization, attempts to unify and synthesize being considered the imposition of an ideological, and thus spurious, order. According to Ihab Hassan, postmoderns prefer the 'openness of brokenness, unjustified margins' (Hassan, 1986, p. 505) to the tendentious unity brought about by the various forms of artistic closure. The metaphor of 'unjustified margins' is a useful one for it suggests graphically the refusal to tidy up loose ends. Rather than attempt to pull everything into shape at the last minute, and thus create an illusion of order where none in fact exists, the postmodern artist or writer is likely to let the ends remain loose and visible: indeed they may well be moved to the foreground to emphasize the fact that wholeness and completeness are not honestly achievable. Collage, with its juxtaposition of disparate elements, is thus a favourite postmodern method.

Decanonization

Perhaps the most widely disseminated tenet of postmodernism is that the governing narratives of our culture – *les grands récits* – have broken down (Lyotard, 1984). We are less likely now to trust blindly in authority than were the citizens of previous ages. Fewer and fewer people believe wholeheartedly the overarching stories we tell ourselves about ultimate values, truth, progress and reason because the authorities that underwrote such stories – the church, rationality, science – are no longer viable. Jean-Franois Lyotard, in his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition*, defined postmodernism, loosely, as, ' ... incredulity towards metanarratives'. The very fact that it is possible to speak

of the most fundamental belief as 'stories' suggests the extent to which the unquestioning acceptance of them as revealed truths has atrophied. [...] With the grand narratives in ruins at our feet all we have left are *les petits récits*, stories that do not aspire to global significance, but operate at the level of discrete language games. Such stories work insofar as we can invest in them and turn them to our ends but there is little left now in which the postmodernist can put absolute trust.

A further effect of decanonization is the ironing out of differences in value between cultural artefacts and images. The more our lives are invaded by relativism, the harder it becomes to feel confident about absolute standards in art and life and the boundaries separating pop and high culture become blurred. [...]

Irony

Indeterminacy, fragmentation and decanonization inevitably lead to irony. Whether we like it or not, modern life and culture is massively 'double-coded', images and ideas coming to us ready equipped with an ironic spin that tells us not only what we are looking at but also how to look at it. High Street and television advertisements are today so much more 'knowing' than they were and the consumer at whom they are aimed is expected to understand the allusions and get the jokes in the act of reading the text. [...]

Hybridization

The dissolving of boundaries, the fragmentation of wholes, the flattening out of differences between high and low are all held to be characteristic of our postmodern condition, and they have all contributed to the rise of bizarre hybrid genres and artefacts. Skyscrapers capped with motifs borrowed from Chippendale furniture are now possible, the non-fiction novel emerges from the blending of journalism and imaginative literature and on television docu-soaps import the conventions and expectations of cheap, serial melodrama into the real lives of hospital or airport staff. Nothing is sacred any more for the canons have faded that told us of the great and the good and that kept high culture and low in separate compartments. [...]

Performance and participation

The more that authorities dissolve and the more authors and artists abrogate responsibility for leading readers and viewers towards sense and meaning, then the more readers have to write the text they read. Much art is now conceived in terms of performance and participation, the role of the onlooker or participant in the process being deemed as important as any product. In such a climate the craft element in art, the idea that the artist possesses superior manipulative and creative abilities, has withered away [...].

Postmodernism in literature

How, then, have these trends within the larger culture affected the writing of fiction? The main influence has been upon the structures and conventions that have traditionally been shared between writer and reader. We expect a well-constructed, well-told story to have – to put it crudely – a beginning, a middle and an end. We expect to find more or less convincing characters interacting in an imaginary world according to the dictates of a plot which the author usually takes the trouble to resolve in some more or less satisfying way. Stories seem to follow rules and although the rules might differ for different kinds of stories – fairy tales, school stories, thrillers, romances, etc. – we do not usually expect the rules to be broken or abandoned. We expect something like a decorum, a sense of fittingness, to prevail within the fictions that we read and we very soon notice when incongruities intrude.

For example, we would not normally expect an author to step out onto the stage of his ongoing fiction to inform the reader about exactly what it is he is up to, but such interruptions are commonplace in postmodern writing. Take for example the following passage from the novel *How Far Can You Go?* by David Lodge (Lodge, 1980). Lodge would not consider himself to be a postmodern writer, but his academic interest in the subject has prompted him time and again to employ postmodern devices within his otherwise realistic novels. Here, a group of old friends who have not met for some time raise the subject of the accidental death of the daughter of some other, absent friends.

> 'Yes,' said Edward, shaking his head, and looking at his toecaps, 'that was too bad.'
>
> Adrian and Dorothy had not followed this and had to have it explained to them, as you will, gentle reader. Two years after Nicole was born, Dennis and Angela's next youngest child, Anne, was knocked down by a van outside their house and died in hospital a few hours later. I have avoided a direct presentation of this incident because frankly I find it too painful to contemplate. Of course, Dennis and Angela and Anne are fictional characters, they cannot bleed or weep, but they stand here for all the real people to whom such disasters happen with no apparent reason or justice. One does not kill off characters lightly, I assure you, even ones like Anne, evoked solely for that purpose.
>
> 'Of course, they blame themselves for the accident, one always does,' said Miriam ...
>
> (Lodge, 1980, p. 125)

The kind of intrusion of the author's voice into the fictional conversation of the characters is rather different from the traditional author strategy of appealing to the 'gentle reader', despite the fact that Lodge makes such an appeal at the beginning of the passage. What we experience here is a deliberate interruption of the drama that throws the fictional nature of that

drama into high relief. We are suddenly aware that the story is precisely that, a story.

Consider a further, related example. In a short story by the Latin American author Julio Cortázar entitled 'Continuity of Parks', a man is described as reading a novel in a high-backed, green velvet armchair in his study. The novel he is reading tells of a desperate but resolute murderer who follows an avenue of trees that leads to a house; he climbs the stairs and locates the study, ' ... and then, the knife in hand, the light from the great windows, the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man in the chair reading a novel.' Thus is someone murdered by a character in the story that he is reading (Cortázar, 1968).

What is it that these two examples have in common? In one the author steps out from behind the curtain to address his audience, his readers, and in the other an 'unreal', fictional character is made to commit a 'real' murder. In both examples, figures involved in the creation of a fiction or belonging to the fiction refuse to stay in their assigned places and, like Anthony Browne's little bear in *Bear Hunt*, cross boundaries to take upon themselves roles they would not normally occupy. The effect is to disturb the expectations of the reader and once again to push into the foreground the fictional nature of the story. [...]

Postmodernism and metafiction

Postmodern fictions are usually unsettling, sometimes very funny and occasionally completely bewildering, but what is the justification for considering them to be specifically postmodern? How do these fictions display postmodernity? The most obvious connection between these examples and the list of characteristics discussed above lies in their authors' unwillingness to permit the reader to enjoy an uninterrupted illusion of a secondary world. Amongst other things they are concerned to remind the reader that literary fiction is not a window onto, or a mirror of, the real world but a fabrication that temporarily deludes us into believing that 'real' people are engaged in 'real' events. Furthermore, such stories often imply that the everyday-life-world itself will not withstand too much scrutiny, and that our own lives, with all their randomness and chaos, are only endowed with sense and meaning through out persistent liking for and belief in stories. [...]

The postmodern picturebook

The claim that certain picturebooks may be considered to be postmodern rests largely upon some very compelling parallels between the picturebooks in question and the kinds of prose fiction for adults discussed above. [...] As picturebooks possess some features that prose fictions do not, rather than attempt to squeeze my examples into a typology derived from novels and short stories, I have grouped them into five rather loose categories of my own devising into which both prose and picturebooks can fit.

Boundary breaking

Boundary breaking occurs when characters within a story are allowed by their author to wander beyond the narrative level to which they properly belong. [...]

In *The Story of a Little Mouse Trapped in a Book* by Monique Felix a mouse appears to be confined within the page upon which she is represented. She pushes at the sides in her attempts to get free, then nibbles around the edges to cut out a square of paper from the page, folds the square into an aeroplane and flies down to safety 'out' of the book and into the 'real world' depicted beyond the ragged edges that are left. *Simon's Book* (Henrik Drescher), *Benjamin's Book* (Alan Baker), and *The Book Mice* (Tony Knowles) all rely upon similar effects. Benjamin, for example, is a rather clumsy hamster who gets into scrapes through such tricks as walking across the page upon which he is represented leaving a trail of muddy paw prints behind him. In attempting to wipe the page clean he only makes matters worse. John Burningham's *Where's Julius?* manages the curious feat of having one character trespass upon the inner fantasies of another.

Excess

Excess [...] may take the form of any kind of gigantism that upsets our expectations. Interestingly, picturebooks often have an 'over the top' quality. They frequently involve a stretching and testing of norms – linguistic, literary, social, conceptual and ethical as well as narrative. [...] The unthinkable or the unmentionable appears with startling regularity in picturebooks. Alarming, disturbing or exciting possibilities are put to the test in *Would You Rather ...* by John Burningham. In this book narrative is abandoned altogether and the reader is invited to choose between extraordinary, exciting or disgusting possibilities. Many of the options on display are grotesquely humorous in the manner familiar from children's comics and cartoon strips while others put social norms to the test. Indeed, the book can cause embarrassment in children as they recognize the enormity of some of Burningham's suggestions.

Angry Arthur by Hiawyn Oram and Satoshi Kitamura takes a different form of excess as its theme: the extravagant results of a temper tantrum. Once again there is an accumulation that goes well beyond the bounds of realism, but in this instance there is a clear metaphorical purpose to the depicted events. The eponymous anti-hero is so angry at being prevented from watching late night TV that his rage brings on typhoons and earthquakes. In the real world the actual results of bad temper are rather more localized but the images of chaos in the book serve as the perfect objective correlate for the sense of boundless outrage experienced by angry infants. The dissolution of one's personality in blind rage is well portrayed in the loss of a universe.

Indeterminacy

Indeterminacy is the opposite of excess. In the latter case readers are offered an accumulation of one sort or another way beyond the normal for realistic stories; in the former, they are left with very little information. The contrast between these two extremes reminds us of the fact that a sense of the real in stories depends upon what Susan Stewart calls 'an economy of significance' that is governed by generic conventions (Stewart, 1984): writers (or in the case of picturebooks, writers and illustrators) must neither say too much nor too little or they risk losing the reader.

All stories are built upon gaps – writers and picturebook makers cannot describe, explain or show everything – but some picturebooks expose those gaps for us and thus reveal the comic absurdity of the situation we are left in when textual props are missing. For example, *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen* by Russell Hoban and Quentin Blake has at its heart a series of three testing games that are simultaneously present and absent. Womble, Muck and Sneedball are named and (partially) illustrated but we are never allowed to learn their precise nature. Blake's illustrations hint at their complexity, and Hoban offers one or two clues about scoring and procedures, but the three games remain a pungent lack throughout the story.

Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley also relies upon an absence, but here it takes the form of a withholding of information about how two sequences of images are related. The pictures and words on the left-hand pages clearly relate to the images on the right but we are left to make up our own minds about the precise nature of the relationship. [...]

Another book that leaves relationships and outcomes obscure is *Black and White* by David Macaulay. The four stories told in the four quarters of each page-opening are depicted in four separate styles, one of them entirely wordless, another packed with the kinds of visual puns that some picturebook illustrators delight in. There are hints and suggestions embedded in the picture that the four stories might be connected but Macaulay makes no efforts to explain how, or indeed if, this is so. In fact, he prints a warning label on the title page: 'This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.'

Parody

Parody is inherently metafictive as it involves a refusal to accept as natural and given that which is culturally determined and conventional. As a literary device it is usually associated with satire and ridicule and may thus seem an unlikely trait to find in children's picturebooks, but in fact picturebook makers often lean towards this particular mode. The aim of parody in the picturebook, however, is not to ridicule any particular author or style but to poke fun at the conventions, manners and affectations of a particular genre.

The Worm Book by Janet and Allan Ahlberg is an excellent example of how a relatively rigid form – the child's 'information book' – can be undone by placing straight-faced captions beneath silly pictures: 'All good worms have a beginning, a middle and an end … Worms with two beginnings, a middle and no end are apt to injure themselves … Worms with two ends, a middle and no beginning get bored.'

A more sophisticated parody of a non-fiction, information text can be found in *How Dogs Really Work* by Alan Snow. This book comes complete with table of contents, index, cut-away pictures with keys, labels with arrows, inset diagrams and so on. The target of the parody is clearly the glamorous books that have proliferated in recent years showing the insides of everything from skyscrapers to ocean liners. Snow's book, however, shows caricature dogs opened up to reveal pulleys, levers and valves and the text purports to explain how doggy behaviour can be explained in terms of the rudimentary, Heath Robinson-like machinery shown in the pictures. Thus, in the section headed, 'Legs and Getting About' we read:

> Legs are organs of support and locomotion in animals (and humans). In dogs, the legs are fixed at the four corners of the main body, (see diagram 1). Nearly all dogs have four legs, even the short funny ones that sometimes look like they may not, (see diagram 2). Legs are powered by energy generated from the food the dog eats.

As befits this kind of manual everything is shown in the greatest possible detail, and there are lots of handy hints for the prospective dog owner ('Make sure you are running your dog on the right fuel. If you are not it may affect the dog's performance.') [...]

Performance

Many picturebooks are constructed to be deliberately interactive and participatory. Picturebooks with tabs to pull, flaps to lift, wheels to rotate, pages to unfold, holes to peep through and, most recently, buttons to push and sounds to listen to, are now quite commonplace. Notable examples include: the popular *Spot* books; the elaborately engineered works by Jan Pienkowski such as *Haunted House* and *Robot*; the books of Eric Carle and Ron Maris with their cut and shaped pages; much of the work of the Ahlbergs, in particular *Peepo*, *The Jolly Postman*, *Yum Yum* and *Playmates*. [...]

Books such as these are not particularly concerned with undermining, or resisting the creation of, a secondary fictive world through manipulation of the text. Instead they foreground the nature of the book as an object, an artefact to be handled and manipulated as well as read. They are thus metafictive to the extent that they tempt readers to withdraw attention from the story (which, it must be said, is often pretty slender) in order to look at, play with and admire the paper engineering. One of the characteristics of a well-told tale is that as we read it our awareness of the book in which it is

written tends to fade away, but when the material fabric of the book has been doctored in such a way as to draw attention to itself, it is less easy to withdraw into that fictive, secondary world.

Pop-ups and movables tend to produce a degree of unease amongst children's book critics and scholars for they often do not seem to offer much in the way of a reading experience at all. For this reason they are sometimes considered to be more like toys than books, objects to play with rather than to read. There is some justice in this view, but it is far too simplistic for it tidies up too neatly something that, if we are honest, rather resists pigeonholing. We might better understand the movable if we view it as a hybrid, a merging of two, otherwise incompatible artefacts: the toy and the picturebook. Under this description, movables are both books that can be played with and toys that can be read.

Picturebooks: postmodern or playful?

Boundary breaking, excess, indeterminacy, parody and performance are all strategies or devices that authors and illustrators can use to push what can be done with the picturebook to its limits, but they are also frequently used by writers of fiction for adults to unsettle readerly expectations. The view that some picturebooks can be considered to be postmodern arises out of this parallel between the picturebooks in question and certain kinds of novels and stories for adults. [...]

The question of why many picturebook makers feel free to abandon settled modes of storytelling may best be answered by taking a good close look at the nature of the form within which they are working and the audience to whom that work is addressed.

Notes

1   My own first attempt to write about this subject was published in *Signal* as 'The constructedness of texts: picture books and the metafictive' (also collected in Egoff, Stubbs, Ashley and Sutton 1996). Other relevant texts include: Moss, G. (1992) '"My Teddy Bear Can Fly": postmodernizing the picture book'; Styles, M. (1996) 'Inside the tunnel: a radical kind of reading – picture books, pupils and postmodernism'.

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