

Visual Literacy and Picture Books

Joan Gibbons

Picture books provide an accessible context in which children can engage in and enjoy visual language.

Children can learn visual conventions from a variety of picture books, starting with the simplest understanding of representational drawings in books for babies, working through knowledge of how a stroke of the pen develops a particular meaning in context, and coming to a sophisticated knowledge of the use of signs and symbols in pictorial representations. Recent developments such as the postmodern picture book present new challenges.

Visual literacy became a formal part of the New Zealand school curriculum with the acceptance of English in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994). This is not to say that this aspect of literacy had been ignored before then, but the emphasis has certainly changed. The new document states: 'Students should be able to: engage with and enjoy visual language in all its varieties; understand, respond to, and use visual language effectively in a range of contexts.' (p. 38) One of these contexts is the picture book. Picture books are easy to enjoy from a very early age, and continue to be enjoyable and to invite response at a variety of levels into adulthood. They are easily accessible; most classrooms already have them available in sufficient (although not necessarily sufficiently variable) quantities. Picture books, including the sub genre of the comic book, have their own conventions which have to be learned, and the learning of them is made easier by the experience of many and varied examples.

Understanding visual conventions

Learning to be visually literate starts early in life as babies begin to interpret the things that they see, including pictures in books. A great

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many conventions contribute to an understanding of picture books. Books for babies such as *Working* (Oxenbury, 1981), may present very ordinary events such as eating one's breakfast, sitting on a potty, having a bath, and sleeping. The task of the infant reader is simply to identify the everyday events being depicted, but it would be interesting to note at what point the child reading *Working* realises that the baby standing up in the cot is not 'working' appropriately. This complication, in a book for the youngest reader, encourages the development of visual literacy.

Some of the conventions of picture books are best introduced in relatively simple books that provide easy checks as to whether child readers are understanding what they see. It is difficult to appreciate the unusual if you do not first learn what is usual, so signals given in books for young children should be accurate, and predictions easy to make. The picture on the title page of *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) suggests a happy book, a promise which is fulfilled. The collage illustrations provide the opportunity to introduce some of the conventions of making and reading pictures. Peter's pyjamas end abruptly where his legs are tucked under the blankets, but invisibility does not mean absence; the reader does not conclude that Peter has no feet. In bed, Peter looks quite big. Outside, he is seen in proportion to the snow piled against the fence, and we can see that he is a very little



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boy. Children could be asked to consider whether this is because Peter feels bigger at home than he does outside, and why this might be so. As Peter tramps through the snow, he points his toes and makes different tracks. His feet, covered by the snow, cannot be seen, giving readers an opportunity to think about how he is holding his feet and to try to match his footprints, an experience which can be followed up on the next page by dragging their feet. Such activities can allow young children to demonstrate their visual literacy. A third track requires a prediction as to what might be making it. The most likely item, a stick, turns out to be the instrument used. It is important with this age group that predictions have a good chance of success.

We often select books for a particular age group according to the appearance of the illustrations. Cosy images such as those in *The Snowy Day* contrast with darker images in a later book by Keats, *Goggles*, which has, even on the

cover, a vision of a wider, potentially more dangerous, world. Peter is older and is no longer confined to the world close to home, but when ‘some big boys’ appear we see that he is relatively small. They are shadowy and threatening, wanting to rob Peter of his goggles. Peter makes a universal gesture for silence, a sign which indicates that to be visually literate is not necessarily difficult. The various holes depicted in this story, such as those in the fence and the pipes, require an understanding of the visual representation of empty space.

Alfie Gets in First (Hughes, 1981) requires the use of several aspects of visual literacy. We see character being depicted in illustrations as Alfie bursts into the book, obviously proud of his newly acquired accomplishments in running whilst his little sister sits in the pushchair that in all probability was until recently his. While he sits on the steps, proud of his achievement, we can scan the picture and see the neighbour later identified as Mrs MacNally.

Scanning of the pictures is useful, as characters involved in the story, and important events, are first introduced visually and then become part of the action. The next pages show Mum, having opened the front door, popping her keys in her basket and placing the basket inside the door. Alfie slams the door, noticing too late that the keys are inside. At this time we get our first sight of the hinge of the book

becoming the wall between Alfie and his Mum. This is clearer on the next page where both outside and inside the house can be seen with the hinge/wall in between. Alfie and Annie Rose, on either side of the wall, become tearful, then more tearful, then distressed.

Annie Rose’s hat falls to the ground and is progressively

trampled upon as the story progresses, although it is never mentioned other than in the illustrations. There is so much going on in the pictures of this book that one task presented is to distinguish the main ideas that they carry from the peripheral scenes.

As Alfie and Annie Rose begin to recover, Annie Rose leans through the picture frame to try to get closer to Alfie, pushing beyond its boundary. Alfie begins to take action, although this can only be seen; it is not mentioned in the text. As Maureen runs to request the assistance of the window cleaner and his ladder, Alfie parallels this by fetching a chair. By leaving Alfie’s side of the action out of the text, Hughes forces the young reader to ‘read’ visually, as well as to pay attention to the text. As the window cleaner climbs to the upstairs window, Alfie climbs onto the chair he has placed against the door. The hinge/wall disappears as the door opens. Alfie is again first, and very pleased with himself. On the next double page spread he is aligned with the men on one side of the page while the women all sit on the other. Sexist, perhaps, but an effective way of showing that Alfie has grown through his experience.

Conventional symbols are a major factor in comic book illustration, and, more recently, in junior fiction series such as *Jets*. They are used to good effect in *Calico the Wonder Horse* (Burton, 1941). Calico first appears with a spiky halo behind her, indicating her smartness, but perhaps also suggesting that she is on the side of good. Her importance is reinforced by the V of cacti surrounding her, which gives perspective to the drawing. Calico ‘turning on a quarter’ is shown by the angles at which she holds her body and the curls in the dust behind her. Images are often symbolic. The Bad Men wear black hats, ride black horses, mostly have black beards or moustaches, and ride against a dark background. Their passage up the mountain to their hideout is indicated by a zigzag path which moves the characters up the frame.



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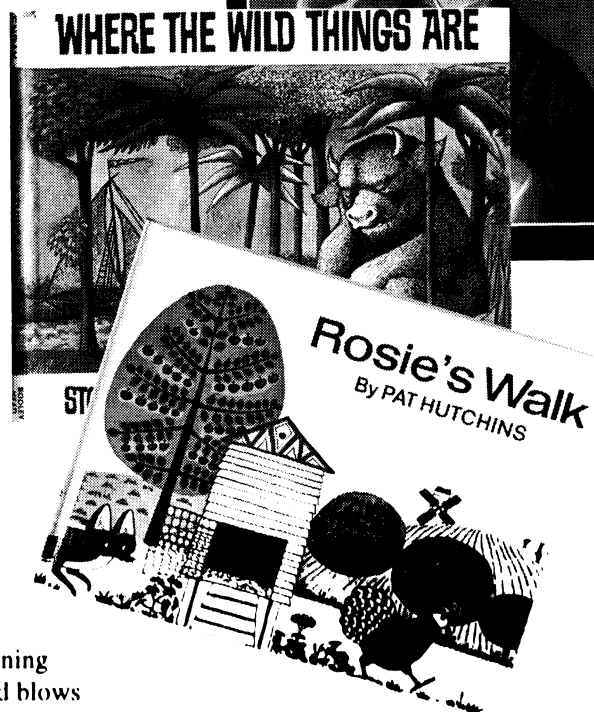
Calico’s ‘idea’ (p. 14) is surrounded by stars of increasing size. Her ‘racing off’ is depicted by dust balls joined by zooming lines (p. 15). Her even faster return brings exploding stars to the dust balls (p. 19). Stewy Stinker’s screams as he lands on cacti are a combination of decorative exclamation marks, stars and lines shooting out into the sky, managing to suggest bad language as well as pain (p. 20). On the last page, Calico again takes centre stage, surrounded by balanced groupings of ‘baddies’ and ‘goodies’ with the two most important human characters, Hank and Stewy Stinker, shaking hands in front of him in a gesture of friendship.

A visually literate child will pick up clues from illustrations indicating what kind of book is being presented. Calico can be immediately perceived as a humorous story, Alfie as a story for young children. If you compare the illustrations for Paul Zelinsky’s *Rumpelstiltskin* with those for Diane Stanley’s *Rumpelstiltskin’s Daughter*, you immediately expect the former to be a serious rendering of the traditional story and for the latter to be funny; both appear to be renderings for older children rather than for preschoolers. The artistically educated older reader will recognise renaissance style in Zelinsky’s book, and Louis XIV in Stanley’s version.

A story’s atmosphere is often evoked from the kind of illustration it carries. The muted tones and weird shapes of *The Widow’s Broom* (Van Allsburg, 1992), the starched preciseness of *The Sweetest Fig* (Van Allsburg 1995) and the Gothic horror of Steven Woolman’s illustrations for *Caleb* (Crew, 1997), create expectations that these are stories for older children. Images in *The Whales’ Song* (Sheldon &

Blythe, 1990) are soft and muted; even whilst emphasising the great size and grandeur of the whale they suggest gentleness. Quite a different atmosphere is built up by the lively, colourful illustrations in *So Much* (Cooke & Oxenbury, 1994). Both the rhythms of the words and the actions of the characters in the illustrations suggest an exuberant lifestyle, and a baby who belongs to an extended family who all love him. *Joseph’s Yard* (Keeping (1969) uses line and colour to evoke atmosphere. Rain falls unrelentingly straight down, the sun shines with burning brightness, the wind blows horizontally across the page and also at an acute angle. Joseph’s care for his plant is shown amidst soft earth tones; the bloom is vivid but it withers putridly. Earlier images of wind and snow are joined together on one page to indicate time passing. Brightness and bleakness, sorrow and hope, growth, loss, shame and happiness are all shown with changes in line and colour.

Readers can observe how an author may use illustration to enhance the creation of a fantasy world in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), a visually balanced book. The first page carries a line of text and a small picture. The pictures gradually grow larger, taking up more and more of the page as Max’s fantasy grows. Then they start intruding upon the opposite page, pushing the text to the side and then to the bottom of the page, finally pushing the text altogether off the page, so that the whole of three double page spreads is taken up by Max’s wild rumpus with the wild things. Then Max starts thinking about home again, and the



text comes back, first to the bottom of the page, then to the side, producing in reverse, although more quickly, the effect of the first part of the book. The last page contains only five words of text; no pictures. It is probable that this may not be noticed when the books is first read, but the effect is likely to make an impression even if the reason for it is not immediately detected. It is, I think, an example of something that should not be pointed out to the reader, but should be left for the individual to discover.

Rosie’s Walk (Hutchins, 1968) is a good example of the power of illustrations to alter a text. Nodelman (1988) discusses this in detail in *Words About Pictures*, an excellent academic introduction to picture books. Nowhere in the text is the fox mentioned, but his presence in the illustrations is crucial to the plot. Rosie and the fox often appear on separate pages, but they are always seen in relationship to each other. The text is just one sentence long, thirty two words, but the story

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is full of incident. The predictability of what will happen is an important contribution to the excitement of the story. I think it important that children should be left to discover for themselves the role of the fox in the story, rather than have it pointed out to them. It would point to an interesting and rather alarming gap in the visual literacy of any child if they had still not noticed the fox after a second reading.

Use of symbolism, signs and orientation

Illustrations can through contrasting images and the use of symbols aid understanding of the text. In *The Very Best of Friends* (Wild & Vivas, 1989), a cosy image of the elderly Jessie and James in bed together, with William the cat curled up at James's feet, is followed by the desolate image of James being carried away by an ambulance after suffering a fatal heart attack. We see Jessie and the animals from behind, all watching as James is carried away. Their misery can be felt in the bleak watercolour tones of this picture. The mailbox by the gate resembles a tombstone. Jessie's despair makes her impervious to the needs of James's cat, and William grows wild, 'mean and lean', hating everything and everyone. The change is depicted dramatically, so most middle primary school children will be able to describe its development.

Grief and sadness are also seen in *Leila* (Alexander & Lemoine, 1983), a book for children from Year 4 to Year 8, which involves the death of a beloved son and brother. The desert scenes carry a sombre atmosphere, and as the Sheik's son Hamid rides out into the desert the sands are grey and we see what may be a portent of doom in the form of a black bird. Hamid never returns, and grief overwhelms the Sheik and his

daughter Leila. Here, the tears are visible on Leila's face, but there are symbols of her loss in the picture too: a riderless horse, a saddle bag drifting through the otherwise empty sands. The horse regains its rider when Leila begins to talk about Hamid again, and the reader must be aware that this does not mean that Hamid is still riding, only that he has come alive in Leila's memory. The saddle bag continues to sink further into the desert sands, although the last time we see it, near the end of the story, it is accompanied by a white bird. This is a useful picture book from which to explore the use of symbols. Let your pupils suggest meanings for them, rather than imposing standard meanings; you can always bring these out later if no one suggests them.

A recent book which appears very appropriate to the visual literacy curriculum is *Highway* (Wheatley & McLean, 1998). There are maps, road signs, drawings of underpasses and other motorway features, advertising on vehicles, flags, physical features in the landscape; all manner of visual signals appear as a family work their way along the route to their holiday destination.

There are several books available that can be used to show how a different orientation alters what you see. *Round Trip* (Jonas, 1983) sends the reader through the book to the last page and then requires that the book be turned around and read in the opposite direction, using the original illustrations upside down so that they appear quite different.

A similar concept is used in *If At First You Do Not See* (Brown, 1982) although in this case the pages are turned around individually to gain a different perspective. *Watertower* (Crew, 1994) must be turned through 360 degrees in the course of its reading; its illustrations, which include use of symbols, are open to interpretation.

Books Without Words

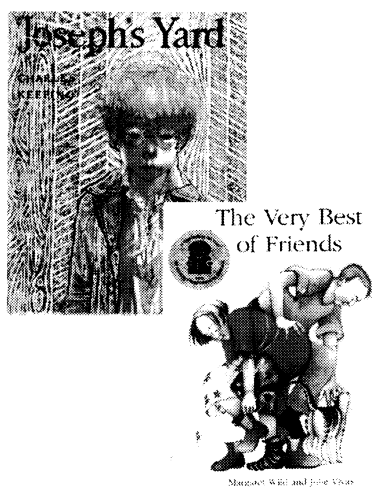
Books without words, or with very few words, place special

demands upon visual literacy. *Sunshine* (Ormerod, 1981) portrays everyday events in great detail, using sequential images to form segments of the narrative. It is worthy of study by any class exploring visual literacy and can be used throughout the primary school with various levels of sophistication. The story starts with a little girl waking at first light. She reads for a while and then makes her way to her parents' room. She climbs on to Daddy's side of the bed and wakens him with a kiss, in a reversal of the classic *Sleeping Beauty* story. Children begin to recognise intertextuality at quite an early age, and this example will be seen and its intertextual reference understood by quite a number of young children familiar with the traditional fairy tale. Daddy gets up, wraps them both in dressing gowns, and prepares breakfast. Smoke from the toaster gradually thickens across five frames of a double page spread; the repetition encourages children to look backwards as well as forwards, to check that they have seen the very first signs of the smoke, and demonstrates to young children the importance of following a sequence. The little girl helps carry breakfast to her mother and Daddy goes back to bed to read the paper which his daughter brought in five pages earlier. This sort of occurrence encourages the reader to pay attention to detail because it may be referred to later. When Mummy falls asleep again the girl creeps off the bed and toilets and dresses herself. The dressing takes up eighteen mini frames over three pages: young children know that dressing yourself takes a long time. She then looks at the clock and cries out in alarm. The parents hurriedly jump out of bed and scurry around the room getting washed and dressed while the daughter stands, a little smug, in the midst of the scramble. Attention to detail is

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essential throughout the book.

Sequence is usually of great importance in wordless books. It is an essential component of the comic book, and comic-like devices are frequently used in wordless picture books. *Clown* (Blake, 1995) tells a complex story in pictures. The clown is one of a bunch of soft toys discarded into a rubbish bin. The story chronicles the actions of the clown as he travels across the town, talking to various children, but inevitably losing contact with them through the intervention of adults. He is thrown into the upstairs flat of a crying baby whom he cheers up with acrobatics. He then helps the baby's sister to clean up the flat before taking her to rescue his friends from the rubbish bin. The mother is delighted and the world becomes a more cheerful place. Every action and emotion of the clown and the people he meets can be interpreted and understood via the visual medium.



In *Up and Up* (Hughes, 1979) different interpretations of events may be made by different readers. The little girl's attempts to fly are obviously inspired by the birds she sees, but is her later success at flying because she has eaten the chocolate egg or a result of her hatching from it? Connections must be looked for if this story is to be fully appreciated. The small balloons, which come to grief on the branches of a tree, anticipate the large hot air balloon which catches the girl but is popped by the television aerial she is

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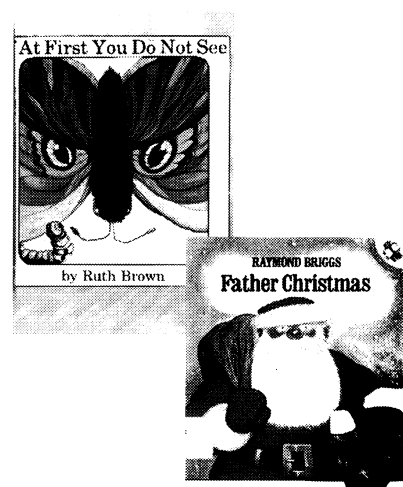
holding. Throughout the story, visual conventions are used to depict sound, movement and thought. Lines spreading from a central point depict a knock against the ground; stars are seen after the girl bumps her head and are repeated amusingly when she lands on her bottom after an attempt at flying; lines enclose the space where the balloons were before they popped; a whirl appears



above her head following another fall; the sound of a knock on the door can be seen; lines spreading outward from her head indicate the sudden realisation that something strange is happening to the girl; lines of steam indicate heat; other lines indicate movement. All of these teach a wide range of visual conventions which can be found in other stories. Emerging from the tatters of the fallen balloon, the girl no longer has the power or the wish to fly, and her look as she contemplates her boiled

egg is open to interpretation by the reader.

Raymond Briggs has also used comic strip art to advance children's understanding of how to read pictures. *His Father Christmas* (1973) can be understood by preschoolers and yet is highly complex and sophisticated. The highly coloured bubble pictures emanating from Father Christmas must be interpreted as dreams. The alarm clock ringing loudly in capital letters with jagged lines and exclamation marks makes the dream pop. Father Christmas tries to regain it, but the image has cracked; the sun he was basking in is setting and the scene has chilled. He later drives through snow, rain, electric storm and fog accompanied by symbols we immediately know indicate swear words, his progress from the left to the right hand side of the page indicating the large distance he is travelling. As he climbs down the chimney the



outside wall disappears and we see inside the house. The visually literate reader knows that this means not that the walls have disappeared, but that the reader is being given a view of the inside of the house. It is easy to decide the brand of the unlabelled bottle of brown liquid which is not what Father Christmas wants; he favours cognac. We are supposed to notice that Father Christmas parks his sleigh in the beam from the lighthouse; a visual joke. After delivering his gifts he flies through increasingly fine

weather as daylight arrives. His direction across the page is the same as that of his previous flight because he is flying around the world. Briggs creates a memorable character which may change the child's perception of Father Christmas.

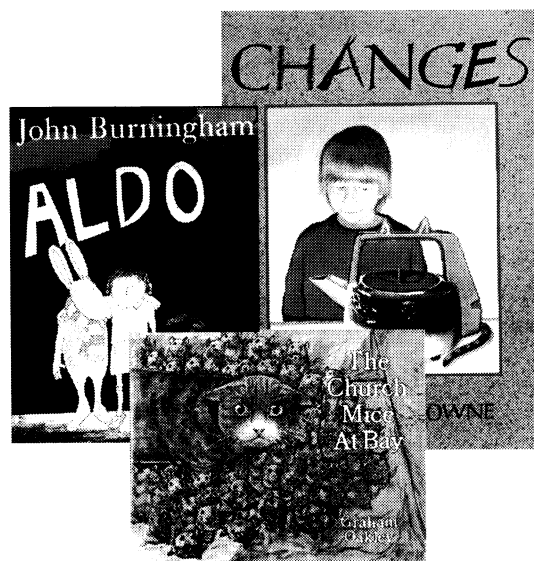
Zoom and Re-zoom (Banyai, 1995) make more deliberate attempts at the teaching of visual literacy. Not always entirely consistent in their focus, they nevertheless give a clear and entertaining glimpse of the importance of distance, perspective and point of view, and encourage close attention to detail. (They are discussed in more detail in an article by Russell (1997)). The *I Spy* (Wick & Marzollo, 1992) series of picture riddles, books like *Alfred's Camera* (Ellwand, 1998), and the *Where's Wally* (Handford, 1987) series build visual awareness by forcing readers to diligently search the pictures for particular objects. All have proved very popular.

Postmodern Texts

Postmodern tendencies in picture books have flourished in recent years. In Graham Oakley's church mice books pictures interact with written text to form a complete picture of what is going on, and visual images sometimes contradict the written text. When a few of the vicar's friends gather to see him off on his holiday in *The Church Mice At Bay* (Oakley, 1978) we see a sizable crowd including all the mice. They hoped that the substitute 'would be a nice quiet young chap like the one they'd had last year' but the next picture tells us, 'He wasn't, even before we read the words. The mice hold their ears and grimace at the rock songs, described in the text as a change from 'nice hymns', and don't look in the least as though they are agreeing that they can get used to it as the text suggests. No food, clearly depicted in an empty square, is the last straw. The mice stand together to spell out 'DOOM', and frighten the new vicar in other ways

seen only visually. Oakley's fairy tale world, in books such as *Once Upon a Time* (1990) is multicultural; both Prince Charming and Beauty are black, but this is stated only in the pictures. It is also in the future rather than the past; aeroplanes and rockets have crashed at the top of the beanstalk.

Anthony Browne has often made visual awareness a requirement for the full appreciation of his work. In *Gorilla* (Browne, 1983) the reader may compare the images of the busy father with those of the gorilla. The gorilla, wearing father's hat and



coat, does all the things that Hannah has most wanted her father to do. Gorillas appear in every conceivable place, including a gorilla in the classic pose of Whistler's Mother in a picture by the door of Hannah's house, as Superman, as the Statue of Liberty, and as a guerrilla in an army poster. In *Changes* (Browne, 1993), the surrealism often associated with Browne's illustrative work is in full play. His father has said that things are going to change, and Joseph sees the kettle changing into a cat whose tail we can later spy under his bed, whose head appears behind the washstand and who stalks the bird which has appeared from the form of Joseph's slipper. The washstand develops a face and leg, a crocodile appears from the bottom of the couch, a photograph of Joseph with his parents has a pig added to it and strange reversals

happen on the television screen. The change to which Joseph's father was referring eventually appears - a baby sister. Some readers have interpreted this as a happy ending, but others may share my view that this real and permanent change is as frightening as any of the others.

John Burningham has made considerable contributions to developments in visual literacy. Many of his books say more than the text alone would suggest. In *Granpa* (Burningham, 1984), the utterances of grandfather and grandchild are parallel rather than responsive; they do things together but do not always connect. Granpa grows ill, and then his chair is empty. It seems likely that he has died but nothing is said; the little girl is alone, perched on her own chair looking at Granpa's empty one. Then a slightly bigger girl is seen pushing a pram - life goes on. The young child being read this book might not at first grasp all the implications, but this does not matter. It is important not to force interpretations on to young children, but to let them see what they are ready to see. These books

should be read to children so that they are introduced to their possibilities, not as a lesson in what they ought to be seeing.

Aldo (Burningham, 1991) requires that the text be deconstructed in order to be understood. What is stated may not be quite true. It may be the child in the book's perception of the truth, or it may be what she has been taught to say and what she is meant to believe. The pictures tell the other side of the story. The girl in this book spends a lot of time on her own. She says she has 'lots of toys and books and things' and holds up two books and two toys, not lots. She says she goes to the park, but it is obvious from the illustration that she does not get to play with other children there. Even having a meal out she is isolated from other children. Text and illustration are in

opposition. Then we are introduced to her friend, Aldo. He comes to her rescue when 'things get really bad' and with him she does wonderful things. The reader is given an impression of things deeply wrong in the girl's life; her parents quarrel and Aldo cannot help with this. He can only offer comfort when she is alone.

Raymond Briggs made a giant step forward in demands on picture book literacy in *When the Wind Blows* (Briggs, 1982). From the start with black endpapers, the reader must regard visual cues if a reasonable understanding of the book is to be achieved, although the words are also important. Jim is an ordinary bloke facing international events over which he has no control. His powerlessness is emphasised by his determination to act responsibly. He does all the things he has been told to do but to no avail. The smallness of the scale of his life is shown in the tiny comic strip pictures in which his part of the story unfolds. It is contrasted with the hugeness of the nuclear bomb which takes up two full pages, and the way the politicians (anachronistic though they vary in Jim's memory) sprawl across the page. The aeroplanes which drop the bombs, and the submarine, are also huge, sprawling and anonymous in the darkness. When the missile attack is launched the pictures get frantic, Jim's speech shows his panic, the frame changes shape as he crouches in his shelter. The next two-page spread is almost blank, stark white with a rose tinged edge, indicating that the missiles have exploded. Over the page we see more white space, with a diagonal of fragmented picture frames just beginning to show at the bottom of the page, followed by a page of red, gradually reappearing frames, and then pictures, at first fractured, gradually achieving form and colour, and only in the final picture appearing in a normal rectangle, indicating that the blast is over. As time passes, we see the gradual disintegration of Jim and his wife. Their pictures become blotchy as their health deteriorates, until

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they hide their faces from the viewer, 'protecting' themselves in paper bags. From that moment on we see only anonymous shapes, which become symbolic of all who are dying, gradually fading into nothing. The postmodern aspects of the shifting, changing nature of the pictures become apparent. This is a book that can provide fruitful discussion for Year 6 to Year 9 pupils.

Another obviously postmodern picture book is *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990). Here, the reader receives an overt warning that the 'book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time' and that 'careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended'. Reading must begin on the title page where the gaol break is depicted. The author's name appears to climb down the knotted sheets which fall from the barred window, and the publisher's name and logo is disrupted by the prisoner's climb past. The four separate texts are joined, even on the first double paged spread which contains the sub-titles, by the prisoner climbing his way down the second page, covering two sections. Resemblances between the masked prisoner, the white dog with black mask-like markings over his eyes, the boy with the black and white shirt like the prisoner's, and the black and white Fresian cow can be seen. The most realistic story, 'Seeing things', is also the most

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blurred, contrasting sharply with the clear outlines of the story opposite, 'A Waiting Game', which takes place, perhaps, in the toy station we see being lifted on the last page. What appears is not necessarily what is. This is a book that uses postmodern devices to stretch the reader's understanding of how books and stories work; the separate stories gradually come together as one story. It is not suitable for whole class use (it would lose too much if it had to be explained), but it is a book that repays close scrutiny by an individual reader, or it could be used by a pair of children working together if both have previously had a chance to read it alone.

Requirements of visual literacy from the reader of the picture book have always been present but have grown more transparently complex in recent years. Although we often associate visual literacy with moving images, we should not underestimate the need to understand static images as well, particularly the sequential static images of which the picture book makes frequent use. Influences from the comic strip, animation and computer images, the availability of more sophisticated colour printing and graphic possibilities, and the expansion of postmodern tendencies have all affected the development of picture books. The same developments have also affected moving pictures in their various forms. Presenting these varied images to children plays an important part in their progress towards visual literacy. The picture book is there, readily available in your classroom. Use it as a primary and fundamental tool in teaching visual literacy.



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