Citation

Book review

Mary Taylor Rycik
Ashland University
mrycik@ashland.edu

Sipe, L. R., & Pantaleo, S. (Eds). (2008). *Postmodern picturebooks: Play, parody and self-referentiality.* New York: Routledge. 268 pp. ISBN 0-415-96210-2.

Postmodern literature has become an important new genre in the field of children's literature. It is usually defined by its metafictive characteristics such as self-referentiality, lack of closure, co-authoring, multiple meanings and perspectives, and what editors Lawrence Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo call its "subversion of literary traditions and convention" (p. 3). Although such elements have been present in children's literature for a long time, postmodern picturebooks came into prominence in 2002 when *The Three Pigs* (Weisner, 2001) won the Caldecott Medal for picturebook illustration. This book is often cited as the premier example of a postmodern picturebook and is frequently referenced by the chapter authors of *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody and Self-Referentiality.* In this anthology, recognized experts in the field of children's literature have contributed sixteen informative chapters concerning the nature of postmodern picturebooks as well as four observational studies involving young children's interaction with these fascinating, if sometimes frustrating books.

Historical Perspective

The first chapter, by Barbara Kiefer, claims not to be a history of picturebooks, but it does provide a useful overview of the evolution of this type of literature. Kiefer predicts that picturebooks will continue to be popular, and she cites the success of 2008 Caldecott Award winner, Selznick's (2007) *The Invention of Hugo Cabret,* as evidence of the acceptance of new picturebook formats. Kiefer makes the assertion that "the picturebook is an art form rather than a teaching tool" (p. 10). However, thousands of teachers who have used picturebooks to teach reading, writing, and different art forms would disagree with this statement.
Illustrations
Illustrations are, of course, an integral part of picturebooks. There are many illustrations throughout this book, albeit black and white ones. The charming frontispiece by David Weisner very effectively illustrates many of the special qualities of postmodern picturebooks such as playfulness and parody of traditional fairy tales. We see Grandmother, Red Riding Hood and

other fairy tale characters punching a time clock and waiting for their shifts to work inside the giant storybook.

Martin Salisbury's chapter on *The Artist and the Postmodern Picturebook* should have been one of the most important chapters of the book. It may actually be the least useful, however, because it uses the works of only two, lesser-known illustrators as examples for both the text and illustrations. Salisbury states that, "there have been far too many mediocre picturebooks published recently" (p.36), but he does not effectively discuss what distinguishes high quality illustrations or how an illustrator can convey postmodern characteristics through the use of color, shape, and design. Bette Goldstone writes more effectively about illustrations in chapter eight where she focuses on the use of space in postmodern picturebooks. She cites many more examples and urges us to notice how an illustrator uses the space on the page to break the boundaries of conventional storytelling.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several of the book's chapters deal with theoretical perspectives on postmodern picturebooks. Eliza Dresang has written extensively on Radical Change theory and how it relates to postmodern literature. When applied to children's literature, Radical Change refers to changes in format, perspectives and text boundaries. She provides a very useful table on page 43 showing the literary changes identified by Radical Change theory and the metafictive devices most associated with postmodern literature. For example, non-sequential plots, multiple narrators, and typographic experimentation are all metafictive features also common to books identified as Radical Change. Karen Coats argues in chapter five that children's interactions with books help them to define themselves in their society, and she asserts that "transmodernism" is a more useful construct than postmodernism when viewed from a child's perspective. She uses the example of Brian Collier's masterful illustrations in *Martin's Big Words* (Rappaport, 2001) as an exemplar of a transmodern view of the world. The illustrations in this book appear torn apart and reassembled symbolizing the political and social strife during the life of Martin Luther King. In chapter ten, Michele Anstey suggests the intriguing notion of comparing postmodern picturebooks to artifacts in a kind of literary archaeological dig. Anstey provides a three-step model for investigating these books by using postmodern characteristics to examine the book's format, illustrations, and text and then answering guided questions to gauge the book's meaning to oneself and to the greater world.

Multicultural Perspectives

The authors who contributed to *Postmodern Picturebooks* make it clear that such books are not just an American phenomenon. Most cite books published outside of the U.S., and several chapters specifically focus on these. In chapter six, John Stephens examines five Australian picturebooks and makes the point that these books meld internationalism with local concerns in a process that he terms "postmodern hybridization" (p.89). Maria Nikolajeva focuses on Scandinavian picturebooks that emphasize the qualities of play and playfulness. Although the primary intent of Christine Hall's chapter on "Imagination and Multimodality" is to demonstrate how postmodern picturebooks can be used to stimulate children's imagination, most of the books she cites are British. These chapters are very useful to the reader who is only familiar with American postmodern picturebooks, but would like a more multicultural perspective.

Reading Instruction with Postmodern Picturebooks

Two of the chapters in the text address using postmodern picturebooks to assist with reading instruction. Margaret Mackey examines six postmodern books that are purposely subversive to the traditional storybook narration and how these texts might be used by teachers to challenge their students' notions of text conventions and plot schemas. One text that she explores is *Bad Day at Riverbend* (Van Allsburg, 1995). It has the look of a black and white coloring book and at first glance, it appears to the reader that someone has defaced the book by scribbling in it with a crayon. The characters complain about a mysterious slime that has invaded their cowboy town. It is not until the end of the book that we realize that the "slime" is actually crayon marks created by the realistically drawn hand of a child on the last page (presumably VanAllsburg's own daughter, who is pictured on the back cover), thus creating three levels of reality. In chapter 12, Robyn McCallum also examines how postmodern fairy tales can be used to teach critical literacy. However, the complex language she uses, such as "metaleptic disruptions to the diegetic level of narration" (p. 181), often obscures the important points she is trying to make about using these books to actively engage students in metacognitive thinking. What is missing from these chapters and from much of the book is a teacher's perspective or at least some guidance for teachers on how best to incorporate postmodern books into the classroom.

Focus on Specific Authors and Illustrators

Two chapters focus on specific author/illustrators of postmodern picturebooks. Susan Lehr's chapter is on British author/illustrator Lauren Child whose books include a series featuring the character of Clarice Bean, a lively clever girl who seems to know everything about everyone's inner thoughts. Child uses a pastiche of illustrative styles, texts and genres throughout her books. Lehr notes, "Her sense of play and mischief evoke blissful secondary worlds even as the air is being let out of the tire" (p. 178). Co-editor Sylvia Pantaleo's chapter uses author Ed Vere's picturebook *The Getaway* (2006) as the basis of a study with third- and fourth-grade students. Unlike the serious tone of the previous chapters, Pantaleo mimics the playful tone of postmodern picturebooks when she begins, "Pssst! Hey reader! Yeah you! Listen, you gotta do me a favour and read this chapter about a picturebook called *The Getaway* by Ed Vere" (p. 238). In Pantaleo's study, students were explicitly taught metafictive devices and then encouraged to identify and discuss those devices in postmodern picturebooks. *The Getaway* was chosen as the students' favorite book, and Pantaleo notes that the students were able to identify many of the intertextual references in the book as well as the use of parody and multiple narratives.

Children's Reactions to Postmodern Picturebooks

In addition to Pantaleo's study, there are three other chapters that describe qualitative studies of young children's reactions to postmodern picturebooks. Doctoral students Caroline McGuire, Monica Beffatti and Maria Ghiso conducted a literature discussion group with five third graders in an urban school. Unlike the previous study, the children were given no instruction on metafictive features prior to the study, which utilized both postmodern and

traditional texts. The purpose of the study was to observe whether the children were able to make sense of the postmodern texts without explicit direction from the teacher. The authors concluded that the children were able to do so. However, the excerpts from the children's discussions seemed to focus primarily on trivial aspects of the books. For example, in their discussion of *Bad Day at Riverbend,* the picturebook in which the characters encounter a mysterious "slime" that is really a crayon scribble, the children discussed whether the cows are male or female. The authors' conclusion would be more effective if they used transcripts to illustrate the point in the conversation when the children realized what the "slime" was and who drew it.

The authors of chapter 14, Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles, assisted by three graduate students, studied the reactions of primary children in British schools to postmodern picturebooks. Similar to McGuire, Beffatti and Ghiso, they also found that the children, some as young as five, were able to adapt to the metafictive devices in order to construct meaning from the texts. In fact, the children seemed to delight in engaging physically with the text, "becoming ventriloquists of their picturebooks" (p. 207), and thus becoming co-authors of the text. Finally, co-editor Lawrence Sipe's chapter is a case study of a small class (N=13) of first graders interpreting *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001). The children were read other more traditional versions of The Three Pigs as a basis of comparison with Wiesner's postmodern masterpiece. Sipe provides many excerpts from the children's conversation where they puzzle over the unusual aspects of the book and make insightful observations such as how the pigs change appearance from realistic to cartoon as they move in and out of the story and how the letters on the last page fall from the text and become alphabet soup. Nevertheless, researchers of young children must be careful not to overinterpret the words of young children. For example, Sipe quotes a child who points to the pigs on the front dust cover and says, "These are going to die." Sipe concludes that "their appearance is a foreshadowing of a more realistic plot" (p.225), but perhaps the boy is just remembering previous versions of the three little pigs where the wolf eats the pigs. Sipe makes the important point that the primary purpose of postmodern and all types of books is to offer reading pleasure to children. He quotes David Wiesner's Caldecott acceptance speech: "The word most often used in reviews of the *Three Pigs* has been 'postmodern.' The word most often used by me while making the book was 'fun'" (p.236).

Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody and Self-Referentiality is most useful as a reference for children's literature scholars and researchers and less so to teacher educators and teachers. As editors and contributing authors, Sipe and Pantaleo have provided a generally clear and concise tool for understanding the relatively new genre of postmodern picturebooks. The observational studies with young children do provide some insight; however, more details about effective classroom use with children would broaden the audience for this book. The text does a good job of including international examples and lesser-known authors and illustrators. To paraphrase Ed Vere: Pssst! Hey reader! Listen. If you want to know more about postmodern picturebooks, you should read this book.

Dr. Mary Rycik is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio. She is a former primary school teacher and reading specialist and has co-authored a study of primary grade students' reactions to postmodern picturebooks.

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