Expository Fiction: Blurring the Boundaries between Fiction and Nonfiction in *Dragonology* and *The Discovery of Dragons*

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The form and function of the contemporary picturebook has undergone significant changes in the past two decades. Postmodern and meta-fictive elements and sensibilities (Bradford, 1993; Goldstone, 1999; Lonsdale, 1993),

polysemous narratives (Evans, 1998), radical change elements (Dresang, 1999), and various technological advances in printing and book design (Salisbury, 2007) have played a role in the evolution of this ubiquitous form in children's literature. Because of these advances in form, function, and design, the way students respond to picturebooks and how these literary texts are utilized by classroom teachers throughout the reading curriculum have also changed (Serafini, 2005).

As picturebooks have played a more prominent role in the elementary reading curriculum, researchers have investigated children's responses to various elements and structures of picturebooks, including the relationships between texts and illustrations (Baddeley & Eddershaw, 1994), depictions of gender (Westland, 1993), endpages (Sipe & McGuire, 2006), visual images (Arizpe & Styles, 2003), and metafictive devices (Pantaleo, 2005). As the forms and boundaries of the contemporary picturebook shift and genres become blurred, new investigations are required to understand the changes taking place and their effects on reading education.

Reading researchers, literary theorists, and educators have recognized a blurring of the boundaries between fictional literature and nonfiction or expository texts (Colman, 2007; Duthie, 1994; Palmer & Stewart, 1997; Pappas, 2006; Saul & Dieckman, 2005). Lewis (2001) recognizes the changing nature of the picturebook and its flexibility in form, design, and content when he describes it as the "chameleon" in the world of children's

book publishing. But how exactly is this blurring of boundaries accomplished? Does it occur simply when facts are mixed in with imaginary elements? This seems too simple a distinction. The blurring of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction means more to educators than helping librarians decide how to properly organize books in a library. Might this blurring of genres mean that the lines between the elements of narrative and the structures of expository texts are being combined in new and significant ways? Could it be that new genres, formats, and designs are constantly evolving and the picturebook will never look the same? Or, could it be that postmodern allegiances to rally against objectivity and a single truth, or issues of representation are being played out in contemporary picturebooks?

In this article, I will share an analysis of two contemporary, postmodern picturebooks; *Dragonology* (Drake & Steer, 2003) and *The Discovery of Dragons* (Base, 1996) to illuminate how the various elements of these "expository fiction" texts are perpetrating a fraud on young readers in playful and unusual ways. In addition, my analysis will show how these two texts are blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. (For an extended bibliography of similar books, called "mock nonfiction" by some publishers, see references.)

FICTION OR NONFICTION?

As most librarians, educators, and literary theorists would attest, the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction have been blurred in the past decades. A primary

example is *The Magic School Bus* series by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen. Although these books offer the reader what may be considered factual information, they also utilize narrative and fictional elements. Genres are constantly evolving, and new genres created in film, art, literature and music are redefining the boundaries previously recognized. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction are becoming porous and blurry (Pappas, 2006).

Distinctions made between fictional and nonfictional texts have traditionally been based on the relative value of the information provided. If the information provided is considered accurate or "true," the book is deemed nonfiction; if not, it is considered fictional. When queried, most students and adults would define fiction as imaginative writing and nonfiction as realistic writing. Iser (1993) challenges us to rethink this distinction as he states, "there is little point in clinging to the old distinction between fiction and reality as a frame of reference" (p. 1).

One way of differentiating between fiction and nonfiction is to suggest that expository texts have a referent outside themselves. However, this distinction may be problematic. Iser (1993) writes, "a piece of fiction devoid of any connection with known reality would be incomprehensible" (p. 1). Based on this concept, all texts are a mixture of reality and fictions. Writers of fiction include realistic information, while writers of expository texts sometimes use fictitious characters to reveal information. In addition, "thinking that fiction is fake undermines the verisimilitude that many fiction authors try to achieve" (Colman, 2007, p. 259). Nodelman (1984) suggests that in any picturebook the distortion of truth is inevitable because the author and illustrator select materials, language, and images to present a particular version of reality. The world as is, void of interpretations and objectively presented, is not possible in picturebook form, whether fictional or expository.

The truth value associated with works of fiction and nonfiction is generally based on its correspondence to an objective reality or referent outside of itself (Rorty, 1979). This correspondence is primarily assessed by the reader, depending on whether the facts in the book can be corroborated with other texts that offer similar information, or on a reader's personal observations, experience, and knowledge of the world. However, from this perspective the responsibility of determining the truth value of a text resides with the reader, not necessarily the author, illustrator, or an analysis of the elements and written language of the text itself. Authors may intend to be as accurate as possible in their writing, only including facts and objective data, but they can never step outside themselves, or the language in which they write, to achieve full objectivity. In other words, some texts may be more accurate than others, but none are objective representations of an external reality.

The terms creative or literary nonfiction have been used to describe a blending of fictional and nonfictional elements in contemporary novels (Minot, 2002). This blended genre is "distinguished by three basic characteristics: it is based on actual events, characters, and places; it is written with a special concern for language; and it tends to be more informal and personal than other types of nonfiction writing" (p. 1). Based on these characteristics, the expository fiction presented here can be considered the opposite of literary nonfiction. In expository fiction, the actual events, characters, and places are fictitious, the structures used to present information conform to expository textual demands, and the fictional nature of the information is presented in a more traditionally expository manner to persuade the reader of the proposed reality of the content.

Genres are in constant flux. The instability of genres leads to the blending or hybridization of genres (Kress, 2003). There are no "pure" genres available, as new works change the nature of each genre, extending its parameters and altering the semiotic resources that are drawn upon in the creative process. This is not necessarily problematic, but it does challenge readers to understand what these blended genres present and the stance one needs to assume during the act of reading.

One way of circumventing the theoretical and epistemological challenges associated with the "fiction - nonfiction dichotomy" is to shift the focus from the distinctions between truth and fiction to a focus on the structures of the written texts—namely, the differences between narrative and expository structures. Narrative texts employ literary elements, for example plot, characters, setting, and tension. These elements are used in varying degrees to construct what we have traditionally called "story." As the name implies, expository texts are designed to expose readers to information, to explain things about the world. Expository

texts are often what we traditionally consider "nonfiction." This shift from the distinction between fiction and nonfiction to a focus on narrative and expository structures moves our attention from whether a text is accurate and corresponds with an objective reality to the elements, structures, and components of particular texts. The visual and textual elements of contemporary picturebooks may be analyzed for the structures and grammars they draw on to offer narrative accounts or expository information.

The world narrated is different from the world shown (Kress, 2003). Each system of meaning included within a picturebook—design, illustration, and text—provides the creators of picturebooks with a variety of modes and modalities to draw upon. In other words, authors and illustrators can do things with images that they can't do with written text, and so forth. The semiotic resources utilized by the authors, illustrators and designers of *Dragonology* and *The Discovery of Dragons* draw upon a "discourse of exposition" in an attempt to describe in detail the characteristics and history of dragons. Because of the different resources various semiotic systems bring to the picturebook, an analysis of these texts must take into account all the elements, including written language, font, design elements, and images, as well as how these semiotic resources interact and are utilized.

Understanding Dragons

Since it has been suggested that we only recognize what we know, how do we come to know dragons? I would suggest that we have come to know dragons because they have been a ubiquitous element in medieval literature, contemporary fantasy, and popular culture. Generally, dragons are described as mythical creatures that are large and powerful. Usually reptilian in nature, with magical or spiritual characteristics, dragons have appeared in the writing and art of European and Asian cultures for centuries. Dragons first appeared in the *Iliad* (Homer, 2003) where Heracles was commanded to slay the Hydra. In contemporary fantasy, dragons appear as Smaug in *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 2007); as *Eragon* in Paolini's trilogy (Paolini, 2003; 2005; 2008), throughout Rowling's Harry Potter series, and as characters in contemporary movies like *Dragonheart* and *Reign of Fire*.

Dragons are often considered representations of human's fear of fire or snakes. Of course, there are numerous comparisons between dragons and dinosaurs, and this connection may have been the original impetus for the myths themselves. In fact, there are actual Komodo dragons alive today, but they are not the dragons being discussed here. Cartographers often labeled yet undiscovered territories with the term, "Here There Be Dragons" and painted or drew dragons in these blank areas of maps. In this way, dragons represented our fears of the unknown. However, unless we discover an actual dragon hiding in some hilltop cave someday, breathing fire and flying through the skies to burn down villages, for the purpose of this article I assert that these are mythical creatures, used as fictional characters in stories and myths throughout the world.

Methods and Data Sources

Utilizing a semiotic analysis of the contents of two picturebooks (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001), I focused on the types of semiotic resources utilized in creating the written, visual, and design elements of these texts. The questions used to initiate the investigation were:
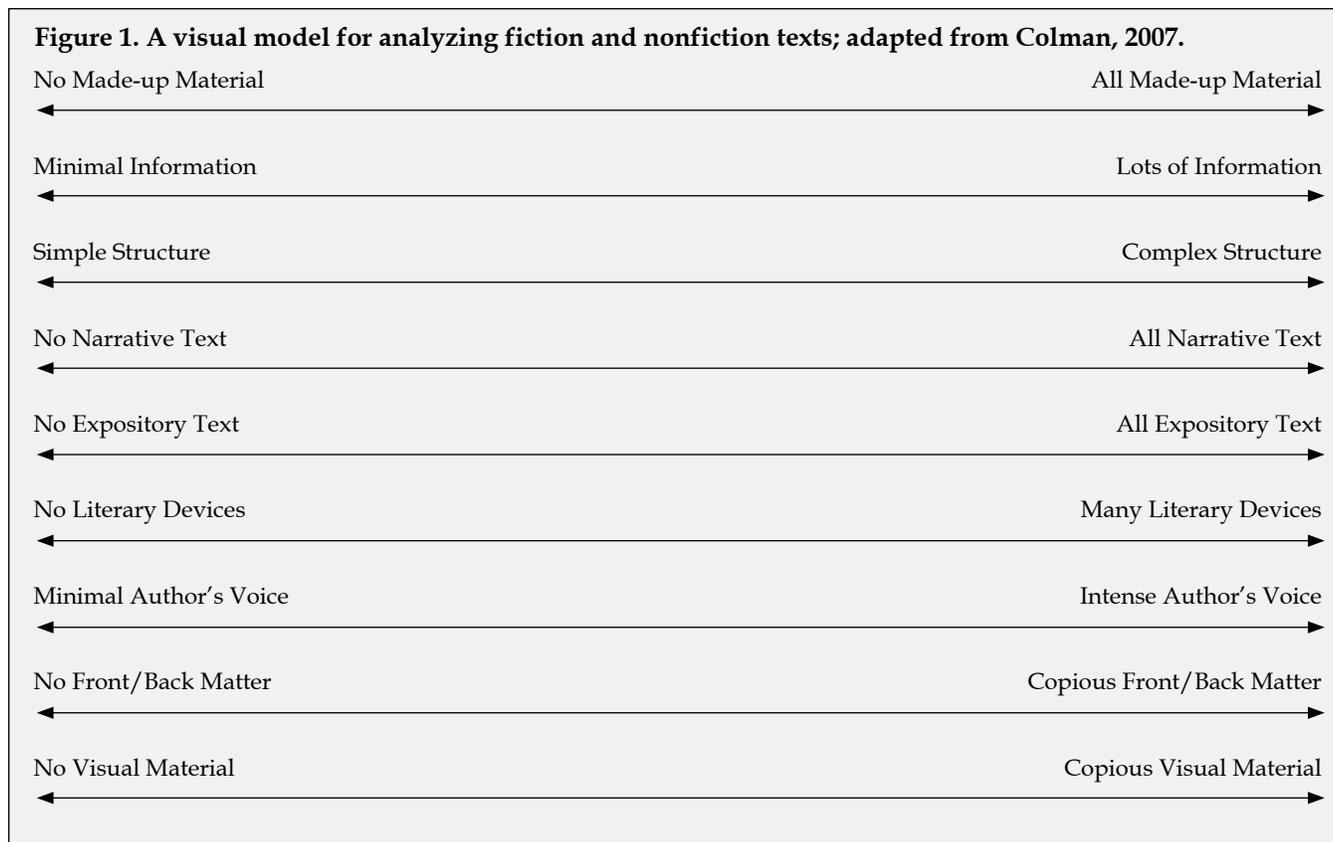
1) How do the visual and design elements utilized in these picturebooks contribute to the blurring of fictional and expository texts?
2) How do we distinguish between fictional and expository elements in these texts?

Selected images, textual, and design elements were coded and analyzed across both books, ensuring that codes were exhaustive, exclusive, and enlightening (Rose, 2001). Each visual, textual, and design element was then analyzed further to determine the semiotic resources utilized and the structures used by the authors and illustrators as rhetorical devices.

Initial analyses revealed that various semiotic resources were used to reinforce the expository presentation of an imaginary topic. Various elements of these texts—authorial references, maps, primary source documents, detailed illustrations, life cycle diagrams, legends, personal endorsements from fictitious scientists, and the inclusion of "real" dragon scales and cross sections of a dragon's wing—added to the expository nature of these fictionalized picturebooks.

A Visual Model for Analyzing Fiction and Nonfiction

Colman (2007) created a visual model for analyzing fiction and nonfiction texts. She based this model on

Figure 1. A visual model for analyzing fiction and nonfiction texts; adapted from Colman, 2007.

No Made-up Material ←—————————————→ All Made-up Material

Minimal Information ←—————————————→ Lots of Information

Simple Structure ←—————————————→ Complex Structure

No Narrative Text ←—————————————→ All Narrative Text

No Expository Text ←—————————————→ All Expository Text

No Literary Devices ←—————————————→ Many Literary Devices

Minimal Author's Voice ←—————————————→ Intense Author's Voice

No Front/Back Matter ←—————————————→ Copious Front/Back Matter

No Visual Material ←—————————————→ Copious Visual Material

"nine elements that reflect decisions writers make as part of the writing process" (p. 261). Each element of Colman's model is depicted as a continuum that ranges from fictional or imaginary elements on one end of the spectrum to nonfictional or expository elements on the other end. If the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction are determined by where particular aspects of texts fall on Colman's nine continua, the blurring of genres would take place in the middle of these continua, with both ends representing more stable or recognizable examples of fiction and nonfiction, respectively (see Figure 1).

The nine elements described by Colman (2007) served as an analytical framework for considering the various semiotic resources (not just the textual decisions made by the author, as posited by Colman) used in *Dragonology* and *The Discovery of Dragons*. The nine elements include: 1) the amount of made-up material, 2) the amount of information, 3) simple or complex structures, 4) the amount of narrative text, 5) the amount of expository text, 6) the use of literary devices, 7) author's voice, 8) the amount of front and back (peritextual) matter, and 9) the amount of visual material. Each of these elements will be addressed in this discussion, and some challenges to Colman's distinctions presented by these two picturebooks will be offered.

The first element, the amount of made-up material these two picturebooks contain, seems to require a rather straightforward analysis. Since the material is about dragons, and dragons are imaginary, all of the material is made up. However, what is not addressed by this simplistic distinction is how the made-up matter is presented. For example, in *The Discovery of Dragons*, Graeme Base presents fictionalized, first-hand accounts of observations and encounters with dragons in journal entries and other "primary source" documents. Although the content is made-up material, its presentation as primary source documents is used to suggest the actual existence of various types of dragons. In much the same manner, various information in *Dragonology* is presented as facts about dragons' life cycle, habitats, biology and physiology, and behaviors. How ideas are presented—one of the semiotic resources used—is as important in considering these texts as whether the information is actual or made-up. This

adds to the blurring of our initial distinctions between fictional and expository structures and presentations.

The second element, the amount of information included in the text, would fall in favor of the expository end of the continuum. Both books are filled with different types of information. Journals, personal accounts, sidebars, diagrams, charts, maps, and detailed illustrations are used to presents facts about dragons. The important caveat is, of course, that all of this information is fictional.

A distinction between simple and complex structures is the third element. Both books would be considered complex structures, with a variety of resources used to share information in each. *The Discovery of Dragons* (Base, 1996) is organized by the four types of dragons that inhabit the Earth, whereas *Dragonology* (Drake & Steer, 2003) is organized by different aspects of dragons in general. This element doesn't help our analysis in distinguishing between fictional and expository texts. Complexity can be part of both expository and narrative texts. The degree of complexity does not necessarily determine its genre or truth value.

The fourth and fifth elements are the amounts of narrative and expository writing used in a particular text. In my analysis, *Dragonology* contained virtually no narrative text. The only narrative text offered is a letter from the "author" Ernest Drake, enclosed in an envelope attached to the front endpages. In this letter, Ernest, in 1904, writes a letter "to whom it may concern," describing the various studies of dragons across history and what the reader will encounter in the upcoming pages. In *The Discovery of Dragons*, an introduction is used to share with readers the science of "serpentology" and the purposes for the contents of the book. Throughout this book, narrative texts are used to share with readers various explorers' experiences and interactions with dragons throughout the world. Captions are included that describe what is contained in each of the plates or illustrations. These captions are expository in nature and used to describe the characteristics of the dragons represented. There is no other expository text used in *The Discovery of Dragons*. The personal accounts of experiences with dragons are all offered in narrative form, possibly lessening their credibility as nonfictional facts and information.

The use of literary devices is the sixth element. The use of more literary devices represents the fictional end of the spectrum, where less use represents the expository end. Although literacy devices are more often used in fictional writing, metaphors and other literary devices can be used in expository writing as well. In *Dragonology* and *The Discovery of Dragons*, few literary devices are used, suggesting a more expository presentation.

The seventh element, author's voice, deals with whether or not the reader senses the presence of a distinct voice by the style of the writing or use of first-person narrative. *The Discovery of Dragons* relies on a fictionalized narrator (Graeme Base as Roland W. Greasebeam) and numerous first person accounts in the form of diary or journal entries to present explorers' first-hand interactions with assorted dragons. *Dragonology* introduces the character of Ernest Drake, a self-proclaimed dragonologist, through an introductory letter and library card, complete with photograph included in the front endpage. The rest of *Dragonology* is presented in third person, traditional expository prose, much like the language used in encyclopedias. The challenge here lies in the fact that these books are presented in an expository third-person format and in first-person accounts. The author's voice may come through, but it is a fictionalized version of the actual authors, masquerading as dragon scholars.

The amount of front and back matter is the eighth element in Colman's visual model. *Dragonology* and *The Discovery of Dragons* contain extensive amounts of both front and back matter. Introductions, illustrated and narrated endpages, publisher's notes, an afterword, and table of contents all suggest an expository structure. If based on structure alone, regardless of the content, these books seem more expository in nature.

The final element, visual material, is extensive in both of these picturebooks. Of course, no actual photographs of dragons are included, but illustrated plates, legends, intricate borders, illustrated endpages (*Dragonology*), author photographs, and jacket illustrations (*The Discovery of Dragons*) are. These picturebooks rely on image as well as written text to present their information. The absence of actual photographs of dragons may be one of the most prominent indicators of the fictional nature of these books.

In addition to Colman's elements and continua, one might consider evaluating these picturebooks by the criteria used to select award winners for informational

and expository texts. The National Council of Teachers of English and the American Library Association present the Orbus Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children and the Robert F. Sibert Award for Informational Book Medal, respectively, each year. The criteria used for these awards include the accuracy of the content, the credibility of the author, the quality of the illustrations and writing, the design and style of the text, and its overall appeal.

Two important criteria to consider when analyzing these expository fiction texts are the ways accuracy of information and the authority of the authors are established. For example, Graeme Base used a particular discursive position as revealed by his alter-ego (nom-de-plume) Roland W. Greasebeam to write with a heightened sense of authority (Greasebeam's degree in Serpentology) and add credibility to his fictitious content. In *Dragonology*, Ernest Drake is presented as a learned scholar and explorer, and standing member in the Secret and Ancient Society of Dragonologists. The credentials offered and the scholarly characteristics attributed to the fictionalized authors support the accuracy of the information being presented. In addition, testimonials, journal entries, and other primary source documents; the use of Latin for naming various dragons; the "Audubon-like" legends and figures included throughout both texts; biographical information; and the institutional emblems and references all add to the authenticity and authority of the presentation of information. The semiotic resources drawn upon in both texts are used to extend the fraudulent nature of the information presented. If the reader accepts one basic premise, that dragons existed, the visual and textual resources presented in these texts can be used to support their claims.

DISCUSSION

Dragonology and *The Discovery of Dragons* use expository structures to present fictional information. However, the façade of realism remains intact throughout the books, leaving it up to the reader to ascertain whether dragons are real or fictional creatures. If one accepts the premise that dragons are real, these books can be read as nonfictional, expository texts.

The simple distinction between fiction and nonfiction is made more complex because expository texts, images, and structures were used to present imaginary information in both of these books. The reader is left to decide whether these texts should be approached and read from Rosenblatt's (1978) efferent or aesthetic end of her continuum. How one reads a text, one's stance, is not solely determined by the text itself. Readers can approach expository texts from an aesthetic stance and fiction from an efferent one. The text, and its inherent structures, simply provides cues as to how it might be read. We, as readers, can always read against an author's, illustrator's, or publisher's intentions, even if this means accepting something we know to be false. These two picturebooks utilize various illustrations, written text, diagrams, maps, and other design features to keep the fraud intact. Readers can assume an efferent stance and compile extensive amounts of information about dragons to take away from their reading.

Colman (2007) suggests that, "contrary to what is typically taught, nonfiction and fiction can have many similar and overlapping characteristics" (p. 267). Not only can the characteristics overlap, so can the general intentions of the authors and illustrators. By presenting fictionalized information through expository structures, the creators of these texts further complicate the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction.

In addition, Colman (2007) describes a new genre—"hybrid books"—where authors label books as nonfiction but point out the parts of a book that are made-up. But, what if they don't point out any made-up parts? What if the authors never admit to presenting imaginary information? There is no admission of fictionalizing any of the accounts by Base in *The Discovery of Dragons*. In fact, Base assumes the "nom de plume" of Roland W. Greasebeame B.Sc (Bachelors Degree in Serpentology) as a way to further endorse the material presented. The only admission that *Dragonology* may contain fictional material is in the front endpage: under the "publisher's note," they state that the publisher is unable to determine whether Ernest Drake was real and they are "unable to make any claim as to the truth of this [material] and must present this volume merely as an interesting curiosity."

What is considered information is determined as much by the reader as by the text itself. Interpretation is affected by the context in which signs or semiotic resources are encountered (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Smagorinsky, 2001). When fictitious material (i.e. dragons) appear in expository formats, the reader is

challenged to go beyond the text itself to determine the reality or value of the information or to play along with the game and read these as expository texts. Just like readers deciding the truth value on bogus websites, readers of blurred genres must go beyond the text itself when deciding the value or intentions of what has been represented.

As new genres emerge, and contemporary picture-books continue to evolve and blur the distinctions between genres, research is necessary to understand how various semiotic resources work and the possible effects they have on young readers. The blurring of genres may be more complex than simply the problematic distinction between fiction and reality. The two picturebooks discussed here draw upon expository structures that allow authors and illustrators to present information in ways that support the opposite of what is intended. In other words, they used structures that support the exposition of reality to present fiction.

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