

Rethinking Words and Pictures

Naomi Hamer, Perry Nodelman, and Mavis Reimer, eds. 2017. *More Words about Pictures. Current Research on Picture Books and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People*. New York: Routledge. 244 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-65664-2

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Picturebook research is an eminent field of study, particularly if we consider our modern culture, which is dominated by visual and multimodal media. One of the milestones in the development of picturebook research is *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (1988) by Perry Nodelman. Heretofore, studies on the history of picturebooks were predominant, while the theoretical investigation of picturebooks was grossly underrepresented. *Words about Pictures* has drawn international attention to the multifarious aspects involved in the theoretical examination of picturebooks, whether it concerns the complex text-picture relationship, the depiction of time and space, the contextual meanings of visual objects, or the significance of the implied viewer. Considering the progress of picturebook research in the last three decades, the question rightly arises about to what extent Nodelman's book has impacted on subsequent studies in the field. This was the core issue of an international conference in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of Nodelman's seminal study, hosted by the University of Winnipeg in June 2013. A selection of papers presented at this symposium is gathered in this volume, edited by the conference conveners.

Following the three thematic strands of the conference, consisting of semiological and structural readings of picturebooks, studies of graphic narratives and media forms, and explorations of the material and performative aspects of picturebooks, the twelve chapters provide an overview on questions that govern picturebook research today. The introductory chapter, "Why We Need More Words", by Perry Nodelman, is retrospective and future-oriented at the same time. Nodelman firstly points out those aspects that have not been deftly discussed in his book of 1988. For instance, he mentions comics as the "oddest absence" (3) – an aspect he substantially discussed in a special issue on the relationship between picturebooks and comics (Nodelman 2012). Another issue he highlights is the change in the cultural perception of picturebooks, as the international book market shows an increasing number of picturebooks published in non-Anglophone countries. On a final matter, Nodelman critically discusses the impact of digitalisation on picturebook-making, as he deplores the often simple scripts and interactive devices of available picturebook apps. In this regard, Nodelman makes a plea for print picturebooks as they actually seem to "allow a wider range of possible reader/viewer interaction" in comparison to digital picturebooks (14). While technological advances may be unstoppable, Nodelman compellingly points out that the materiality of print picturebooks challenges the child reader in manifold respects in a manner that digital picturebooks seemingly cannot.

Interactive engagement with the material character of picturebooks comes to the fore in the ensuing chapter, which thus builds a smooth connection with the ideas expressed by

Nodelman. Lian Beveridge focuses on board books for babies that explicitly invite infants to bite into or gnaw on them. While this activity is normally prevented by caretakers, Beveridge argues that the action of biting into books serves as an initiation into the understanding of the book concept. Coined as “infant literacy”, she even maintains that this activity may count as reading (21). However, if every action done with books by infants – Beveridge names a few others – is classified as “reading”, this assertion has a dilutive effect on the scholarly conceptualisation of this essential topic. While one may argue that actions such as biting, touching, and chewing can foster the infants’ appreciation of the material quality of books, they are far from understanding the narrative and aesthetic qualities associated with picturebook reading (see, for instance, Arizpe and Styles 2016).

Another approach to the reading of picturebooks is undertaken by William Moebius who distinguishes “six degrees of closeness in the picture book experience” (30). The core idea behind this phenomenological approach consists of highlighting the idea of the picturebook as a work of art – an idea which is far from new and has been discussed extensively in picturebook research. By drawing on ancient philosophy and art history, Moebius develops a concept of closeness that he compares with the experiences in a museum. Although there are differences in relation to space, time, and proximity, Moebius points to the relationship between children and adults as co-readers/viewers, the analogy between the artist’s point of view and that of the young child, the attentive viewing of the world of objects, the impact of layout and design, and, finally, the process of understanding, which invites the reader to ponder on the pictures’ multiple levels of meanings.

Erica Hateley examines Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing* from the viewpoint of cultural politics. Her fascinating analysis of Tan’s picturebook reveals manifold references to popular culture and artistic traditions that range from Hieronymus Bosch to Surrealist paintings and Australian art about everyday life. In this regard, she highlights the impact of the expressionist group “The Antipodeans”, whose artworks were showcased in Melbourne in 1959. According to Hateley, their art programme impacted on the characterisation of the figures and the fictional world. By disclosing the “cultural palimpsests” (55) inherent in Tan’s illustrations, Hateley thus emphasises the narrative quality of *The Lost Thing*, which is characterised by multiperspectivity.

The significance of digital media, fandom, and interactivity in the conceptualisation of modern picturebooks is discussed in the ensuing two chapters. Naomi Hamer investigates the actual changes in the development of picturebook apps by considering the adaptation of print picturebooks to digital versions with an emphasis on the innovative app design of the Nosy Crow Studios. In this respect, she maintains that picturebook theory should be complemented by other theoretical frameworks, such as transmedia storytelling, remediation, game studies, and New Literacies.

In view of the move from print to digital media and the increasing impact of fandom, Helene Høyrup suggests three models of imaging digital children’s literature: multimodality, game theory, and social and participatory literature. Moreover, she attempts to reconcile Poststructuralism, material aspects of picturebooks, and the analysis of digital media. However, the connection between these diverse frameworks and her tripartite model leaves the impression of an ambitious but rather underdeveloped approach, which is partly due to the disregard of actual studies in the field.

A team of four scholars, Kari-Lynn Winters, Candace Figg, Kimberly Lenters, and Dave Potts, has authored the only chapter in this volume that focuses on an empirical study. Based on the assumption that picturebook reading should be regarded as a performance, they observe the interaction between picturebook artists and students during reading aloud sessions at school visits. The authors reason that every reading session extends and changes the meaning of the picturebook story, dependent on the performative abilities of the reader and the reactions of the audience.

Considering the current discussion on climate change, the chapter by Nathalie op de Beeck on environmental picturebooks addresses a key topic. She looks into picturebooks on nature and how they might foster children's engagement with flora and fauna. Referring to Rachel Carson's concept of "sense of wonder" (120), op de Beeck convincingly elaborates on the ideological messages these picturebooks convey, as they mostly emphasise the idea of conservation as a cultural norm. Another aspect that percolates through the chapter is the contrast between the built versus the natural environment (124), since it significantly impacts on children's vision of nature.

Drawing on Nodelman's considerations on orientalism (Nodelman 1992), Torsten Janson investigates visual staging in Islamic children's literature published in the UK from the early 1970s to the present. The author observes a mixture of Islamic norms and references to British minority culture (128), which relates to the depiction of figures and the use of the pre-modern tradition of ornamental design. While the first phase, from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, shows a preference for the representation of sacred history, the second phase, from the mid-1990s to the present, considers the life conditions of contemporary British Muslims. By a thorough analysis of some illustrated children's books, Janson persuasively demonstrates the emulation of Western genres in conjunction with social conservatism and theocentric conceptions of truth, reality, and virtue.

The interface between picturebooks and graphic novels is the core topic of Nina Christensen's contribution on the Danish multimodal artwork *I Love You, Danmark* by Kim Fupz Aakeson and Rasmus Bregnhøi. This chapter's line of argument is at a highly theoretical level, discussing Nodelman's concept of 'dual narrative' in relation to the concepts of 'medium' and 'genre'. In order to fully grasp the stylistic representation of the Danish book, which is characterised by mixed signals, Christensen suggests the academic term 'multi-perspective narrative' (168), which points to the book's multi-levelled verbal and visual messages.

Andrea Schwenke Wyile focuses on the concept of "interanimation" – a term borrowed from Margaret Meek (1992) – to better explain the relationship between words and visuals in picturebooks (172). As a complement to existing picturebook theory, Schwenke Wyile proposes a third theoretical space, which she denominates as 'narrative space'. This third dimension comes into play as "a result of the reader's interaction with the material pages and their contents" (172). Thus, Schwenke Wyile turns her interest to the performative part of picturebook reading, which she ambiguously describes as an "ecosystem" (178).

The final chapter, by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr., is a personal account of his experiences with the copyright holder of Shel Silverstein's poetry and illustrations. Considering that the facility to reprint illustrations and text passages in scholarly books is essential for a better understanding of artworks, abnormal high fees and other restrictions on behalf of

the copyright holders definitely hamper academic investigations. Against this background, Thomas' lively written contribution elaborates on the nearly unsurmountable problems he faced when contacting the estate of Shel Silverstein, which finally led to the author's decision to cancel his research project.

Looking back, this accumulation of chapters gives a rather mixed impression. The arrangement of the chapters seems to be coincidental, since a clear concept of the structure of the volume is not discernible. Apart from this, in discordance with the statements in the preface, most of the chapters only pay lip service to Nodelman's achievements. Exceptions are the contributions by Beveridge, Christensen, Høyrup, and Janson that comprehensively discuss Nodelman's theoretical thoughts in relation to picturebooks and the pleasures of reading children's literature. While some chapters are distinguished by a thorough analysis of individual picturebooks, others create a bridge from picturebook research to related disciplines, such as comic studies, art education, and literacy studies. However, very often, these specific chapters lack a thorough knowledge of current research in these fields. Although the chapters demonstrate that big efforts still have to be made to raise the academic level of picturebook research, at the same time the contributions in this volume touch on promising topics, such as the interfaces between picturebooks and related art forms, the material aspects of picturebooks, and the ideological and cultural messages picturebooks convey.

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Celtic Origins of “Celtic” Fantasy

Dimitra Fimi. 2017. *Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy: Idealization, Identity, Ideology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. XIII, 305 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-55281-5

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Dimitra Fimi's clear, concise, highly readable *Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy*, published by Palgrave Macmillan as part of its series of Critical Approaches to Children's Literature, is a precious addition to a substantial quantity of theoretical texts on Celtology, fantasy studies and children's literature studies. In one sense, this book explores the reception of “Celtic” myth in contemporary fantasy literature written for children or young adults; and in another it also seeks to build on recent theoretical ideas around the