

MATERIALITY, METAFICTION AND “THE REALITY OF FANTASY” IN CONTEMPORARY PICTUREBOOKS

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ABSTRACT

According to many scholars, picturebooks are artefacts that deserve not only to be read but also cherished. Artists and publishers nowadays experiment more and more with book architecture in order to attract consumers. As a result, picturebooks in interesting shapes and different sizes, featuring impressive fabrics and boasting odd paper qualities and unusual textures are published, imbued with aesthetic and ludic appeal. The use of cuts, flaps, foldouts, envelopes, slipcases, die-cuts, pop-ups, and tabs in picturebooks, all challenge the traditional reading process, as readers must carefully observe their physical, multisensory and interactive elements so as to interpret the denotative and connotative meanings of the picturebooks and participate in storytelling. Those materials also draw attention to the status of books as objects, dissolving the boundaries between fiction and reality. Based on previous academic research regarding the differences between concepts such as narrativity and nonnarrativity, fiction, nonfiction and metafiction, and the material aspects of picturebooks, this article correlates the concepts of metafiction and materiality. It discusses the role of movable parts in picturebooks and the way they offer readers a playful experience, compelling them to embed that narratives are artefacts of fiction and making them aware of the interplay between reality and illusion, allowing the latter to become part of their world.

KEYWORDS:

picturebook, materiality, metafiction, fiction, reality

INTRODUCTION

Children’s picturebooks serve as a means through which readers can primarily be entertained, educated, develop their imagination, and explore the world and its possibilities, as can be seen in several chapters of *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmmerling-Meibauer (2018). They also contribute to readers’ growth by fostering their literacy skills and laying the foundations for lifelong reading habits (Reese & Riordan, 2018); yet these also constitute consumer products, manipulable and aesthetic objects that deserve not only to be read but also to be cherished (Brown, 2006; Chambers, 1983: 174). Assuming that picturebooks are objects, they can be characterised by their material aspects, with materiality constituting one of their primary features, to which authors, illustrators, and publishers attach great importance (Kümmmerling-Meibauer, 2015; Nikolajeva, 2008:57). In contemporary picturebooks, text, images, and their material properties whether compete or collaborate to convey the message(s) of each book and perform the narrative with certain materials being valued over others. Readers are called upon to engage with them in multiple ways: play with the book as an object, read the words, examine the pictures, and interact with the book itself, its pages, and its “movable” parts (Diehn, 1999; Veryeri Alaca, 2019).

Materiality is related to materials, signs, scripts and graphic systems, physical phenomena, organisms, substances and artefacts and is also intrinsically connected to the child’s cognitive development (Veryeri Alaca, 2019). The materials used in order to create children’s picturebooks define their very purpose and action, the illustrators’ colour choices (Campagnaro, 2019: 363), as well as the stages of development and cognitive abilities of the implied readers. Isabelle Nières-Chevrel argues that the materiality of picturebooks contributes to making them work as fictional narrative worlds (2009: 119), and Silva-Díaz acknowledges it as an inherent feature of picturebooks “that favour metafictional strategies” (ibid: 69), while questioning the realism of fiction. Jiwone Lee comments that the picturebooks’ materiality serves as a “border between fantasy and reality” (Lee, 2022:22) and, while discussing Suzy Lee’s art, claims that the works’ formats, the reading direction, the binding, the covers, and the page margins not only make the narratives but also invite readers to actively engage with the stories, “and ponder over what they are looking at and what they have been taking for granted” (ibid: 23).

Metafiction is characterised as a type of fictional writing that deliberately high-

lights its own nature as an artefact. It aims to question the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh 1984: 2) and to suspend the illusion of fiction (Stephens, 1992: 101) through specific devices, such as games, fantasy and mystery (McCallum, 1996), or the use of play, unusual designs and layouts that call attention to the books’ objecthood (Silva-Díaz, 2018: 77). Metafictive picturebooks “educate young readers not just about what books do, but how they do it” (Viswanath, 2018: 68). They achieve the latter by challenging, on the one hand, “the fiction and reality dichotomy” (Deng, 2024), and, on the other, by challenging readers to interact with the creator of the works; by doing so, they reach an understanding of who the creator actually is –for the story’s meaning to be fully realised – keeping in mind the different levels of fictionality that exist within and outside of such texts.

Drawing upon the model of the narrative-communication situation Tharini Viswanath, who focuses on metafictional picturebooks, discerns the completely fictive world of the text that the characters presumably create: the text’s “fictive reality”, in which the situation is real for the characters and is nothing but an imitation of any reader’s outside of the text reality; and the reality of the individual reader (2018: 68-9). Sungyup Lee defines books as “meta-fictional mediums” and “physical borders where illusion meets reality” that, due to their objecthood, compel their readers “to recognise that what is contained inside is simply fiction” (2016: 18). In this vein, this article correlates the concept of metafiction with the material qualities of picturebooks, based on the arguments that both metafictional and movable books, with the help of their tangible parts, call attention to the books as artefacts; undermine the realism of the text and images; prompt readers to embed that the narrative is an artefact of fiction; invite them to playfully participate in the act of reading; and suggest that reality cannot be fully captured or encompassed by a single, unified interpretation. The study seeks to demonstrate how the material aspects of the selected picturebooks offer readers a new way of seeing the world (Goldstone, 2008), acting as portals that facilitate transitions between illusion and the real world, posing “ontological questions about nature and existence of reality, the creation of literary universes and the nature of human artefacts”, “laying bare the construction of fictional reality” (Grieve, 1998: 5, 10). The relationship between fantasy/dream, fictional reality and metafiction in the selected picturebooks is examined considering academic studies that investigate these subjects from a narratological and literary-theoretical point of view.

THE "REALITY OF FANTASY"

Fantasy provides young people with a world they can trust, prompts them to contemplate universal human pursuits and conflicts with objectivity and allows them to understand natural emotional reactions. As young people use their senses, intellect, and fantasy to perceive phenomena and laws of nature, they realise that imagination does not necessarily serve as an escape from reality. Conversely, it can form the basis for their pursuit of the "real" through fostering creative visionary abilities. Often, someone's love for literature reflects their pursuit of "reality", as the truth of events is more eloquently articulated and more easily understood when expressed within fictional stories (Angelaki, 2024; Ramsden, 2011).

Literary worlds are accessed through the act of reading and are considered fictional in the sense that they do not entirely align with the real world (Puchner, 2011: 342). Within children's literature scholarship, there is a distinction between fantastic and realistic fiction, with the latter referring to narratives featuring events that could plausibly happen to people or animals, presenting situations that, despite being fictional, are conceivable, and involving characters who respond to these scenarios in ways that align with how actual individuals might realistically react (Galda & Cullinan, 2002). Among children's literature scholars, fictionality is correlated with narration, while description and nonnarrativity have traditionally been linked to factual content, as theorists frequently consider that such texts provide objective truths rather than imaginative or fictional content (Rybak, 2022). However, Smiljana Narančić Kovač (2020, 2021) challenges this view.

Building upon classical narratology, transmedial narratology, and picturebook scholarship, Narančić Kovač discusses fiction picturebook and its subcategories, aiming to describe its content and discourses with respect to fictionality. She established a semiotic model for narrative picturebooks (2015; 2018) and subsequently expanded this to form a semiotic model for nonnarrative picturebooks. She defines nonnarrative picturebooks as texts that incorporate both factual and fictional elements, noting that, apart from describing real-world people, objects, events, or phenomena, they may also explore beliefs or fictional concepts. Narančić Kovač underlines that while the discourses of fictional and nonfictional texts may offer an array of strategies for conveying meanings, most of them being nonfictional, the line between fictional and nonfictional is indeed thin (Narančić Kovač, 2021:70). After all, items of knowledge and ideas do not necessarily refer exclusively to factual reality, but rather include abstract concepts and fiction-

al worlds. Drawing on Marie-Laure Ryan’s concept of the “storyworld” (Ryan, 2014) – a term encompassing both factual and fictional stories – she contends that a narrative is typically classified as nonfiction if it depicts a storyworld on the same ontological plane as the real-life author and reader. She proposes that if a narrative aligns with a storyworld that exists at the same level as the real-world author and reader, it is nonfiction – just like it similarly happens with nonnarrative texts referencing real-world elements (Narančić Kovač, 2020: 70).

Narančić Kovač claims that in narrative nonfiction picturebooks, the verbal discourse typically provides expository information aligned with real-world knowledge, and the pictures correspond to this factual basis (2021). The latter argument verifies Ryan’s reasoning, according to which “a text of non-fiction cannot use fictional devices without losing its credibility, [while] a fictional text can always imitate non-fiction” (2010: 10). Narrative voices in these picturebooks employ storytelling devices to structure information, whereas nonnarrative texts rely on logical or scientific methodologies, such as comparison, classification, description, and explanation, to organise content. Conversely, nonnarrative nonfiction picturebooks may blend fictional and factual elements within the same work while maintaining an overall nonfictional purpose. In these texts, imaginative or invented elements appear primarily in the visual discourse, retaining their fictional status only when associated with fantasy contexts. When pictures evoke realistic rather than fantastical concepts, their nonfictional integrity is upheld by the factual nature of the accompanying verbal text, as the images derive their nonfictional status from the words. Only when visual elements represent something that cannot be related to factual reality do they introduce a fictional aspect to the nonfictional composition.

Narančić Kovač’s analysis regarding the structure of nonnarrative and narrative picturebooks recognises that both forms utilise multimodal discourse, foster intermodal relationships, convey layered meanings, and encourage readers’ active engagement through exploration, interaction, and inquiry. However, nonnarrative picturebooks diverge by not conveying linear stories or constructing storyworlds. Instead, they present structured information and knowledge, inviting readers to engage with the content through a dynamic, dialogic exchange rather than narrative immersion. Kovač underlines that the nonfictionality of children’s books is secured through their educational function, while the foundation of fictionality is rooted in the game of make-believe; however, she stresses that this metafictional play (through invented concepts, layered meanings, and the interactive elements encouraged by picturebook discourse) remains anchored in the reader’s own re-

al-world experience, with the distinction between fiction and nonfiction being ultimately influenced by her interpretation.

According to metafiction scholars, fiction represents, reconstructs and re-invents reality (Waugh, 1984), and metafictional strategies highlight the disparity between the world depicted in literature and actual reality, intentionally exposing the conventions that realistic fiction uses to construct fictional worlds. This approach reveals narratives as word constructions rather than direct reflections of reality (Silva-Díaz, *ibid*: 69). Ann Grieve in *Metafictional Play in Children's Fiction* refers to the “doubly fictional worlds” (*ibid*: 10), that is, the invented worlds that can be found within invented worlds; in these layered fictional constructs, one possible world becomes accessible from within another by means of manipulating entities within the initial world. A secondary world is considered accessible if it can be imagined or conceived by the inhabitants of the primary world. Mary Holland discusses metafictional realism, identifying it as “a new kind of metafiction”, in which the metafictional foregrounding, if the composition process produces a sense of the real authors’ presence, encourages an encounter with the reader (Holland, 2020). In conclusion, separating factual from fictional narratives is a controversial task since fiction and reality rely on each other (Nikolajeva, 1996: 7-8, 207) to the extent that, trying to circumscribe fiction and non-fiction into predefined categories, constitutes an eternal quest for the ouroboros tail.

MATERIAL AND SENSORY ASPECTS OF PICTUREBOOKS

According to the existing literature, the term “movable books” encompasses a wide array of interactive and creatively designed children’s books that incorporate diverse materials, engaging formats, and activities to stimulate the readers’ imagination and cognitive development, which have existed for centuries (Haining, 1979; Montanaro Staples, 2018: 180). They obtain movable parts such as acetate pages, flaps, slots, slipcases, wheels, toys, three-dimensional cards, and other artefacts, such as colouring pencils or stickers, thus inviting children to use these gadgets which function “as statements about the artefact in which they figure” (Ommundsen, 1990:172), to use metafiction theorists’ words. Movable parts create the illusions of movement, challenge the traditional codex and its fixed way of reading and are made of imaginative materials, such as shiny cardboard, wood, plastic, cloth, edible materials, etc. (Ramos, 2019; Reid-Walsh, 2012; Reynolds,

2010: 156). Since these may adopt any form of contemporary art and craft, movable books often turn out to be hybrid objects that are both books and toys (Hurst, 1995), as well as crossover readings that invite adults to interact with them to interpret the words, the images and their material structures (Beckett, 2012: 19-80; Kreider, 2015). Movable books feature various innovative types: for example, there exists an extensive range of books that engage the reader to participate in specific actions, such as building, piling up/stacking, setting up, painting, arranging and gardening. There are also books with fold-out or acetate pages, accordion fold books, or carousel books, like *The Carousel of Animals* (2018) (Figure 1) of Gerard Lo Monaco; a book that serves as a game, inviting readers to meet new, different animals and worlds as they “ride” the carousel. Its movable parts and the reader herself assume responsibility for the telling of the tale, which is told differently with every new spin, allowing fiction to become part of the readers’ world.



FIGURE 1 Gerard Lo Monaco’s *The Carousel of Animals* (2018), Shelf Publications

Pop-up books are also popular, with their three-dimensional pages inviting readers into a complicated world; their materiality may provide a sense of reality to readers but, at the same time, compel them to realise that they are objects that allow physical reality and imagination to interact. Miriam Körner’s pop-up book titled *Fox and Bear* (2022) (Figure 2) could be characterised as a material part of a child’s and an adult’s act of reading and arguably its material agency, as it cannot be unno-

ticed, has the potential to forge an emotional connection between the book itself, the message it carries and its audience. Körner aims to underline the profound disruption of a forest’s natural equilibrium, underscoring the environmental consequences of unchecked industrial expansion and the abandonment of sustainable practices. The book is made of reused paper cutouts and recycled cardboard dioramas that operate in tandem with the text and the illustrations as a third narrative system.



FIGURE 2 *Fox and Bear* (2022) by Miriam Körner, Red Deer Press Inc.

Books with mix-and-match pages that invite readers to flip them are also much-liked and admired, such as Emily Gravett’s *Spells* (2008) (Figure 3). In it, Gravett’s approach, which consists of using torn pages as part of the narrative, elevates the reading experience; it invites the audience to consider how the physicality of a text itself can transform meaning and prompts them to engage not only with words, but also with the way they are visually and materially pre-



FIGURE 3 Emily Gravett’s *Spells* (2008), Pan Macmillan

sented, making every tear and rearranged fragment a potential shift in the story’s reality. In *Spells*, the horizontally split pages enable readers to “cast” their own spell-combinations along with the little green frog, whose wish is to become a prince but forgets to read the fine print as he tears through the book. Until the frog completes his effort to put the spell together from all the ripped pages, it turns into various creatures before becoming transformed into a prince and, therefore, multiple characters become involved in the storytelling, assuming the roles of the “author” and the “illustrator” within the text.

AIM OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Even though the scholarly discussion about the material/structural aspect of children’s picturebooks is not exhausted, it is undeniable that the materials for the creation or technical aspects of page flipping and decoration are not randomly chosen; they can actively challenge the writing, storytelling, or the reading process as well as support or subvert the ideology of words and images. For the purpose of this study, the research material consists of six multisensory picturebooks in which content, materiality, graphic design, shape, texture, and colour transform into verbal, visual and tactile narratives and may foster embodied experiences, juxtaposing the illusion of reality and the reality of fantasy, as well as the limits of our knowledge about things. All books are addressed to both adult and underage readers. As they deal with their “real” experiences, they invite them to go beyond a literal interpretation and challenge them to participate in a playful reading experience. At the same time, they prompt them to pay attention to the spatial presence of the book –objects for interpreting the denotative and connotative meanings of the text and the visual images – while relying on their previous experiences, imagination, and creativity.

In the selected books, messages are conveyed by words, images and materiality, precisely all three dimensions of picturebooks: objects that concern (i) the materials the picturebooks are composed of, (ii) the type of books, and (iii) the types of actions that are associated with picturebooks as objects. Acknowledging that readers of multisensory books rely on the text, images, and their senses to comprehend their meaning and messages (Messerli, 2018), this article examines whether the material aspects of each selected book facilitate the readers’ interaction while supporting the ideological messages of the visual and verbal modalities. The article also examines

whether materiality challenges the readers' established perceptions about fiction and reality while encouraging them to seek knowledge in the most unlikely places, striking a balance between truth and dream, objectivity and subjectivity, evidence for something real and the sense that it exists even if it is not visible.

As mentioned above, both metafictional texts and movable picturebooks require a high degree of play and interaction on behalf of the readers, challenge the storytelling process as they create multiple levels of reality –especially in the cases where they deal with real concepts in the verbal discourse –while inviting readers to enter into the world of picturebooks in order for the stories' "meaning to become complete" (Viswanath, *ibid*: 68). Therefore, this research relies on the existing literature regarding the physical properties of book-objects and how their material qualities can generate a tension between reality and fiction; on studies concerning metafictional picturebooks and those that recognise book objects as metafictional texts; and on academic studies that discuss the relationship between fiction and reality from a narratological, and literary-theoretical point of view.

ANALYSIS

When the Sun Goes to Sleep

Accordion books (also known as concertina books, fanfolds, oriental fold books, panorama books, orihon or leporellos) are created from a long strip of paper that folds back and forth upon itself. They can be read in multiple ways, stimulating all the senses of the readers and encouraging both physical and mental interaction with the book. One can read them as double books, look at individual folds or separate pages, and read them whether from left to right or from back to front. Additionally, readers can unfold the entire book to have a better view of the sequence of images (Beckett, 2012: 64-66). This allows them to acquire an idea about the story's beginning and end, even if the plot involves dreamlike discourse and/or imagery. Such an experience is traditionally viewed as chaotic, where something is perceived as true but is not real. Consequently, the narrative may appear disjointed, lacking a clear beginning, middle, and ending (States, 1990: 28).

Accordion books can stand and be placed on a table or the floor, thereby opening new reading perspectives (Beckett, 2014: 62). They can even be folded to

form a circle, allowing the reader to make associations with circular patterns and ideas (Smith, 2000: 63), as in the case of *When the Sun Goes to Sleep* (2020) by Argyro Pipini (Figure 4). This picturebook sets the scene for interactivity, inviting readers to use their imagination to explore its meanings, engaging them in an intellectual game; its discourses combine both fictional concepts, representing events that cannot be related to factual reality, as well as nonfictional ones, such as animals, countries, and phenomena of the real world, in the same work. The book spans over 2.5 meters in total length and leverages the accordion book’s possibilities in expressing movement and the passage of time. The work verbally, visually, and kinaesthetically communicates the daily cycle on Earth. The simplicity of this accordion book, combined with its creative versatility, makes it particularly effective in engaging children in storytelling. Its format allows the narrative to adopt a circular structure, looping back on itself. Moreover, the front and back texts can be read independently, creating two distinct yet parallel story-worlds within the same work.



FIGURE 4 A. Pipini’s *When Sun goes to Sleep*. (Il. Iris Samartzi). Martis

Taking it out of its protective cover, the reader reads that “when the Sun goes to sleep, and grown-ups finish dinner, when birds stop singing, and flowers close their petals, when the sea calms down, and darkness covers the mountains, when the moon floats in the sky, and the Evening Star adorns the firmament [...] Sleep arrives”¹. Thus, narration delves into the world of dreams, the intermediate space between objective and subjective truth and imagination, while its material quality presents the book’s nonfictional content to readers. Turning the pages slows down the reading process, much like time slows down in dreams. Moreover, the sense of fluidity in the dream and the sequence of dreamy impressions is supported by the unfolding process of the book’s pages.

¹ This book is originally written in Greek. For the purposes of this article, extracts have been translated from Greek to English by the author herself.

The visual discourse introduces a fictional aspect to the book’s nonfictional composition, as it draws readers into a dreamy journey of seven days, during which Sleep takes children on a ride to “wondrous worlds”, “to the moon, to a feline wedding”, “to England and India” and “to the jungle”, where “zebras complain because they don’t want to learn spelling” and “hippos are bored in History and Geography lessons”. As in fairy tales, the phenomenon of anthropomorphism is evident in the narration, hence underlining the hybridism of the accordion book format. Sleep is depicted as a man who “wears pyjamas and socks”, “carries blankets and little bears”, and encourages children “to form a choir” with elephants. One side of the book features a checkered design pattern reminiscent of a fluffy quilt, and, on the other side, when all the images are unfolded, a child appears surrendered to his dreams, wearing a sleeping cap and pyjamas. In the pyjamas pocket hides the smiling Sun, ready to appear once the dream ends. All aspects of the depicted child’s dream are contained within the folds of the book, and readers can follow whichever reading path they desire.

Isol’s Nocturne: Dream Recipes

Dreams are understood as mental images created by human imagination, based on impressions of the soul, which are liberated during sleep (Harris, 2009: 254-255); as the medium that reveals the truth about ourselves (Zhu, 2013: 664-667); and as a mechanism that fulfils unconscious desires that, during sleep, intertwine with ideas, recent memories, and emotions (Ragland, 2000: 64-74). Due to their mysterious nature, dreams often serve as plot elements in literary stories (Brown, 1999), as in the case of *Nocturne: Dream Recipes* (2012) by Isol (Figure 5). Its structure has physical, sensory, and metaphoric qualities, with readers being drawn into a revelatory journey between reality and imagination, where they are called to bring order to the mystery of dreams as they interact with the book. This picturebook crosses the borderline between fiction and reality as it evokes two storyworlds; its materiality sets the scene for interrogation, and its visual discourses present two realities in parallel: one of them refers to a storyworld existing at the same level as the real author and the real reader of the text, whereas the second one gives “real” substance to the dreams depicted in the book. Each page simultaneously narrates two different stories (Figures 6,7) that readers can see as soon as they illuminate the pages of the book with a flashlight and then darken the environment to discern what lies within each page. Nocturne prompts

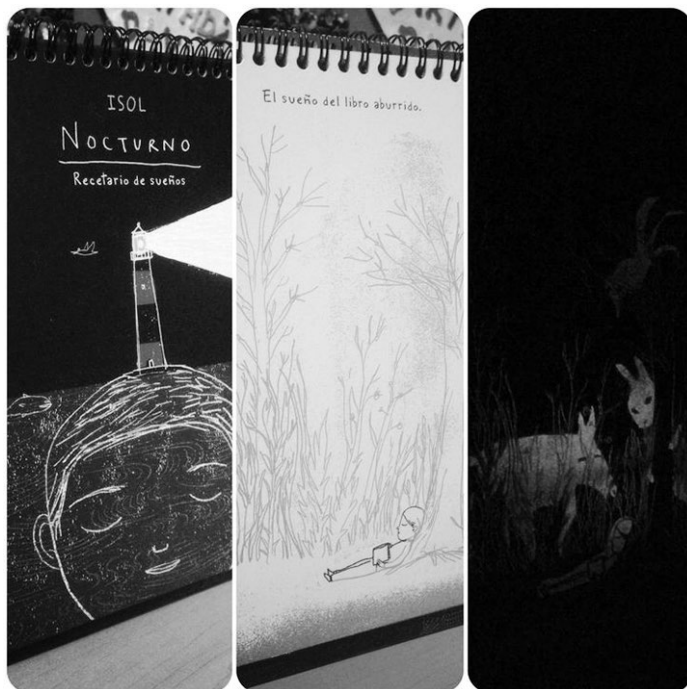


FIGURE 5 A. Isol's Nocturno: *Dream Recipes* (2012) (Trans. E. Amado), Groundwood Books

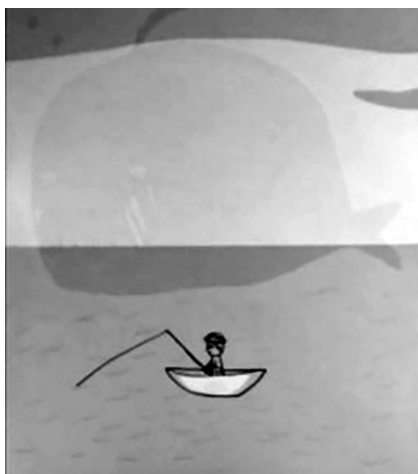


FIGURE 6, 7

children to transform the phosphorescent images into verbal narratives and to give substance to the depicted dreams. This book is not the only one that reveals the artist’s inclination to experiment with the book format in an attempt to question the hegemony of the classic story and blur the boundaries between fiction and reality: Isol’s work, *It’s Useful to Have a Duck* (2007) (Figure 8), is a nonfictional picturebook that, despite combining different reference worlds, manages to preserve its unity. It requires physical manipulation and interaction, as well as readers’ interpretation.

It’s Useful to Have a Duck; It’s Useful to Have a Boy

Both the verbal and visual narration, aided by materiality, in this ‘dos à dos’ format, meaning ‘back-to-back’ (Veryeri Alaca, 2018: 66), stimulates a special physical and cognitive interaction with readers, fostering their empathy and broadening their perception of reality. As soon as they take this accordion book off its slipcase, since it cannot be read only in a single direction and linear order is altered, readers can recount two different realities, depending on the storyteller’s perspective. Should readers choose to read the boy’s story, who exists at the same level as the real-world author and reader, they learn that he “finds a duck” and “rides it like a riding horse”. By turning the book over, they find the same story told from the duck’s point of view, which interprets its riding as “a rubbing in his back”. Accordingly, the duck “uses the boy’s head to see the view” and believes that “he gives him kisses”, whereas, on the back, the boy informs the readers that



FIGURE 8 Isol’s *It’s Useful to Have a Duck; It’s Useful to Have a Boy* (2007) (Trans. E. Amado), Groundwood Books

“he uses the duck as a hat” and that “it can be a whistle or a straw”. It could thus be argued that accordion books support the exploration of diversity and, through their unfolding, readers can develop their sensitivity and respect for diversity. The boy’s perspective is narrated in a yellow background. If the story is read from the duck’s perspective, narrating how it feels to have a little boy, the background becomes blue, and the book acquires a different title: *It’s Useful to Have a Boy*.

There’s a ghost in this house

Another picturebook that encourages the readers’ participation and understanding of the actions of the author, illustrator, characters and readers, while broadening their imagination and idea of reality through sensory, playful materiality, is Oliver Jeffers’ *There’s a ghost in this house* (2021). This work combines drawing, paper art, digital technology and collage, a technique that entails a dissolving of narrative and syntactic relationships (Drucker, 2018: 51). In it, multiple levels of reality are detected: the reality of the individual reader, supported by the illustrations, and the photographs of old houses and other real-life objects; the fictive reality of the text; and the text’s fictive world created by the characters. The book’s material quality calls attention to the reading process and the book as an object, serving as a means of traversing narrative levels within the story, urging the readers to use their imagination so as to “look beyond the apparent, to strip a situation to its core, and to find the essentials” (Richardson, 1976:549).



FIGURE 9,10 Oliver Jeffers’ *There’s a Ghost In This House* (2021), HarperCollins GB

The story revolves around a young girl residing in a haunted house "built in 1760", according to the sub-caption, firmly believing in the existence of ghosts. The depiction of the girl on the opaque pages incorporating photographs and pictures from printed media, as well as the ghosts' portrayal on the vellum ones, all allude to their different ontological nature (Figures 9, 10). The cartoonish, green-coloured little girl, whose appearance "embraces the irrational and child-like" (Drucker, *ibid*: 53), communicates directly with the actual readers, demonstrating that "a fictional character both exists and does not exist" (Waugh, 1984: 91). She invites them in the eerie house, asking for their help to discover whether "there are ghosts in the house" since she "had not found one" and is "not even sure what a ghost looks like", but she is sure that they do reside in the house. On the next page, the readers see smiley ghosts on the milky acetate paper, "white, with holes for eyes", wandering above the protagonist, struggling to gain control over the narrative.

The girl, despite being drawn as a cartoon, evokes a realistic concept secured by the verbal discourse's status, temporarily deluding readers "into believing that 'real' people are engaged in 'real' events", to use David Lewis' words (2001: 93). Ghosts, on the contrary, are invented entities that possibly exist only in a fantasy world, adding a supplementary layer of fictionality to the narrative (Narančić Kovač, 2020:83). The fantastic images of the ghosts that appear on the translucent pages of the book playing hide-and-seek with the little girl, finding hiding spots under the baroque table, "behind all the wardrobes" or among paintings hung on the walls of the carved staircase, all create a sense of the dream's elusiveness and intensify the readers' sensibility, who might feel they have entered into an invisible yet real world as they wander through the misty scenery; there, they can actually see the ghosts the protagonist is searching for, those she cannot see for herself (Campagnaro, 2017). The house thus becomes a narrative space in which a multitude of possible modes of existence and "realities" coexist and interact (Stephens, 1992:52). Additionally, since the colour is a dominant system of non-verbal communication able to highlight a story's content and to bring out the spatiotemporal framework and the development of the plot while evoking the reader's emotional responses, Jeffers most likely chooses the black-and-white and grey background in the double spreads to create visual stimuli to the readers and enable them not only to engage in the book's fictional, eerie world but also to sense the heroine's effort to differentiate dreams from reality.

Mythology The Gods, Heroes, and Monsters of Ancient Greece (Ologies)

Hesiod's Theogony is the oldest and most authoritative of the Greek creation myths, which was composed to satisfy the human need for answers to fundamental metaphysical questions about the existence and origin of the cosmos and the ultimate nature of reality. In this poem, cosmogony intertwines with theogony. As cosmogony and theogony unfold, they transform into the modalities of heroic genealogy and anthropogony. The theogonic myths are not considered a reliable historiographical source. However, they were used as a source of knowledge in early Western thought, and it is believed that they owe their charm to their mysterious, dreamlike nature (Haarmann, 2015). In Hesiod's poetry, mystery intertwines with explanation, logic with imagination, fiction with reality; accordingly, this happens in Steer's and Twist's picturebook titled *Mythology The Gods, Heroes, and Monsters of Ancient Greece (Ologies)* (2007) (Figure 11), a book that "goes far beyond facts" and awakens children's curiosity (Merveldt, 2018:232), verifying Ryan's argument that fictional texts "can always imitate non-fiction" (2010: 10)².

The information indicated by this book's visual and verbal discourse refers to the mysterious world of ancient myths. In the first double spread, the narrator, who exists at the same level as the real-world author and reader but does not reveal his identity until the end of the book, addresses the readers and informs them that he used this book as a guidebook of Greece while gathering ancient Greek antiquities. He explains that he did so upon Mr Benakis' request, a Greek historical personage born in 1873 and art collector, who later founded the Benaki Museum in Athens. According to the mysterious narrator's note in the beginning of the book, which he wrote from Mount Olympus and glued it in the first double spread, this book was initially written by Lady Hestia Evans, a fictive figure who is presented as the book's real author. According to the narrator, she decided to travel across Greece, inspired by Lord Byron. She visited Greece aiming to delve into ancient Greek mythology, cosmogony, theogony, and anthropogony, with the readers following her journey to the country; in fact, she gives way to time travel, an opportunity to learn about the Hesiodic work. Lady Hestia Evans is not visually represented in the book, yet, as readers can find the comments she added to the book's pages, along with several sketches, she evidently vies for control over the narrative.

The text, image and paper-based activities and novelties of the book involve

² The phrases are lifted from another context, in order to review the book with this language.

the readers in a game of make-believe and encourage them to mentally embark on the beginning of the world and the etheric kingdom, ruled by Zeus; the sea, ruled by Poseidon, and the underworld, ruled by Hades. Readers are prompted to immerse into these worlds and discover the mysteries of the cosmos, the gods and goddesses, the constellations, the monsters and other mythical creatures, and immortal heroes as they turn from one page to another. Simultaneously, they are encouraged to sense the qualities of the paper itself and interact with the various tangible objects within it that draw attention to the medium at hand and convey specific messages and, thus, are part of the narrative. The book's movable parts deploy a wealth of materials: oak leaves, reminiscent of the oracle of Zeus that "spoke" through rustling oak leaf; a three-dimensional Pandora's box unleashing curiosity and hope; a booklet recounting the story of Odysseus; a set of playing cards showcasing the twelve Gods of Olympus; the cloth of the Golden Fleece; or a silver obol, that was paid as a fee to Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, who transported the shades of the dead across the river Styx or Acheron to Hades.

The numerous 3D maps, slipcases, cuts, flaps, envelopes, pull-outs, and other delightful properties engage readers in a memorable reading experience, "bringing the book to life" (Scott, 2014: 40). While materiality becomes the book's narrative voice in conversation with its verbal and visual modalities, the pages become transformed into a mythical stage and support the human tendency to invent and believe in imaginary realities (Arnett, 2022). Although nothing of what is written in the book can be historiographically verified, the strict organisation of the genealogical tree of the gods, demigods and heroes, in addition to the chronological order in which their appearance is listed in correspondence with the Hesiodic work, all make the educational aspect undisputable. Moreover, the book possesses the ability to draw the reader into the allegorical universe of the theogonic myth, suggesting that, even when fiction does not directly reflect reality, it can nevertheless teach how the world works (Johansson & Löfgren, 2022). Furthermore, the details in the newspaper clippings dispersed throughout the book "establish continuity between one's own private universe and the world outside, to make from what is already there something that is one's own" (Perloff, 1998: 43).

At the end of the book, readers come across the narrator's note, signing as John Oro, his name meaning gold in Italian. In his note, the narrator encourages the reader to keep a journal and write on the papers enclosed in the envelope within the picturebook, using a real feather as a pen. However, Oro warns readers that the papers might turn gold. At the same time, the book's colour changes, creating the



FIGURE 11 Steer's, D. & Twist's, C. *Mythology The Gods, Heroes, and Monsters of Ancient Greece (Ologies)* (2007), Candlewick (Greek version)



FIGURE 12 Steer's, D. & Twist's, C. *Mythology The Gods, Heroes, and Monsters of Ancient Greece (Ologies)* (2007), Candlewick (Greek version)

illusion that it becomes golden (Figure 12), while in the previous double spread, Oro narrates the story of Croesus, the king of Lydia, who reigned from 585 BC until his defeat by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 547 or 546 BC. Despite Croesus being famed for his immense wealth, the royal figure is portrayed as a shepherd living on Mount Olympus, whom the narrator claims to have met,

implying that either he or Croesus travelled in time, too. Furthermore, John Oro mentions that he conducted research to verify whether Croesus’s claims about his lost fortune, mainly consisting of gold bars, which the Greek authorities transported to America were accurate statements. The metafictional devices in the book, alongside its physical attributes and material quality, reveal the construction of a fictional illusion, questioning the connection between the imaginary, the fictional, and the real, as well as the actions of readers during and around the act of reading. Since the truth in this picturebook is inherently unstable and open-ended, creating the effect of indeterminacy (Silva-Díaz, *ibid*: 69), readers are placed in the role of resolving this ambiguity while also playing with the book’s movable parts, which foreground the book’s nature “as an artefact to be handled and manipulated as well as read” (Lewis, *ibid*: 98).

Once Upon a Time There Was and Will Be So Much More

The size and shape of visual representations in children’s illustrations are related to the rendering of a sense of time, movement, emotion and place (Dowd Lambert, 2018: 32). Additionally, the pages are not only a means of conveying the text and images but also elements that influence the way in which stories are read (Gressnich, 2012: 169). In Johanna Schaible’s *Once Upon a Time There Was and Will Be So Much More* (2021) (Figure 13), the malleability of space and time is communicated through words, pictures and the book’s material aspect. The work encourages a unique reading experience that fosters education, entertainment, interactivity, and physical engagement with the book’s materiality, thus contributing to the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. The use of various paper sizes is reminiscent of *Open This Little Book* (2013, Chronicle Books), written by Jesse Klausmeier and illustrated by Suzy Lee. Arguably, both Lee and Schaible conceive art as a form of play.

The abstract concept of time in this picturebook is transformed into a tangible process thanks to the foliation of the book. At the same time, the narrative manages to preserve “a balance between the innovatory and the familiar” (Grieve, *ibid*: 6) since Schaible addresses not only adults but also children who might not have experience in decoding texts. Its graduated pages reflect the passage of time. Concurrently, the interplay of image, discourse and materiality enables the author-illustrator (Haynes & Murriss, 2019: 300) to encourage the readers to ask themselves what time it is after all. As one page succeeds another, the distinction



FIGURE 13 Johanna Schaible's *Once Upon a Time There Was and Will Be So Much More* (2021) Candlewick Press

between past, present and future is problematised: the double spreads become smaller and smaller until the readers reach the middle of the book, where they encounter the present (the “now”). From that point onwards, the second part of the work begins; in it, the paper size in each double spread gradually increases until the book's last two-page spread becomes the size of the original two-page spread.

In the first double spread, readers are transported to “millions of years ago” when “dinosaurs lived on Earth”. In the following two pages, they travel back in time, “thousands of years ago”, when “people built towering pyramids” that stand eternal in Africa, to remind us of human works and days ³. As readers are informed that “100 years ago”, “a journey” by boat “took a long time”, they are naturally prompted to learn how to perceive time and its flow by focusing on technological achievements. Arguably, they are also led to the realisation, on the one hand, that time differs according to the place where one experiences it, and on the other, that its flow depends on our inability to see the world in all its details; hence the reference to “the landscape” that “looked different” “ten years ago” and the narrator's statements “a month ago, it was still summer”, “a minute ago, the light was turned off”. In the middle of the book, in the smallest double spread,

the narrator interferes by imploring the reader to "make a wish" "now!" while the visual narrative depicts a shooting star.

Although the primary aim of the book's pages is to support children in understanding the abstract concept of time, the material aspect of the work and the narrator's address to the reader are designed to capture their attention. Even the book title starts with the words "once upon a time", "a convincing indicator of fictional content" (Narančić Kovač, 2020:72). Yet the book's materiality is what keeps the reader satisfied as mimesis is being challenged. In the following pages that gradually grow, the initial affirmative texts are replaced by questions posed by the narrator to the reader, such as "How will you celebrate your birthday next year?", "What will you discover when you are older?" or "What will hold you in awe forever?" demonstrating the gap between the world represented in literature and reality (Silva-Díaz, *ibid*: 69). By employing such questions, readers are possibly led to the conclusion that time constitutes a complex network of events, in which humans project sequences of the past, present and future.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary children's picturebooks showcase the progress and development of publishers, illustrators, and graphic designers and cater to the evolving nature of children themselves. The selection of materials used in constructing modern picturebooks and the embellishments on their pages significantly contribute to how readers interpret the verbal and visual content. Moreover, it amplifies the interaction between the narrative, the visual elements, and the book's physical form (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2011; 2015). Metafictive texts and movable picturebooks require readers to engage in a significant degree of playfulness and interaction, thereby challenging conventional storytelling by creating multiple layers of reality. This is especially evident when they address real-world concepts within their verbal discourse. Such works invite readers to actively immerse themselves in the world of the picturebooks, as the full realisation of the stories' meaning depends on this participatory engagement. From this perspective, the study correlated the terms "metafiction" and "materiality" and explored picturebooks that combine innovative handlings of materials and objects, different forms of expression, narratives, graphic layout, book format and design in an attempt to examine whether their movable parts operate as a third narrative system, and function as portals

to transitions between reality and fantasy, triggering/challenging/confronting the readers' "conventional expectations of meaning and closure" (Waugh, *ibid*:22), while invoking "some context of the everyday world" (*ibid*:115).

The analysis revealed that the reading process is enriched thanks to the materiality of books, which can serve as a gateway for the reading audience to both the visible and invisible worlds through their physical engagement. Materiality becomes intertwined with the verbal and visual narratives in the selected books, creating conditions for a playful type of reading, blurring the boundaries between the narrative space and the actual physical space (Do Rozario, 2012). Readers are challenged to go beyond surface appearances through the experiential handling of the books, to consider the spatial presence of the books, and to develop sensitivity towards their material properties. Through these properties, not only are the explicit and hidden meanings of authors and illustrators supported as to where fiction ends and reality begins (Thoburn, 2016:5), but rather the books themselves become sensory environments and "books-as-performance" (Smith, 1984: 342) where different types of literary practices converge, rendering the reading process into an embodied experience with numerous implications. Just as in the case of metafictional picturebooks, reader engagement in movable books often arises from an appreciation of the text's intricate artifice and the active negotiation of the dynamic interplay between multiple sign systems presented within the narrative.

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MATERIJALNOST, METAFIKCIJA I „STVARNOST FANTAZIJE“ U SUVREMENIM SLIKOVNICAMA

SAŽETAK

Mnogi znanstvenici smatraju da su slikovnice artefakti koje ne treba samo čitati nego i čuvati. Danas umjetnici i izdavači sve više eksperimentiraju u osmišljavanju knjiga kako bi privukli publiku. Stoga se objavljuju slikovnice zanimljivih oblika i različitih formata, opremljene impresivnim tkaninama, neuobičajenom kvalitetom papira i osebnim teksturama, estetski i ludički primamljive. Primjenom rezova, omota, preklopa, omotnica, mapa, izrezanih šablona, trodimenzionalnih umetaka i anotacija u slikovnicama preispituje se tradicionalni proces čitanja zato što čitatelji moraju pomno pratiti fizičke, multisenzorne i interaktivne elemente kako bi rastumačili denotativno i konotativno značenje slikovnice i sudjelovali u pripovijedanju. Ti materijali također pozornost usmjeravaju na status knjige kao predmeta, rastačući granicu između fikcije i stvarnosti. Na temelju prethodnih istraživanja o razlikama između pojmova narativnost i nenarativnost, fikcije, nefikcije i metafikcije te o materijalnim aspektima slikovnica, ovaj rad u međusobnu vezu dovodi pojam metafikcije i materijalnosti. Raspravlja se o ulozi pomičnih dijelova slikovnice i metoda koje se primjenjuju kako bi se čitateljima omogućilo da ih dožive kao razigrane, čime ih se potiče da pripovijesti usvoje kao fiksijske artefakte i osvijeste interakciju stvarnosti i iluzije, a ovo potonje integriraju u svoj svijet.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

slikovnica, materijalnost, metafikcija, fikcija, stvarnost