

## Reading picture books is serious fun

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**ABSTRACT:** *This narrative explores how picture books can be used in the literacy classroom for pupils aged between 11-12 years. It discusses the links children can make when interpreting pictures and then returning to text. It highlights pupils' ability to understand metaphor and narrative structure when reading picture books, and how they can show their understanding of complex ideas through drawing pictures themselves.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Literacy, picture books, visual.*

Half way through a Masters in Education course, I was presented with the challenge of working with children and picture books to investigate how it might promote their literacy. Since I teach in a secondary school, I was not totally convinced it would work. However, ever the optimist I settled on exploring picture books with Year 7, a patient and trusting class who would bear with their English teacher's eccentricities.

Having studied multi-layered picture books and the symbolic detail of image represented by such artists as Anthony Browne, Sara Fanelli and Helen Cooper, it occurred to me that promoting visual literacy might inspire my pupils' imaginations and understanding. It also might enable them to appreciate more easily the complexities of narrative structure – that is to say, the way a story is told, its narrators, tone, point of view, structure and layers of meaning. Good picture books are multi-layered and present the components of narrative structure in an accessible way. They also offer the reader the opportunity to read a text in one sitting and to reread a text several times over. I thought that studying picture books might be a valuable tool for KS3 pupils' future critical reading.

Having read around the subject, I realised that picture books are deceptively simple but offer literary riches in the classroom. Being polysemic, they have two different signing systems which interact; the pictures and words are of equal importance. Nodelman (cited in Hunt, 1999, p. 78) talks about the reading of picture books as complex in its process though seemingly simple. Anthony Browne, a distinguished picture book maker “developed the idea of a picture telling a different story to the words” and used “visual language which could tell part of a story that the words don't tell” (Browne, 1994, p. 186). Image communicates emotions and moods. The more mature the child, the more mature the insight and reading of the subtext (Badderley and Eddershaw, 1994).

Helen Bromley (1996) discusses the role of the imagination in the reading of picture books. She refers to the importance of rereading and how mood is conveyed through light and colour, bodily gesture and spatial relationships

Why should we take picture books so seriously? Lewis (2001) mentions postmodernism and the “decanonization” of texts as inviting us to analyse picture books with as much

serious intent as a complex story. Readers of picture books are participants rather than spectators (Benton, 2000). Anne Rowe (1996) talks of reading pictures as an active process. The narrators of picture books are like oral storytellers “with the path of the narrative picked out but with freedom of diversions to explore new tracks or revisit other vistas” (1996, p. 231).

## RESEARCHING MY STUDENTS READING OF PICTURE BOOKS

Inspired by these theories, I set about my research by choosing three methods of collecting data to see if my theories were true and valid. I used a grounded theory approach (Arizpe & Styles, 2003) interpreting the data gathered from interviews, drawings and written reviews from the Year 7 pupils’ perspectives in response to reading *Paradise Garden* by Colin Thompson, which is the story told through words and pictures of a young boy called Peter, who finds rest and peace away from the noise of his home life within the walls of the beautiful city garden near to his home.

The two most significant influences on my research were Styles and Arzipe (2003) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). These influences were brought to my attention by my teachers in “Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature”, Faculty of Education, Cambridge: Eve Bearne, who has explored the application of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s theories in visual literacy, and Morag Styles who led the ground breaking research into visual literacy with Evelyn Arizpe. Arizpe and Styles (2003) have conducted extensive research into the way children read pictures and interpret visual texts. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) have developed explored a semiotic theory of the ways drawings work.

The grid below (Table 1) enabled me to analyse the children’s drawings in response to the picture book we studied. The results were far more telling than I expected in representing their thinking processes. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) believe that there is a grammar in pictures and that reading this grammar enables one to better understand the complex riches a picture can yield. When I interpreted the children’s drawings I placed this grid over each picture in order to understand how to categorise their ideas. So on the left hand side, things you would expect to be there appeared on the left hand side of the page, the more prosaic things at the bottom and the more imaginary things at the top. However, new ideas to the story – new thoughts, characters or events – tend to be introduced on the right hand side. Once again the prosaic appears at the bottom of the page and the more ephemeral, emotional symbols for example, appears at the top.

Table 1. A grid for reading pictures

GIVEN Non real	NEW Non real
GIVEN Real	NEW Real

I analysed the pupils' responses in the interviews, drawings and written reviews according to the following categories:

- Detail and motif
- Plot and character
- The whole structure
- Stylistics
- Verbal and pictorial comparison
- Thematic patterns
- Frames inside and outside
- Perspective
- Colour, mood and atmosphere.

In respect of the data I collected and analysed, it was the taped interviews and the children's drawings that told me the most and taught me something new as a teacher of English. I am going to present my interpretations of the edited highlights from the tapes of the children's discussions and the children's drawings before reflecting on their significance.

### **The taped interviews**

The pupils loved the details of the double-spread pictures in *Paradise Garden* and they enjoyed the process that every time they looked they could spot something new. The children noticed the thematic pattern of journey or quest, which was emphasized by the aeroplane as *aeroplanes mean you're going somewhere, going home although they were adamant that his old home never goes away*. They understood this dual presence of past and present worlds leading to a future blend of the two worlds by the end of the book.

Colour, atmosphere and mood as a category connected with pupils' responses to different seasons in the illustrator's presentations of change and in the mood of Peter. For example, in the initial pictures of Peter in the garden the pupils talked about him as *scared and lonely, for no one is in this world except you*. They noticed how he is the only person in the picture, with friendly animals observing him. Empathy encouraged the pupils' involvement in the pictures and from this involvement thematic patterns emerged in discussion. Continuing with this idea, the pupils discussed the importance of a private space such as their bedrooms where no one is allowed in. In the picture of the sunflowers, the pupils recognized that he was just *with people he wants to be in his life, he cares for the plants and animals*. By entering the paradise garden Peter has made his own decisions just as the pupils would like to create their own world with only people they liked within it.

The frames both inside and outside promoted the pupils' understanding of the tension between Peter's stressful home life and the peace that the *Paradise Garden* presents him with. The framing of the borders enabled the children to discuss the *foreground and background*. In Sara's words, *the boy is in his paradise garden and all the stuff he was trying to get away from is around the edges*. In fact, the pupils said that *pictures can*

*sometimes show feelings more than writing...can include hints, because the borders imply it is still there and that he is always thinking of it. They were very aware of these contrasting worlds, as will be revealed in more detail in the analysis of the pupils' drawings.*

The structure of the book was first identified by Olive. When asked the question: *Do the pictures have to go in this order or could they have gone in a different order?* Olive explained that she saw the book in stages. She was aware of the contrasting worlds. She summed it up like this: *when I started reading the book it seemed quite complicated but when it got further...it was more noticeable, the imaginary world...the outside line...the boy was dreaming....* She felt that the pictures were linked by open-ended points that you could think about. When Libby spotted the vine as a vector, she talked about it as *a long line of his thinking*, thus realizing it as a narrative link and unifier.

The pupils' understanding of the structure linked with their interpretation of the plot and the development of the one character, that of Peter. Nikolajeva (2003) emphasises empathy with character as key to pupils' involvement in narrative. The pupils felt that the pictures at the beginning were *really imaginative but as you move on it gets back to real life*. The change of style of the pictures from imaginative to realistic, from surreal to real reflected for the pupils the gradual return Peter makes to his home and his normal life. The pupils speculated that the garden might not have been real but a place in Peter's imagination.

## **The drawings**

Colin Thompson shows text cohesion by linking pictures together by the aeroplane and the vine tendril, used as repeated narrative devices to create reading pathways. This visual grammar describes the way we've come to expect image to work. Through asking the children to draw a picture to sum up what *Paradise Garden* is about, I learned much about their subtle perceptions of and understanding about the book, its structure and underlying messages, by following the grid illustrated in Table. 1.

Most revealing was the pupils' awareness of the use of borders and the use of space. In all the pupils' drawings, the spacing and positioning of image reflected the whole structure of the book. Laura's drawing placed the boy in the centre with the image of winter and autumn on the left-hand side, whereas, on the right hand, was his new-found summer with peaceful images and the word "noise" crossed out. However, Olive had a main picture of happy images with the sea and green trees, but with the border of noise on the left-hand side and with the direction of the trees directing the reader back to this noise, thus implying his inevitable return to his home. Implicitly, the pupils understood how vectors worked. These children's paradises were definitely of beaches, sunshine and palm trees and all indicated a sense of inevitable return to Peter's everyday life.



Figure 1. Drawing by Olive

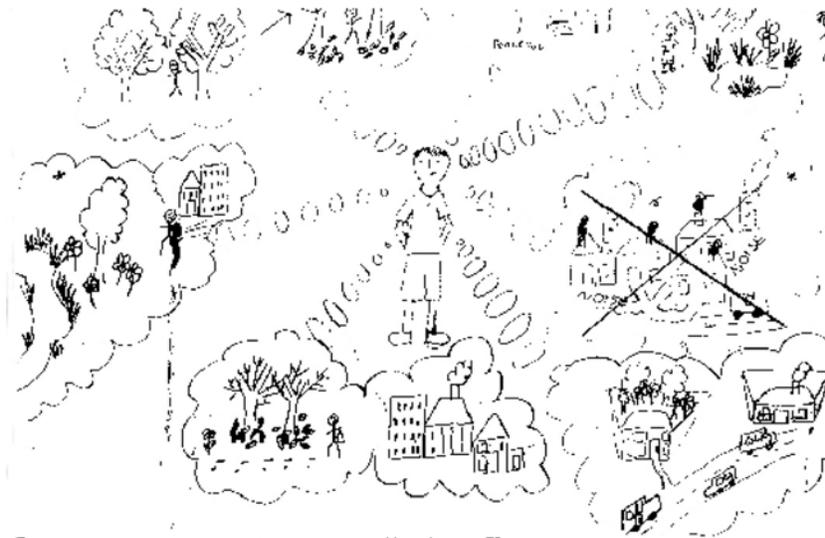


Figure 2. Drawing by Laura

The pictures on the inside of the borders were mostly realistic, whereas the borders contained semiotic cartoon-like images of noise and monotony. The mood and atmosphere were evident in the outlines used. The shapes of Olive's picture reflected the mood and atmosphere of the two worlds. There were jagged shapes on the outside, whereas there were round shapes on the inside, indicating a softer world on the outside and a more threatening world on the outside.

Details and motifs in the pupils' drawings were of representations of noise in the borders as music notation and jagged sound waves. In referring to the main pictures, the pupils drew images of nature – especially of trees – to symbolize the garden. Images of survival were used in Rosie's drawing in her depiction of a wigwam as a shelter, rather like the double-page spread in *Paradise Garden* of Peter sleeping underneath the tree village.



Figure 3. Drawing by Rosie

Depending on the pupil's interpretation, the reader was either an observer of the scene, as with Rosie's picture where the gaze invited you to be an onlooker, or a participant, as illustrated by Laura and Libby, who had the boy directly gazing at the reader offering his thoughts openly. Alice's picture presented the boy's face filling the main picture, just as the book is dominated by Peter's thought processes. Their drawings reflected their own level of involvement with *Paradise Garden*.

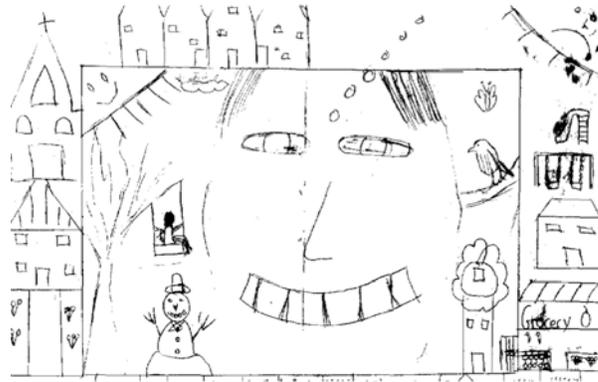


Figure 4. Drawing by Alice

The drawings by the pupils reflected their different readings of verbal and pictorial text. Even after group discussion, they maintained individual perspectives and interpretations.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Reading picture books can advance children's thinking. Just as this is true for Key Stage 1 and 2 children, so it is also true of secondary-school pupils, the age group I am focusing on. The activity provokes the reader to make connections, to read both backwards and forwards, and to read the gaps (Fox, 1996). Reading at Key stage 3, 4 and 5 requires the

increasing ability of pupils to read analytically, which are the skills described in connection with the creation of and reading of picture books. “One of the important advantages for older children of working with picture books is that the brevity of text allows swift comprehension and overview that they seldom achieve when they read novels. That overview enables them to discuss the books in arguably a more sophisticated and satisfying way” (Baddeley & Eddershaw, 1994, p. 45).

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