

# 1 Understanding visual images in picturebooks

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Visual systems of meaning in picturebooks offer different resources and potentials for constructing meanings from written language. Because of this, readers need to familiarize themselves with a variety of differing ways of making sense and reading the images. This chapter draws upon theories of semiotics and visual grammar to present a framework for approaching, analysing and visual grammar to present a framework for approaching, analysing and comprehending the visual images in contemporary picturebooks. Drawing on some of Anthony Browne's picturebooks to illustrate the concepts presented, readers are provided with vocabulary and concepts necessary for supporting children's understandings of picturebooks.

In an oft-quoted definition of the picturebook, Bader (1976: 1) states that 'a picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; an art form; a social, cultural and historical document; and foremost, an experience for the child. It hinges on the interplay of illustrations and written text, the simultaneous display of two facing pages and the drama of the turning page.' This definition, and the compound word 'picture-book' has been used by various researchers and literary theorists to connote the unified nature of the written language and literary theorists to connote the unified nature of the written language and visual images of this literary form (Kiefer, 1995; Lewis, 2001). The picturebook is a unique literary experience, where meaning is generated simultaneously from written text, visual images and the overall design. Sipe (1998a) has described the relationship between written text and visual images in the picturebook as 'synergistic', suggesting that what is constructed from the combination of the two sign systems is greater than the potential meanings offered by either written text or visual image in isolation.

Although picturebooks, used extensively in many reading programmes and instructional resources, convey meanings through the use of two sign systems – written language and visual image – the primary focus in contemporary reading education has been on the strategies and skills necessary for understanding written language. While numerous pedagogical resources are available that focus on strategies for reading and comprehending written text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Owocki, 2003; Snow & Sweet, 2003), pedagogical

approaches focusing on strategies for comprehending visual images, in particular those included in contemporary picturebooks, are only just emerging.

This lack of pedagogical attention to visual images and visual systems of meaning presents serious challenges to teachers at a time when image has begun to dominate the literate lives of their children (Fleckenstein, 2002; Kress, 2003). Unsworth and Wheeler (2002) suggest that 'if children are to learn how to analyse the ways images make meanings, they need to gain knowledge of the visual meaning-making systems deployed in images.' In addition, due to its multimodal nature, the picturebook may provide a bridge from the traditional text-based literacies of the past with the multiliteracies necessary in the future (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Evidently the contemporary picturebook has a great deal to offer.

Picturebooks represent a traditionally accepted, ubiquitous literary format that continues to play a significant role in elementary reading curricula. In addition, picturebooks are multimodal, meaning they draw upon multiple modes of expression – namely, written language, visual image and graphic design – to tell a story or offer information. Although the relationship or interplay between visual image and written language may vary across picturebooks (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000), in order to construct meaning in transaction with picturebooks, and to fully experience what contemporary picturebooks have to offer, children need to attend to both systems of meaning.

In general, written language has been the dominant system of meaning used in educational contexts, with visual image often relegated to the role of supporting written text rather than as a system of meaning in its own right (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The two systems of meaning contained in picturebooks are governed by distinct logics: written language is governed by the logic of time or temporal sequence, whereas visual image is governed by the logic of spatiality, organized arrangements and simultaneity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The temporal sequence or the order in which words appear in a sentence or phrase is important for understanding written language. For example, 'The dog chased Morgan,' is very different from 'Morgan chased the dog.' In visual images, the positioning, size and composition of the contents of an image affect the meanings conveyed. The visual and textual meaning systems in picturebooks require readers to attend to both temporal and spatial elements to make sense of these multimodal texts.

Because visual systems of meaning inherent in picturebooks offer different resources and potentials for constructing meanings compared with written language, teachers need to familiarize themselves with various approaches for analysing and understanding visual images, in addition to the strategies they use for comprehending written language. Sipe (1998b: 66) suggests that 'when it comes to the visual aspects of picturebooks, many teachers may feel they lack the artistic and aesthetic training necessary to talk with children and to guide their understanding.' If teachers are going to be able to help children

make sense of the visual images and written language of the picturebook, they need first to be able to analyse and comprehend these multimodal texts themselves. Once teachers have a more extensive knowledge base concerning various strategies for approaching and understanding visual images, they will be better positioned to help children construct meaning for themselves with these texts.

This chapter draws upon theories of semiotics and visual grammar, in particular the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), to present a framework for approaching, analysing and comprehending the visual images in contemporary picturebooks. In order to help the reader of this chapter make sense of the strategies, theories and approaches being discussed, I use a limited number of picturebooks from the noted artist and children's author Anthony Browne to illustrate the concepts presented. All examples in this chapter are taken from the following picturebooks: *Voices in the Park* (2001), *Zoo* (1992), *Gorilla* (1983), *The Tunnel* (1989), *Hansel and Gretel* (1981), *Into the Forest* (2004) and *Pigeonbook* (1986). Many of these books are unnumbered, so the page being referred to is described as a particular 'opening', meaning the number of the double-page spread counted from the beginning of the book. The description of the image being considered will also help ensure we are sharing and discussing the same image. If you familiarize yourself with these picturebooks, or have them as references while reading this chapter, I believe your experience will be greatly enhanced.

### Visual grammar and picturebooks

This is not the first account of how semiotics and visual grammars can be used to understand the images contained in contemporary picturebooks. Lewis (2001) discussed how Kress and van Leeuwen's work in visual grammar related to visual images contained in fictional picturebooks, and used their work as a framework for understanding how images in narrative picturebooks were used in conjunction with text to tell the story. In addition, Unsworth and Wheeler (2002: 68) drew upon Kress and van Leeuwen's work to suggest that critical reviews needed to attend more systematically and carefully to the images contained in picturebooks. They stated that 'most reviews of children's picturebooks give a brief synopsis of the story with an evaluative comment, but usually mention the illustrations only briefly and superficially.'

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on four important elements of visual grammar that should be considered when approaching and interpreting an image or series of images in or across picturebooks: narrative processes, visual symbolism, composition and perspective. These four elements, along with other elements and components described by Kress and van Leeuwen, are considered important aspects of an image's structural organization or composition. Although the elements are presented and discussed separately, in a picturebook image they work in concert to narrate the story and provide the viewer with information in visual form.

#### 1. Narrative processes: actors, vectors, demands and offers

Images in picturebooks depict characters, actions and relationships between participants and viewers. Various narrative processes are used to represent action in the story and the relationships between objects and characters. Any character in the story, whether human, animal or an animated object, is considered a participant when placed in the image. These participants act and react to one another, to inanimate objects, and to the circumstances in the scene depicted; in other words, images often depict something happening to someone, that is, one participant doing something to an object or another participant. Lewis (2001: 118) writes that 'picturebooks are full of action processes, for they are primarily concerned to represent, in words and sequences of pictures, doings and happenings, most often in the form of narrative.'

When considering an image with participants doing something, it is necessary to begin by considering who is doing what to whom or what object. An actor may be physically interacting with another actor or object, may be simply looking at an actor or object, or may be looking directly at the viewer. Each of these interactions form what Kress and van Leeuwen call a 'vector'. Vectors are imaginary lines formed between actors, objects and viewers. When one actor stares at another or points a finger at another actor, it constitutes a vector. Considering the possible vectors in an image can alert us to the narrative aspects of an image.

For example, in *Voices in the Park*, in the second opening of the third voice (see Figure 15), there is an image where Smudge and Charles are sitting on a park bench looking directly at each other. This particular vector runs from one participant to another in this image. These participants are focused on one another and seem to be disregarding their parents who are seated almost out of view on the ends of the bench. In this image, the two characters are making an important connection. They are becoming friends despite their class distinctions and their parents' differences. When a vector runs between two participants in an image it is considered an 'offer', meaning the viewer of the image is considered an outsider looking in on the actions being depicted. In this image, we are being offered something to consider. *I*'s readers we are positioned as observers, focusing on the actions and relationships among the characters in the visual image.

A very different type of vector occurs when a participant in the image looks directly at the viewer rather than into the scene. This is called a 'demand'. By gazing directly at the viewer, the character is demanding that we respond directly to their gaze. We are drawn into their appeal and must consider what they are requesting. For example, in *Voices in the Park*, in the second and last opening of the fourth voice (see Figure 16), Charles stares directly at us, the viewer. His gaze requires that we consider Charles's stare, his predicament, and his situation. In both images, Charles seems to want to leave his mother's side and continue to play with Smudge, suggesting he regrets his mother's decision to leave and her need to control him and have him sit close by her on the park bench.

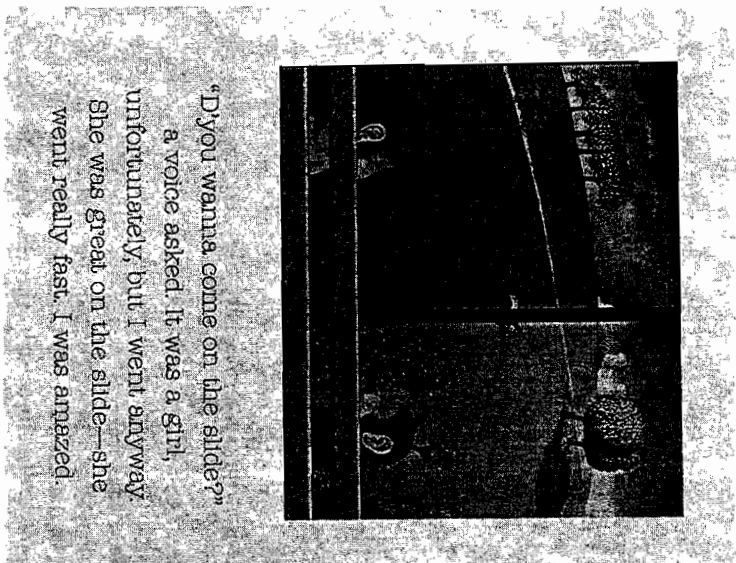


Figure 15 *Voices in the Park*: Smudge and Charles on park bench

In both sets of images described above, the image would have taken on extremely different meanings if the characters of Smudge and Charles looked away from one another when they were seated on the bench, or if Charles looked at his mother rather than directly at the viewer. Numerous books on art history and film discuss the concept of ‘gaze’ (Arnheim, 1986; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001).

## 2. Visual symbolism: bars, street lamps and park benches

Visual symbols are used to represent ideas that are conventionalized through their use in socio-cultural contexts: for example, offering a red rose as a sign of love or caring, the golden arches of a particular fast food chain, the use of a cross for Christian values, or the colour red for anger or violence. Visual symbols are constructed in social settings and used by artists to convey meanings beyond the literal level. In addition, a motif is a recurring pattern or use of a visual component that refers to a theme or particular meaning. The three motifs or visual symbols that I would like to consider in this section, bars, street lamps and park benches, are used by Anthony Browne across



Figure 16 *Voices in the Park*: Charles stares at the viewer

several of his picturebooks. I have found that Browne uses these visual symbols in various images to convey particular meanings, and they become more meaningful when considered across texts as well within their role in one particular picturebook image.

Browne uses vertical bars, whether actual bars, shadows or vertical objects such as trees and bed posts, to suggest internment, lack of freedom, or personal space, captivity and imprisonment. Whether physical imprisonment, for example in several of the images in *Zoo*, or psychological imprisonment, for example in *Hansel and Gretel* or *Gorilla*, Browne draws the reader into the plight of particular characters and the power structure of a group of participants by positioning them on various sides of these vertical bars. Throughout the story of *Hansel and Gretel*, from the image on the title page depicting a bird in a cage, the bed posts drawn in various backgrounds, window panes, vertical lines in the trees, smokestacks, and the print on the children's bed pillows, to the actual bars that imprison Hansel later in the book (see Figure 17), the motif of bars suggests the overarching theme of internment and psychological captivity that haunts Browne's characters throughout this story.

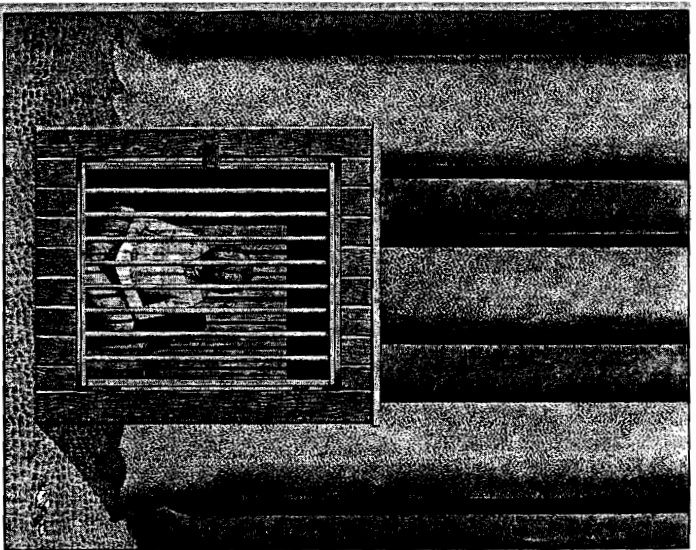


Figure 17 Hansel and Gretel: behind bars

In the second opening of *Gorilla*, the vertical lines of the father's chair and the vertical lines in the drapery foreshadow the young girl's isolation and lack of freedom that emerge later in the story. In the third opening, we see this motif continued in the wainscoting on the wall behind the father and the vertical stripes in the wallpaper (see Figure 18). In the fourth opening, in what is one of the most revealing images for me, the young girl is depicted sitting in bed, and the viewer is positioned to see her through the bars of the bed posts. This image further connotes the isolation that eventually forces her to find solace in her stuffed gorilla. Browne uses vertical lines as a symbol of imprisonment or separation in several other books, in particular *Zoo*, where he uses bars to separate the humans from the animals. One begins to wonder throughout this unusual book who is on the inside and who is on the outside of the bars.

Two additional visual symbols that Browne uses quite extensively are the street lamp, to separate characters, settings and emotions; and the park bench, to bring these elements together. In general, we find that vertical lines, in particular street lamps and bars, are used by Browne to suggest particular themes of isolation and separation, while horizontal lines, in particular the boards used in park benches, are often used as a bridge to bring elements and

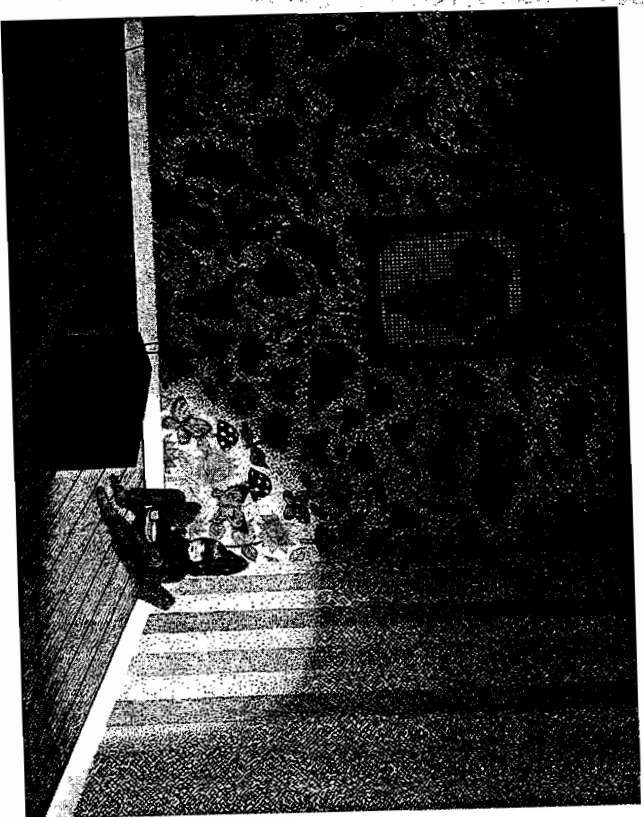


Figure 18 *Gorilla*: girl in light

characters together. For example, in the image mentioned earlier from the third voice in *Voice in the Park*, where Smudge and Charles are sitting on a park bench, there is a street lamp used to separate the worlds and perspectives of the two characters. However, the street lamp does not cut the image all the way through. Instead, the boards of the park bench stretch across the bottom of the image connecting the two characters. These horizontal lines in the park bench suggest a coming together of the two perspectives, as does the blending of the two dogs depicted in the image.

In another image in *Voice in the Park*, the third opening of the first voice, where Smudge's father is positioned on the left and Charles's mother is pictured on the right, they are separated by a street lamp (see Figure 19). However, this time the vertical line of the street lamp cuts the image completely into two sections, the mother's side being larger and somewhat cleaner and tidier. The street lamp here is used as a metaphor for the separation of the two social classes represented by the two adult characters. The fact that the street lamp goes all the way from top to bottom may suggest that their differences may be irreconcilable. In other images in *Voice in the Park*, Browne uses the street lamp to suggest a change from the desolation of winter to the rebirth of spring, and the dominance of Charles's mother on his life.

In *The Tunnel*, Browne uses a street lamp to separate the mother from her two children as she tires of their fighting and sends them out into the world.

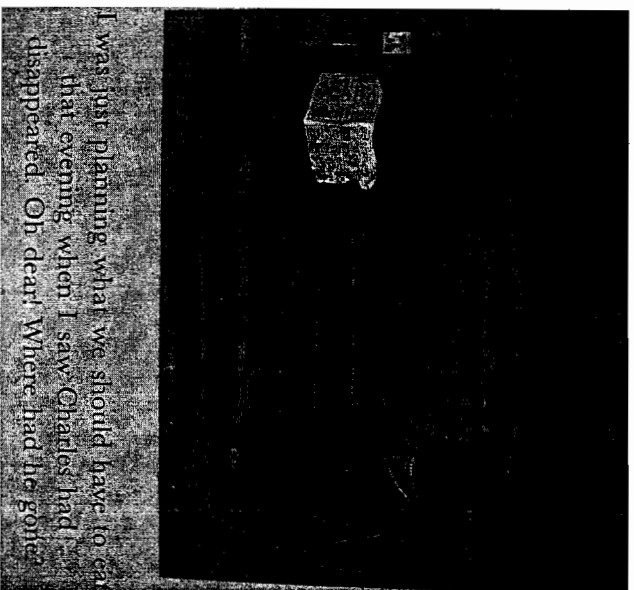


Figure 19 *Voices in the Park*: Smudge's father and Charles's mother at park bench

The vertical lines suggest themes of isolation and separation whilst the horizontal lines serve to bring disparate elements and characters together. These themes and visual symbols become more obvious when we see them throughout Browne's work, not just employed in a single image.

### 3. Composition: salience, positioning and framing

The way things are organized and positioned in an image is called composition: the arrangement and placement of various objects determines their relative importance and how they interact with other elements in an image.

Three important aspects of composition are:

- **salience** – what is depicted as being important and significant in an image
- **positioning** – where objects and actors are located in an image
- **framing** – how lines and negative space are used to frame particular objects and participants in an image.

Each of these compositional elements adds to the overall image and offers clues to its meaning and how it might be considered and interpreted.

### Salience

Salience is the degree to which an artist or illustrator is trying to catch your eye and place importance on a particular object or participant in an image; in addition, it creates a hierarchy of importance among the visual elements of an image. Some entities are positioned and depicted to have more importance or prominence than others. There are numerous ways of drawing the viewer's attention to particular elements of an image, and several of these are discussed here.

Salience does not necessarily relate directly to meaning, but it does suggest what an artist wants the viewer to attend to. We can look at an image and know what the artist is trying to make us look at without knowing exactly what it might mean. Salience is a compositional process of calling attention to certain features in an image.

Three techniques that artists and graphic designers employ to call attention to particular aspects of an image are:

- the use of colour and contrast
- the use of foregrounding and focus
- the relative size of the participant or object.

Learning to attend to what is made salient can help us to understand what an illustrator of picturebooks is trying to say and mean. The process of interpreting exactly what a particular compositional element of an image means is a bit more complex.

Whether a character or object is bigger than another character or object, whether it is in the foreground of an image, depicted in bright colours or in sharp focus, can make that character or object stand out. Anthony Browne uses each of these techniques throughout the picturebooks mentioned to draw readers' attention to various objects and characters. For example, in *Into the Forest*, Browne uses the colour red in the little boy's jacket to catch the readers' attention and as a visual symbol or possible metaphor for Little Red Riding Hood. Against the monochromatic grey background, his red jacket really catches one's eye. The little boy is foregrounded in several of the images to increase his salience, and drawn with precise details so the viewer attends more readily to his image.

### The use of colour and contrast

From the title page of *Voices in the Park*, Browne uses the colour red, negative or white space, and a central position to call the reader's attention to the mother's hat. Throughout this story we begin to attend to her red hat, and soon realize how the hat is used as a symbol of the mother's dominance over Charles and others throughout the story. Before we can interpret what the hat possibly stands for, we need to attend to this visual element. Calling one's attention to particular elements of an image is the first step in making sense of what one sees.

**The use of foregrounding and focus**

Both focus and contrast can also be used to push things into the background and make them seem less important. Throughout *Piggypook*, the mother's face is drawn with little or no details, and is depicted in sepia tones and muted colours to suggest her lowly position in the family hierarchy. At the same time, the boys, Simon and Patrick, and their father are depicted in sharp focus, full colour and more detail. The mother is simply part of the background until the final few pages of the story, when she emerges to claim her rightful place in the family and is depicted in full colour, smiling at us.

**The relative size of the participant or character**

This can call one's attention to a character's importance in an image or his or her circumstances in the story. Throughout various images in his books, Browne uses large trees and relatively small children to depict issues of isolation, anxiety and impending doom. For example, in the fourth opening of *Into the Forest*, the young boy is drawn very small in comparison with the dark forest he is entering (see Figure 20), thereby making the reader aware of his anxieties. What a different story this image would tell if he was heading out of the woods rather than into it. In addition, in *Hansel and Gretel*, the two children are drawn small in scale when compared with the trees, the adults and the surroundings in which they find themselves.

In numerous images throughout *Voices in the Park*, Charles is drawn much



Figure 20 *Into the Forest*: boy walking in the forest

smaller than his mother and partially hidden from view. His relative size and position in the image relates to the subordinate role he plays, while his mother's domineering role is represented by her larger size and foregrounded position. Browne uses size, focus, colour and position to offer the reader ways to interpret the characters and objects throughout his images.

**Positioning**

The positioning of objects and characters determines their importance and how viewers react to them. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) have detailed what they refer to as 'information zones' in their framework. Information zones refer to the placement of entities in the upper and lower halves of the image, the left and right sections, or the centre and periphery. In general, things placed in a central position are given more importance than those on the periphery, as in the placement of the red hat in *Voices in the Park* mentioned previously. Additionally, objects and participants placed in the upper half of an image are considered the 'ideal' while those in the lower half are considered the 'real'. By 'ideal' and 'real', Kress and van Leeuwen are referring, respectively, to things that are more spiritual than earthly, more ethereal than factual, and more idealized or essential than practical.

For example, in the opening spread of *Gorilla* (see Figure 21), the father is

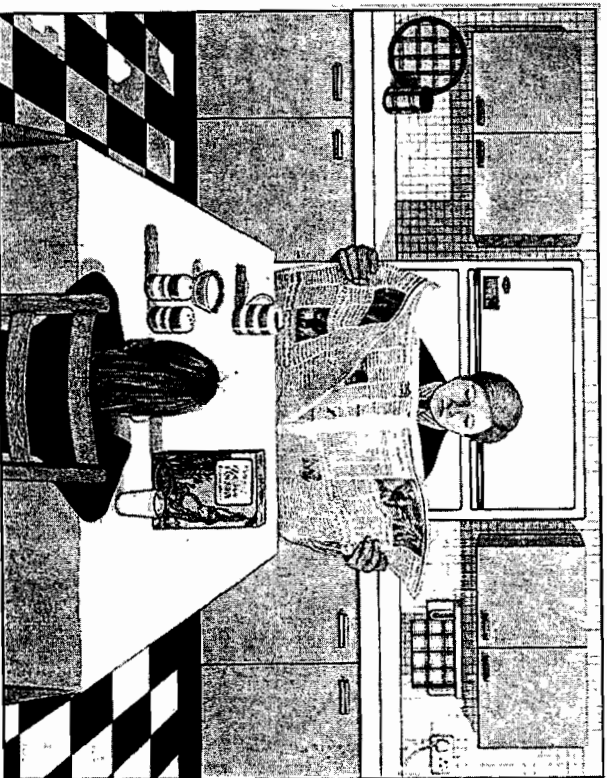


Figure 21 *Gorilla*: father and daughter at breakfast

positioned as the ideal and the daughter as the real. The father is placed in the upper section, well above the girl, looking down at his newspaper, oblivious to the happenings in the real world around him. In the second opening of the fourth voice in *Voices in the Park*, Smudge is positioned on a see-saw high above Charles. She represents what Charles wants to be able to do, the freedom that he lacks and the fun that he believes he should be having: in other words, his ideal.

The left and right halves of an image also have different meanings. In our culture, where we read from left to right, we also tend to view images from left to right. This means that the left half suggests what is old and given, while the right half suggests what is new or possible. In 'before and after' images, the 'before' image is almost always placed on the left, so we read the images from old to new. For example, in the third opening of *The Tunnel*, the mother's hand is placed in the upper-left quadrant pointing in the direction she is sending her children. We have no trouble understanding that the children are moving from left to right, from where they have been, the old, to where they are headed, the new. Throughout *In the Forest*, the boy is positioned on the left side of the image when Browne wants us to realize he is headed into the woods and impending trouble. The left side represents where the boy has been, a safer environment, and the right side represents where he is headed, a more dangerous setting.

### Framing

The last compositional element referred to here is called 'framing'. Framing is created by the use of borders, negative space or lines around an object or participant to draw readers' attention to what is in the frame, or how the frame separates certain entities. In *Piggybook*, when the mother returns to find her husband and children rooting around for scraps in the living room, her shadow is framed in the doorway, setting her apart from the ravaged house. The frame accentuates her posture and her return. On the opening page of *Zoo*, Browne depicts each member of the family in his or her own frame, suggesting a separation among family members. In the third opening of *Corilla*, Browne uses shadows to frame a character. In this instance, he uses the light from a television to frame the little girl and to emphasize her isolation. Framing can be achieved in a number of ways; attending to what is included within frames and how they emphasize and separate elements of an image is an important consideration. Framing is covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

### 4. Perspective: looking up and down; being near or far

The last element of visual grammar that I will describe is that of perspective, or point of view established between the viewer and the objects and participants included in an image. How close up or how far away we are positioned relative to the objects and participants in an image changes the sense of

intimacy in our relationship to those elements. When the characters in a story are portrayed in an image from a close social distance, we feel closer to them. In contrast, the farther away they are positioned, the less we are able to connect with them. In addition, an artist may depict a particular character or object from straight on, or above or below a viewers' point of view. When we are positioned to look up at a character, or other characters in an image are positioned to do so, we imbue the character being looked at with power. When we look down on an object or character, or when another character does so, they tend to have less standing or power.

Browne uses these elements of visual grammar to draw us into the lives, emotions and circumstances of the characters, and to suggest their relative status in his stories. For example, in the fourth voice in *Voices in the Park*, when Smudge encounters Charles's mother, she is portrayed from a very close distance and Smudge is positioned to look up at her. She seems very powerful. In the same way, when the mother returns from her self-imposed exile in *Piggybook*, she is positioned well above her husband and sons as they root around for scraps and beg her forgiveness (see Figure 22). They are portrayed

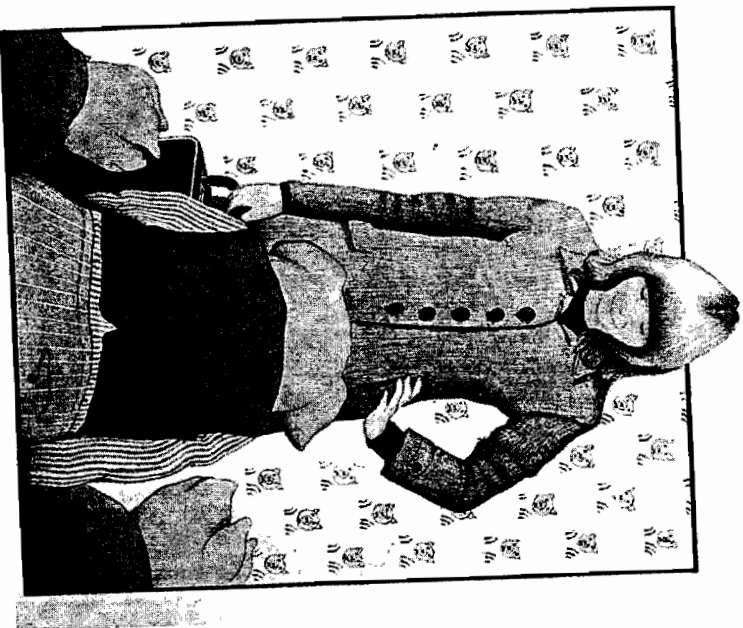


Figure 22 *Piggybook*: mother returns

as pigs growling at her feet, and so the change in the power structure is demonstrated.

In much the same way, throughout the first voice in *Voices in the Park*, Charles is portrayed in the shadow of his mother, hidden behind her in many of the images, and smaller in size and from a farther distance away than his mother. In *Gorilla*, after the gorilla has grown to full size, we look up at his character throughout the story. We are positioned as the little girl looking up at her new-found hero and saviour. Finally, in the closing spread of *In the Forest*, we are drawn into the arms of the mother as she welcomes the boy home from his adventures. By portraying some characters from above or below, near or far, we are invited to interact and understand them in different ways.

### Concluding remarks

Each of the compositional elements and artistic techniques discussed here is used to help the artist and illustrator share meanings and tell the story through visual images. Knowing even the basics of these techniques can help teachers and readers of picturebooks appreciate the richness of these visual components and understand how they are used to convey meaning. As a reader and admirer of Anthony Browne's work, it has taken me time and careful examination to see how he draws upon various visual symbols, motifs, perspectives and elements of visual design to construct deeper layers of meaning in his picturebooks. Readers approaching his work for the first time should not be overwhelmed by his images, nor by the analysis presented here.

Consider Browne's work an adventure, an exploration into the world of visual meanings and grammars. By considering the visual components used within and across his books over a period of time, we are able to make connections that are more meaningful and revealing than by considering just one image or book for a single reading or viewing. It is through close inspection of the components and visual design of images, together with a theoretical understanding of art criticism and visual semiotics, that we are able to extend our understanding of contemporary picturebooks and other visual images we may encounter on a day-to-day basis. This exploration into the compositional and other visual elements of picturebooks provides us with a solid foundation from which to expand children's interpretive repertoires.

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