

READING CONTEMPORARY PICTUREBOOKS

Picturing text

DAVID LEWIS



Reading Contemporary Picturebooks

Reading Contemporary Picturebooks takes a close look at one of the most vibrant and exciting branches of children's literature – the modern picturebook. There has been an enormous increase in the quantity of high quality picturebooks published for children, yet our understanding of what it means to be visually literate and our knowledge of how readers negotiate such composite texts is limited. This book takes a sample of contemporary picturebooks and examines the features that make them unique, suggesting ways of studying and understanding the form.

Issues addressed include:

- the interaction of word and image in picturebooks
- the ecology of the picturebook
- the picturebook as process
- picturebooks at play
- postmodernism and the picturebook
- studying and understanding picturebooks

Reading Contemporary Picturebooks is both an introduction to a fascinating and innovative branch of children's literature and a detailed examination of how picturebooks work.

This book will be of interest to students, teachers and researchers interested in reading, children's literature and media studies.

David Lewis is one of the leading British specialists on picturebooks. He was formerly Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of Exeter.

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For Maureen, Simon and Claire

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1 Modern picturebooks: the state of the art	1
2 The interaction of word and image in picturebooks: a critical survey	31
3 The ecology of the picturebook	46
4 The picturebook as process: making it new	61
5 Picturebooks at play	76
6 Postmodernism and the picturebook	87
7 A word about pictures	102
8 How do picturebooks come to possess meaning?	124
<i>Appendix 1 Developments in printing technology: bringing words and pictures together</i>	138
<i>Appendix 2 Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design</i>	145
<i>Glossary</i>	168
<i>Bibliography</i>	172
<i>Picturebook bibliography</i>	176
<i>Index</i>	179

Figures

1	From <i>Gorilla</i> by Anthony Browne	5
2	From <i>Granpa</i> by John Burningham	6
3	From <i>The Man</i> by Raymond Briggs	8
4	From <i>Voices in the Park</i> by Anthony Browne	9
5	From <i>Have You Seen Who's Just Moved in Next Door to Us?</i> by Colin McNaughton	11
6	From <i>The Jolly Postman</i> by Janet and Allan Ahlberg	13
7	From <i>Think of an Eel</i> by Karen Wallace and Mike Bostock	14
8	From <i>All Join In</i> by Quentin Blake	16
9	From <i>The Little Boat</i> by Kathy Henderson and Patrick Benson	18
10	From <i>The Park in the Dark</i> by Martin Waddell and Barbara Firth	20
11	From <i>So Much</i> by Trish Cooke and Helen Oxenbury	22
12	From <i>Lady Muck</i> by William Mayne and Jonathan Heale	23
13	From <i>Drop Dead</i> by Babette Cole	24
14	From <i>Voices in the Park</i> by Anthony Browne	37
15	A theoretical model of interdependent storytelling	41
16	From <i>Gorilla</i> by Anthony Browne	49
17	From <i>The Man</i> by Raymond Briggs	51
18	From <i>Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley</i> by John Burningham	56
19	From <i>Gorilla</i> by Anthony Browne	69
20	From <i>Drop Dead</i> by Babette Cole	70
21	From <i>Way Home</i> by Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers	73
22	From <i>The Jolly Postman</i> by Janet and Allan Ahlberg	83
23	From <i>Where is Monkey?</i> by Dieter Schubert	106
24	From <i>Where is Monkey?</i> by Dieter Schubert	107
25	From <i>All Join In</i> by Quentin Blake	108
26	From <i>Where is Monkey?</i> by Dieter Schubert	110
27	From <i>Gorilla</i> by Anthony Browne	117
28	From <i>So Much</i> by Trish Cooke and Helen Oxenbury	118
29	From <i>Granpa</i> by John Burningham	121
30	Narrative structures in visual communication	150
31	Analytical structures in visual communication	153

32	A simple classificatory tree structure	153
33	Classificational structures in visual communication	154
34	Oblique and frontal horizontal angles	160
35	Interactive meanings in images	161
36	The meaning of composition	166

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Introduction

Although books have always been illustrated, the special form of text that we now call the picturebook is a relatively recent invention. Its emergence from other forms of printed matter such as chapbooks, toy books and comics has been gradual and rather uneven so that the first examples that looked anything like the ones examined in this book began to appear towards the end of the nineteenth century and it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the picturebook was fully formed.¹ Since the 1960s more and more picturebooks have been published every year so that now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is beginning to feel as if they have always been here. The form has its grand masters and living legends in figures like Maurice Sendak, its canonical texts which are studied in universities around the world, and its devoted readers in classrooms and homes everywhere.

And yet the workings of the picturebook are still rather poorly understood. This is hardly surprising as the serious study of any new cultural form is bound to lag behind its appearance and its adoption by the populace. In the case of picturebooks, it was only in the 1980s that the form began to be taken seriously as an object of academic study. Perry Nodelman's *Words About Pictures*, published in 1988, was one of the first attempts to analyse the workings of the picturebook and it has since become something of a standard work on the subject. However, as we shall see, there is still a good deal of disagreement over how we might best understand the picturebook. There has long been a broad consensus about the basic characteristics of the form, its combining of two distinct modes of representation – pictures and words – into a composite text, but it is precisely this doubleness, this two-sided quality, which has led to much confusion and disagreement. For example, are picturebooks first and foremost books – that is, stories that just happen to be ‘told’ in pictures as well as words – or are they better thought of as a kind of narrative visual art that happens to be annotated or captioned with words? Is it really the pictures that lie at the heart of picturebooks, or do we need to look for ways in which the pictures and the words interact and work upon each other? Further disagreements revolve around the fact that the vast majority of picturebooks are created for children. If we wish to be clearer about the nature of the picturebook should we attend

to what children make of them or will our own close reading of individual texts be sufficient? And how relevant is it to our attempts to understand picturebooks that they are often used for teaching children to read?

This indecisiveness can even be sensed in the way that the metalanguage – the language we use to talk and write about the subject – is still relatively unstable. How should you spell ‘picturebook’, for example? Is it a compound word (picturebook), a hyphenated word (picture-book), or two distinct words (picture book)? Perry Nodelman has it as two words while Peter Hunt’s *Children’s Literature: an Illustrated History* has it hyphenated. Victor Watson’s *Cambridge Guide to Children’s Literature* makes it a compound and I have chosen to use this latter form here the better to reflect the compound nature of the artefact itself for I shall be arguing in these pages that the first step we should take in examining the picturebook is to look at it whole.

In the chapters that follow I shall be picking my way through the uncertainties and confusions mentioned above. Although I have not attempted to provide a simple answer to each individual question – indeed, I do not think we should expect simple answers – I hope that I have managed to articulate a more or less coherent vision. I have drawn upon a range of sources and precursors and can claim only modest originality but I have not attempted to summarize previous work in the field, nor have I tried to write a picturebook ‘primer’ or introductory text. The book is the fruit of my own reflections upon a form of text that I first became fond of when my children were very young and just discovering the world of books and print and pictures. As a result, it is undoubtedly eclectic in its approach to its subject and possibly (some readers may think positively) eccentric. Be that as it may, I hope it might serve to introduce the delights of the picturebook to those who are studying it for the first time, prove just disturbing enough to unsettle those who have some familiarity with the subject, and prompt as many as are interested to undertake their own investigations.

In writing the book I had to settle to my own satisfaction the question of how best to deal with another oddity about its subject, and that is the way in which the terminology we normally apply to books, texts and reading do not seem to attach to the picturebook so readily. For example, if we speak of ‘the text’ of a picturebook, do we mean the words or the words-and-pictures together? In almost all other contexts ‘text’ means words, so there is some risk of confusion here. And when we say we ‘read’ a picturebook does the word – and the process – apply equally well to the visual images and to the sentences and paragraphs alongside, or do we need another term that better represents the special relationship of picture and beholder? In order to reduce confusion to a minimum I have stuck as closely as possible to the following conventions. Picturebooks are *read* by *readers* and the combination of words and images working together in a picturebook I refer to as *picturebook text*. When the context makes it clear that the words are being referred to I use the term *text* (for example, ‘the text alongside the image is as follows ...’). At all other times,

when there is any risk of confusion, I refer to *the written text*, *the printed text* or *the words*. The pictures are *images*, *visual images*, *pictures* or *illustrations*. In a similar fashion, a *writer* or *author* creates the written text and an *illustrator* or *artist* creates the pictures. The term *picturebook maker* is used when writer and illustrator are one and the same person. At times it may be necessary to employ a more technical vocabulary and I have supplied a glossary at the end of the book to assist with any unfamiliar terms.

The first four chapters are largely, but not solely, concerned with the picturebook's formal features. I describe in Chapter 1 a sample of contemporary picturebooks and look for similarities and differences amongst them. I have begun in this way because I believe we will learn best, and learn most, by starting with an open mind about what picturebooks look like and by examining closely a more or less random sample. In Chapter 2 I take a critical look at some of the ways in which the interaction of pictures and words in picturebooks has been described and then, in Chapter 3, suggest an alternative way of approaching this task. I also make a case here for the importance of including the readings and responses of both adults and children in our thinking about picturebooks. Chapter 4 attempts to account for the flexibility and adaptability of the form by showing how the picturebook's capacity to co-opt, ingest and adapt to pre-existent forms keeps it perpetually open-ended and developing. In the final four chapters the emphasis shifts towards an examination of the ways in which readers and contexts influence the picturebook's shape and form. Chapter 5 looks at the association between young children, picturebooks and play and suggests that the picturebook's open-endedness, its capacity to constantly re-shape itself, is to some extent a response to the gradual emergence of children's understanding of books and reading. Chapter 6 looks critically at recent claims that many picturebooks betray a leaning towards the postmodern in their predilection for rule breaking. Chapter 7 reviews some of the main ways in which pictures come to have meaning for us, focusing especially upon the grammar of visual design recently devised and elaborated by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. In Chapter 8 I explore, in a rather tentative fashion, how insights derived from the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein might open up perspectives upon how the pictures in picturebooks come to have meaning for readers. This final chapter also leads me to my conclusions about how best to study and understand picturebooks.

Writing about picturebooks always involves trying to find ways around the fact that it is necessary to *see* the subject under discussion as well as *read* about it. There is something unsatisfying about being faced with pages of print when what you really want to do is examine the image that is being described in words. I have tried to deal with this difficulty in several ways. A small number of illustrations are distributed throughout the book, most of them placed in Chapter 1 where the sample is first described, and I have referred to these as often as I can. At other times – especially when I wish to make a narrowly focused or specific point about an image – I have attempted to describe

illustrations in ways that, I hope, will allow readers to conjure up in imagination whatever is necessary to make sense of my arguments. I have also tried, outside of the basic sample, to allude only to books that are reasonably popular and well known.

At numerous points throughout the book I have drawn upon conversations with children about picturebooks. Most of these were carried out in a South-east London primary school. They usually took place while a particular picturebook was being read so that we were able to talk about puzzles, immediate impressions and misunderstandings the moment they occurred. In every case I was far more interested in what the children had to say about what they were reading than in attempting to teach them anything. As a result, we developed a relationship that allowed the children to talk freely and openly about anything that seemed relevant to them. Over the last few years these conversations have been enormously helpful to me in my attempts to understand more fully what it means to read a picturebook, and two conversations in particular, each one about the same book, have been particularly revealing. The book is John Burningham's *Time to Get Out of the Bath*, Shirley and the readers, Nathan and Jane. Burningham has always been extremely skilful at teasing and provoking his readers as well as engrossing them, and this makes him especially useful to anyone attempting to investigate what it is we do when we try to make sense of combinations of words and pictures that purport to tell a story. Other conversations are reported from time to time, but Jane and Nathan's grapplings with Burningham's odd little story have taught me as much about picturebooks, if not more, than anything I have read or heard elsewhere (with one or two notable exceptions: see Acknowledgements). In reporting our conversations I have smoothed out some of the more awkward gaps and hesitations but have tried not to distort the sense of what was being said. It is never easy interpreting what children say about what they are reading but I believe the task has to be undertaken and I hope I have not done too much violence to their attempts to say what must at times have seemed almost unsayable. Nathan and Jane were six when we first met and will now be quite a few years older. I do hope they are still reading picturebooks.

Notes

- 1 It is difficult to be precise about when the modern picturebook first made its appearance but most authorities seem to be agreed that during the late nineteenth century picturebook makers such as Randolph Caldecott played a decisive role in transforming the Victorian toy book into something much more like the modern picturebook. Similarly, although many fine picturebooks were published prior to the 1960s, a number of factors converged around that time to enable publishers to produce and sell high quality picturebooks in larger numbers than ever before.

Chapter 1

Modern picturebooks

The state of the art

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child.

As an art form it 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.

On its own terms its possibilities are limitless.

(Prefatory note to Bader 1976:1)

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to explore both the nature of the picturebook and what it means to read one. Books and reading have always seemed to me to be inseparable so I have taken an uncompromising view of the picturebook as first and foremost a kind of text, a quasi-literary artefact more closely allied to other kinds of texts than to works of visual art.¹ I shall not ignore the pictures but I think it is unwise to make a beginning by disconnecting the several parts of something that is clearly a complex whole so that they can be examined separately. Far better to keep the complete object in view and see what kind of sense can be made of it in its completeness, however difficult that may be.

Barbara Bader had the measure of the picturebook, I believe, when she prefaced her influential study *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*, with the words that I have placed at the head of this chapter. She offers us a working definition ('... text, illustration ... the interdependence of pictures and words'), reminds us who picturebooks are for ('... an experience for a child') and also hints at the picturebook's extraordinary potential. ('On its own terms its possibilities are limitless'). Much of what follows in this book is an exploration of that vision.²

This first chapter is largely descriptive. I have taken a number of picturebooks and given a brief account of each one. There are a number of reasons for beginning this way. First, I want to provide a sense of what the

picturebook can be like, to conjure up an image of the form that we can work with. But I do not want this picture to be biased in any way towards picturebooks of my choice. It is always possible to influence an argument by selecting examples to fit a preferred view or theory but I would much rather start from a more or less random sample and see what that can show us.

On the other hand, I do want to use the opportunity of describing such a sample to exercise some influence upon how we look at picturebooks. Let me explain. Description is usually considered to be a fairly low-level kind of approach to a topic, less interesting and influential – less potent – than, say, argument or analysis. Description, if done well, seems to bring an object into focus before us but not much more than that. However, in describing something we inevitably call upon a favoured vocabulary, look at it from a particular perspective, throw a certain light upon it. Describing can therefore be a way of influencing how we see an object, and *re*-describing a familiar object is one of the ways that we attempt to change how we understand it.³ So in describing a selection of picturebooks I am not just offering up a representative sample, I am already starting to make a case. It is only a start, of course, for there is much to follow: much that will be qualified and much that must be explained.

Put simply, I have a view of the nature of the picturebook but I do not wish to ‘massage the data’ to make it fit what I think. I need a sample that, if not wholly random, at least has not been the product of some one individual’s preferences. Where might such a sample be found? I could begin by looking at what bookshops sell and purchasers buy, but such a survey would yield numbers of books that would be unwieldy for my purposes here.⁴ What I have done is base my descriptions upon, and later drawn many of my examples from, the fairly short list of books that during the last two decades of the twentieth century were winners, in the UK, of the Kurt Maschler ‘Emil Award’. The award was established in 1982 in memory of the author and illustrator of the children’s novel *Emil and the Detectives*, Erich Kästner and Walter Trier, and is made annually for ‘a work of imagination in the children’s field in which text and illustration are of excellence and so presented that each enhances and yet balances the other’. The criteria thus correspond in a rudimentary way to the minimal working definition that I have borrowed from Barbara Bader, and that most students of the picturebook would recognize. The fact that the books on the list are award winners does not exactly guarantee their quality, but it does suggest that they are amongst the best of their kind, and the fact that they were selected one at a time, year by year, by a changing panel of three judges, removes some of the worry that they are simply the favourite books of a particular reader. It is not perfect, but I think it is a reasonable start.

Here, then, is the list of Emil Award winners from 1982 to 1999:

- 1982 *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales* retold by Angela Carter, illustrated by Michael Foreman
- 1983 *Gorilla* by Anthony Browne

-
- 1984 *Granpa* by John Burningham
 - 1985 *The Iron Man* by Ted Hughes, illustrated by Andrew Davidson
 - 1986 *The Jolly Postman or Other People's Letters* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg
 - 1987 *Jack the Treacle Eater* by Charles Causley, illustrated by Charles Keeping
 - 1988 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, illustrated by Anthony Browne
 - 1989 *The Park in the Dark* by Martin Waddell, illustrated by Barbara Firth
 - 1990 *All Join In* by Quentin Blake
 - 1991 *Have You Seen Who's Just Moved in Next Door to Us?* by Colin McNaughton
 - 1992 *The Man* by Raymond Briggs
 - 1993 *Think of an Eel* by Karen Wallace, illustrated by Mike Bostock
 - 1994 *So Much* by Trish Cooke, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury
 - 1995 *The Little Boat* by Kathy Henderson, illustrated by Patrick Benson
 - 1996 *Drop Dead* by Babette Cole
 - 1997 *Lady Muck* by William Mayne, illustrated by Jonathan Heale
 - 1998 *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne
 - 1999 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury

The first thing we might note about the list is that it contains a number of titles that do not seem to be picturebooks at all, despite the fact that they are finely, and at least in three cases copiously, illustrated. *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*, *The Iron Man*, *Jack the Treacle Eater* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are all much lengthier than the average picturebook with a far smaller picture-to-word ratio than we would normally expect. Also, apart from *Jack the Treacle Eater*, they are all volumes, or texts, that have been illustrated before, some of the stories many times, so that there is not the same close bond between picture and word that we find in most picturebooks. In principle any text in words could be illustrated by any artist but we expect the pictures and words in picturebooks to be woven together to create a single text composed of two distinct media, rather than have text in one medium (words) illustrated with designs in another (pictures). Does all this mean there are problems with the simple definition with which I began? I think the answer is 'Yes', for it is clear that pictures and words can 'enhance' and 'balance' each other without thereby creating a picturebook. But we need not abandon the criterion just yet. We have simply been alerted to the fact that the picturebook is unlikely to yield up its secrets willingly.

In the remainder of this chapter I provide a descriptive account of the picturebooks on the Emil list omitting those titles, mentioned above, that seem to me to be more like illustrated books. I hope to provide a sketch of what the modern picturebook looks like; to provide an introduction to the corpus of works that is to serve as our sample throughout the rest of the book; to introduce some of the themes that will be examined in more detail later; to suggest

some of the relationships that exist between words and images in picturebooks and, most importantly, to indicate the extraordinary diversity of the picturebook.

A sample of modern picturebooks

Anthony Browne's *Gorilla*, a book that has retained its popularity with both adults and children and has come to be seen as an exemplary modern picturebook, won the award in 1983. It possesses the relative brevity which seems to be one of the hallmarks of the form (something *not* hinted at in Bader's definition) and it does appear to be genuinely composite: a single fabric woven from two different materials. We read the words and we follow the pictures and both seem to have roughly equal shares in the generation of the story. Both are necessary and neither, on its own, is sufficient. This much is true, but if we look closely we can find a number of different ways in which the words and pictures work together. The relationship that appears to be most straightforward is a simple kind of illustration: the pictures showing the reader (with varying degrees of specificity) what it is that the words tell us. Thus on the very first page we read of the heroine, Hannah, that, 'She read books about gorillas,' and there, right alongside the sentence is a picture of Hannah sitting cross-legged on the floor reading what appears to be a large picturebook about her favourite animal. However, some parts of the narrative are less easy to illustrate in this way – for example, states of affairs rather than actions – so a little further on we read that Hannah's father 'didn't have time to take her to see one [a gorilla] at the zoo.' and on the opposite page the state of 'not having time ...' is coolly 'illustrated' with a picture of Hannah's father, separated from his daughter by the newspaper that he is holding up and reading at the breakfast table. The former is often referred to as *narrative* illustration – a simple echoing of the words – and many pictures in picturebooks perform this function, but we can see already that it is not quite as straightforward as it seems at first.⁵

For most of the book Browne's words are relatively simple and unadorned. They tell a plain tale of a lonely girl neglected by a father too busy to spend time with her. Many of the pictures, on the other hand, are rich in detail and significance, and embellish this narrative framework, taking us into both Hannah's home and her psyche. Browne uses point of view, framing, colour, visual distortions and illusions, embedded imagery and a host of other design features to give Hannah's story depth and weight. In fact, it is these pictures that keep drawing us back to the book to look more closely and to ponder the significance of newly discovered details. It is for the pictures that we re-read *Gorilla* because it is through the pictures that the story is opened up for *interpretation* while the function of the words is to link events together to make a coherent narrative.

Not surprisingly, many books on the Emil list resemble *Gorilla* in one way or