

# TAKING FULL ADVANTAGE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

*Frank Serafini*

During a recent visit to a third-grade classroom as part of my research project on how students make sense of visual images and design elements in contemporary picture books, I listened carefully to the questions and comments put forth by students while discussing two picture books: Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*. As the project continued, I began thinking about all the different areas of knowledge and fields of inquiry a teacher would have to be familiar with to adequately address all the ideas the students offered during their discussions. Reflecting on what areas of knowledge would be necessary for a teacher to take full advantage of a piece of children's literature became the impetus for this article.

As students analyzed and discussed various contemporary and postmodern picture books (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008), it became clear that a basic understanding of the narrative elements of the story alone—for example, plot, setting and character, and knowledge of how to facilitate a discussion—would not allow the teacher to adequately support the types

of questions and comments students generated. What became evident to me as I listened to these discussions was that a deeper understanding of the texts being discussed, in particular the visual images and design elements, would be necessary to support how readers made sense of these texts (Serafini, 2005).

Many classroom teachers are required to take a course in children's literature as part of their initial teacher preparation or graduate coursework, although this is not always the case (Hoewisch, 2000). In addition to a traditional survey course of children's literature that familiarizes teachers with various authors, illustrators, genres, history, and trends in children's literature, teachers need to become familiar with the peritextual and design elements of picture books, art history and criticism, and visual grammar to take full advantage of the discussions that occur in their classrooms.

My goal is not to intimidate teachers by calling attention to what they may not know; rather, my

---

**Frank Serafini** is an associate professor at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA; e-mail [fserafini@mac.com](mailto:fserafini@mac.com).

---



## Peritextual Features

The first things readers encounter when approaching a novel or picture book are the peritextual elements created and provided by the author, illustrator, publisher, and graphic designer (Genette, 1997). These peritextual elements, including the endpapers, covers, title pages,

dedications, book jackets, and authors' notes, are used by authors and illustrators as an important aspect of the story, not simply as tangential material publishers are required to include (Sipe & McGuire, 2006).

As illustrators, authors, and publishers include more motifs, puns, visual and textual information, and humor in the peritextual elements, it becomes more important to attend to these elements. I would suggest spending 5 to 10 minutes during a read-aloud to discuss these elements and use that discussion as a way to introduce the book, activate relevant background knowledge, and prepare students to comprehend the story being read.

Calling students' attention to these features helps them realize that the story often begins before the book is even opened.

## Picture Book Design Elements

Picture book design elements, including fonts, orientation of the book (e.g., landscape, square, or portrait designs), borders, the interplay between text and image (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006), and the overall composition of the picture book are important elements to consider and discuss. As Bader (1976) and Nodelman (1988) suggested, the elements of a picture book work together to form a unified whole, a coherent experience for the reader and an aesthetic composition. Meanings are constructed from the constituent parts as well as the book as a whole.

Calling students' attention to the way font adds to the story, how color and borders can change the way we react to an illustration, the composition of each page of a book, the shape of the book itself, and the relationship between words and images expands the meaning potential of the readers' experiences.

## Art Criticism

A basic understanding of art history, styles, and movements may add to our students' repertoires for interpreting

purpose in this column is to suggest the need for expanding the scope of teachers' knowledge to incorporate those areas of inquiry sometimes neglected in teacher preparation coursework and professional development opportunities. How do we as literacy educators expand the knowledge bases we draw from to support our classroom discussions and instructional practices? How do we best position ourselves to take full advantage of the questions, insights, and comments made by our students during our classroom discussions? How do we help readers understand *how* meanings are constructed from visual images, not simply *what* meanings are constructed? These are the questions that drive my current research.

Having a basic understanding of the design elements of picture books, the structures of visual images, and the various art movements and styles used in picture book illustration is important for expanding the potential of classroom discussions (Serafini, 2009, 2011). The following is a brief description of some of the areas of knowledge that would support the discussions I observed.

*“Having a basic understanding of the design elements of picture books, the structures of visual images, and the various art movements and styles used in picture book illustration is important for expanding the potential of classroom discussions.”*



contemporary picture books. Understanding the basic differences among folk art, modern art, realism, and surrealism can extend classroom discussions in new and interesting directions. Picture book illustrators are generally trained in traditional art styles and perspectives and bring these perspectives to their illustration techniques. It doesn't take a degree in art history to draw upon this area of knowledge to support classroom discussions. By simply reading an overview of these movements—provided, for example, on Wikipedia—teachers are better positioned to discuss why illustrators and graphic designers make the selections in media, style, and content that they make.

How illustrations are produced is as important as what is contained in the illustration. Mood, theme, and perspective are often as much a part of the style of the illustration as the

content. By calling students' attention to the ways illustrations are created, and the intentions of various art movements and styles, teachers can help students understand more about the images they encounter.

### Visual Grammar

The work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) provides teachers with a framework for making sense of the structures and elements of visual images. Teachers can discuss how images are framed and composed, the perspectives used in the creation of the image, and how aspects of an image are made salient and important. In addition, when characters in an image look at the viewer, it creates a different relationship with characters than when they do not look at the viewer. These two relationships are called an *offer* and a *demand* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The distance from which characters are portrayed from the viewer, also known as the interpersonal distance, can also effect how we interpret the actions of the characters. The work of Kress and van Leeuwen provides teachers with a new vocabulary to address and discuss aspects of visual images not traditionally associated with literature discussions.

In her professional development book, Bang (2000) described numerous ways to get started thinking about and interpreting visual images. Drawing on her work as an award winning author-illustrator, Bang showed the reader how different moods are created through the use of color, composition, and relative size. These interpretive devices help readers attend to the visual aspects of picture books in addition to the narrative elements of written text.

In addition to the knowledge necessary to support sophisticated discussion of picture books, teachers need to be able to organize effective learning experiences, foster a sense of community, facilitate discussions, structure curriculum into coherent units of study, and draw upon effective instructional practices to extend students exposure and exploration of the texts and images they encounter. It is the blend of one's pedagogical knowledge with a deeper understanding of the textual and visual elements of children's literature itself that will truly enhance our discussions of these texts.

### REFERENCES

- Bader, B. (1976). *American picturebooks from Noah's ark to the Beast within*. New York: Macmillan.
- Bang, M. (2000). *Picture this: How pictures work*. San Francisco: Chronicle.
- Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation* (J.E. Lewin, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoewisch, A.K. (2000). Children's literature in teacher-preparation programs. *Reading Online*. Retrieved from [www.readingonline.org/critical/hoewisch/index.html](http://www.readingonline.org/critical/hoewisch/index.html).
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Nikolajeva, M., & Scott, C. (2006). *How picturebooks work*. New York: Routledge.
- Nodelman, P. (1988). *Words about pictures: The narrative art of children's picture books*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Serafini, F. (2005). Voices in the park, voices in the classroom: Readers responding to postmodern picture books. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 44(3), 47–65.
- Serafini, F. (2009). Understanding visual images in picturebooks. In J. Evans (Ed.), *Talking beyond the page: Reading and responding to picturebooks* (pp. 10–25). London: Routledge.
- Serafini, F. (2011). Expanding perspectives for comprehending visual images in multimodal texts. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(5), 342–350.
- Sipe, L.R., & McGuire, C.E. (2006). Picturebook endpapers: Resource for literary and aesthetic interpretation. *Children's Literature in Education*, 37, 291–304.
- Sipe, L.R., & Pantaleo, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Postmodern picturebooks: Play, parody, and self-referentiality*. New York: Routledge.