

How, But Not What or Why

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How Picturebooks Work, by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott. New York and London: Garland, 2001.

How Picturebooks Work—it's a good title. I like it. I like it so much, in fact, that I've used it myself a number of times, albeit with the more usual "picture books."¹ The pieces I've titled in this way were my first attempts to make some sense of the picture book as a genre—work that resulted in my book *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*, which, despite its different title, might well be summarized as an attempt to describe—what else?—how picture books work.

Nor am I the only person before Nikolajeva and Scott who liked this title or this way of thinking about picture books. "How Picture Books Work" is also the title of an article by Laurence Sipe, and an article by Peter Neumeyer has a similar title: "How Picture Books Mean." And while the titles of their various articles and books don't always proclaim it, significant work written in English by Joseph Schwarcz, Jane Doonan, William Moebius and others, and by a range of scholars in other languages, focuses equally on the "how" of picture books.

Nevertheless, say Nikolajeva and Scott, there is still more to know. "Together," they assert, "Schwarcz, Moebius, Nodelman and Doonan introduce enough tools to decode pictures in picture books. But we still lack tools for decoding the specific 'text' created by the interaction of verbal and visual information" (4). Furthermore, they add, "what we still lack is a consistent and flexible terminology, a comprehensive international metalanguage, and a system of categories describing the variety of text/language interactions" (6). Their book, they say, is an attempt to fill these lacks. After quickly developing the system of categories they call for, they announce that, "in the chapters that follow, we will explore the variety of text-image interactions in picturebooks, using these categories to shape our discussion" (26).

Nikolajeva and Scott do contribute to our knowledge of picture books—do add to our repertoire of ways of thinking about picture

books in general. I'm not exactly clear about why a system of categories is necessary or even helpful, but I find their attempt to develop one interesting—for one thing, as I'll describe later, it allows me to understand how this sort of system-making leads to distorted perceptions of what might be happening in specific books. Their work on narrative perspective—on the variety of ways in which pictures and words offer different and intersecting focalizations of the same events—is fresh and persuasive. So is their discussion of the ways in which picture and words offer intersecting modalities—differing degrees of the mimetic and nonmimetic, of literal reality and symbolic departures from the literal. And there are thoughtful and interesting interpretations of specific picture books throughout.

Nevertheless, Nikolajeva and Scott's book as a whole is less pioneering than it so aggressively declares itself to be. For all their insistence on what previous scholarship lacks, they often cite the work of previous scholars, and their explanations both of pictures and of their interactions with texts make frequent use, not always credited, of concepts developed earlier by others. Indeed, the major flaw of the book is exactly the extent to which it mirrors earlier work rather than moving beyond it.

The title reveals the problem: *How Picturebooks Work*, yet once more. This fascination with *how* picture books do what they do is fascinating in itself. Why does it seem like such a productive way of approaching this one particular kind of text for children that so many scholars have focused their approach around it? What does it say about Nikolajeva and Scott's book that they continue to focus on it?

The first thing to be said about this focus is how odd it is. As Nikolajeva and Scott themselves assert, a concentration on matters such as "the depiction of society, ideological values, adult control, and so on, rather than on the dynamics of the picturebook form. . . . is in fact the way picturebooks are often treated in general surveys of children's literature, in reviews, academic papers, and conference presentations" (3). In current literary studies generally, a concern with questions of ideology is so prevalent that studies of form are rarely pursued. Indeed, there's a sizeable—and persuasive—consensus that work along the lines of what Nikolajeva and Scott call "the dynamics of picturebook form" dangerously tends to ignore the ideological content of the texts being discussed in ways that confirm and replicate it.

Consider, for instance, how Nikolajeva and Scott's focus on form leads them to assume that there is in fact such a thing as *the* picture

book—a universally consistent genre with universally consistent characteristics. As they make their way through a catalogue of ways in which pictures and words connect to convey stories, they offer as examples books produced primarily in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden—I have to assume they know less about books published elsewhere. But except for a few sections that focus specifically on how translated books reveal national differences (and thus strangely contradict what is assumed elsewhere in the book), they consistently imply that the matters they discuss would apply equally to all picture books everywhere. Indeed, they assert that one of their main purposes in the book is to develop “a comprehensive international metalanguage” to describe picture books, a language that could work only if the books it described were enough alike to be described accurately by it. I wonder if they are.

I hasten to acknowledge that my own earlier work on picture books, done before my reading of a range of theorists taught me to think about such matters, is equally silent on such matters. If I were to continue with this work now, some decades later, I’d certainly want to think further about the possible usefulness of recent discourse about what Nicholas Mirzoeff and others call “visual culture,” a study which focuses on “opening up the field of vision as an arena in which cultural meanings get constituted” (Rogoff 14). I’d especially want to think about what Fredric Jameson calls “the ideology of form” (98). If what Nikolajeva and Scott—and their predecessors, including me—describe is, in any meaningful way, how all picture books always or usually work, what do these formal constants suggest about how adult culture internationally addresses and constructs the child readers of picture books?² One of the disappointments of Nikolajeva and Scott’s book is that it follows a path laid down in *Words about Pictures* and elsewhere—an attempt to catalogue a variety of ways in which pictures and words work together to tell stories—without ever raising questions about or even attempting to justify the path itself. What might it mean about one’s own prejudices and assumptions to focus so exclusively on the “how” of picture books as opposed to the “what” and the “why”?

So, what *does* it mean? I began my own work of this sort because of my ignorance, as a literary scholar, about the nature of visual information—and my awareness that picture book scholarship generally tended to share this ignorance. It was, in other words, a peculiar form of logocentricity, a deeper knowledge of and interest in verbal texts than in the pictures they accompanied. Two decades later, we have

certainly at least begun to know how picture books work; and while there is certainly more to know about the how (and Nikolajeva and Scott know more than I once did), it's surely time to widen the path and start to think about the what and the why. Indeed, not doing so detaches the work from contemporary scholarship in ways that marginalize it. There is nothing wrong with pursuing work that diverges from current scholarly interests, as long as one acknowledges an awareness of doing so and offers a justification for it. Nikolajeva and Scott do neither. It's a distressing commentary on the state of children's literature scholarship that work published in a series that claims to be "dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture" has made it through (I hope) peer review and editing, apparently without such concerns being raised or acted upon.

A focus on form without consideration of the implications of form (or indeed of focusing on form) is just one way in which Nikolajeva and Scott's work seems out of step with current academic concerns. Another is an insistence on assigning value to specific books and even specific kinds of books. In picture books in which the words and pictures fill each other's gaps, they say, "there is nothing left for the reader's imagination" (17); more complex books are more "exciting" (17). Nikolajeva and Scott nowhere suggest that one reason for developing a supposedly objective and scientific catalogue of ways in which pictures relate to texts would be to condemn or praise certain items in the catalogue—arrive at what are surely subjective judgments about which books and which kinds of books are the good ones. Not only do they continually make such judgments, but they seem unaware of the important questions about the act of ascribing value to literary texts that have been common in literary study for some decades now. While I wonder about their comfort with assuming they know exactly what is or isn't good in ways that ignore the needs and interests of various audiences, I don't necessarily object to them wishing to assign value. But once more, I do worry about the lack of a justification for doing so that might not only explain how the act of evaluation relates to the need for cataloguing but also place their work in the context of current critical discourse.

One ramification of the focus on evaluation is a strange chapter about what Nikolajeva and Scott call the "ownership" of picture books. Here they argue that the most successful and therefore, it seems, worthwhile picture books are likely to be the ones which writers either illustrate themselves or produce in direct collaboration with illustrators.

When, as commonly happens in North American publishing, illustrators work on their own without consulting the writers of the texts they illustrate, “Multiple ownership and multiple intentionality lead to ambiguity and uncertainty in the validity of the interpretation” (29). In the light of current discourse on the inherent uncertainty of all texts and all acts of interpretation, the idea that uncertainty might be grounds for condemning a book or seeing it as less of a “success” (40) is most peculiar.

So is the unexplored assumption that the authors of texts “own” those texts. If, indeed, literature is property, then it seems more realistic—and less blindly accepting of an unacknowledged capitalist ideology—to assume that the ownership of texts is something shared by—or perhaps better, contested by—all those involved with them. Not only illustrators, but also publishers, editors, purchasers, and, above all, readers have and surely ought to have as much of a claim to ownership of a finished book and its meanings as does the person who engendered its text.

Applied to picture books, furthermore, the Romantic idea that the creator of the text is its owner is, once more, strangely logocentric. The implication is that what verbal texts on their own seem to imply or allow is in fact what they do and must always mean. Nikolajeva and Scott allow and admire variations in the meaning of picture book stories engendered by illustrations only when they appear to be permitted by the text writer—i.e., represent what they read as a verbal artist’s intention. Any other intrusion of apparent difference is in error. This undermines their own claim, made frequently throughout the book, that the picture book medium works best when the meanings of the pictures don’t match those of the words. If that’s true, then shouldn’t the likelihood that two independent creators will create more ambiguity be a plus rather than a minus, a potential enrichment rather than an inevitable invitation to error?

It’s instructive, also, that the picture books Nikolajeva and Scott most admire are the more complicated ones—the ones they as sophisticated reader/viewers take most interest in and pleasure from. In the light of the relative inexperience of many child reader/viewers, it seems peculiar simply to assert that the most successful examples of a genre intended for children are the ones certain sophisticated adults enjoy.

Nikolajeva and Scott solve that problem primarily by dismissing it, declaring (but not defending) their “reluctance to discuss pictures in terms of the young reader’s ability to understand them” (204). Apart

from being about young characters, the children's picture book as they describe it is a form that has little to do with children or even ideas about childhood. Avoidance of the possibility that ideas about children might play some part in the form as well as the content of this genre of specifically children's literature represents one more way in which Nikolajeva and Scott have chosen to work outside a context of current scholarship—this time in the theory of children's literature—that would have enriched their thinking and made their work more relevant and more persuasive.

Although Nikolajeva and Scott say they “are not primarily interested in the way children ‘understand’ picture books,” they add, “we cannot avoid noting how the books consistently address two parallel audiences” (132)—one sophisticated and one not, or, as they say elsewhere, “small children and sophisticated adults” (21). Their faith in the existence of this implied “dual audience”—an idea borrowed, mostly unacknowledged, from other children's literature theorists but here simply asserted and never explained or argued for—allows them to focus, as sophisticated adults, on the more complex aspects of picture books. They hardly consider the apparent strangeness of such material being present in books for young, inexperienced readers.

Indeed, Nikolajeva and Scott are dismissive of such readers. Their chapter about ownership never raises the possibility that children, specifically, might own some interest in children's picture books. They assert that certain forms of humor are “probably beyond young readers' understanding” (134) and that certain visual allusions “will probably only be recognized by the adult coreader of the book” (186). Like others who postulate that children's books imply more than one audience, they need to invent or assume less capable children in order to sustain the theory. It would surely be more logical—and less dismissive of child readers—to posit a singular implied reader/viewer who knows or is capable of learning *all* the strategies or repertoire the text demands—perhaps a less sophisticated reader/viewer in the process of becoming more sophisticated?

At times, Nikolajeva and Scott do seem to know that. For instance, they suggest that children's inability to decode the time sequences implied by pictures is a matter of not yet knowing the codes and being in the process of learning them (140)—a view which postulates an implied audience more singular than the one they proclaim elsewhere. (A major flaw of the book is the degree to which parts of it contradict other parts—perhaps a lapse in the editing process?)

Nikolajeva and Scott arrive at their view of the decoding process as they discuss a picture by Wanda Gag in which a number of images of cats represent the same cat at different moments—a technique they want to call “simultaneous succession.” “According to Nodelman,” they say, “small children have problems identifying the sequence as simultaneous succession and instead apprehend it as individual pictures of different cats” (140). Anyone familiar with my work will appreciate how surprised I was to hear that—I couldn’t recall making the kind of generalization I despise and try to avoid. In fact, I hadn’t. Upon investigation, the passage in *Words about Pictures* being referred to turned out to be, not about young children in general, but about *one* specific experience of *one* child. Furthermore, I describe that experience to reach exactly the same point that Nikolajeva and Scott want to make about how children need to and do in fact learn codes. This misrepresentation of my words suggests a counterproductive level of inattention to my work—and to that of the other picture book critics they dismiss in their introduction.

There are two large problems they might have avoided by paying more attention. The first is an over-rigid distinction between what pictures and words communicate. They insist that, unlike verbal language, “the visual sign system can convey time only by inference” (139), and also, “Pictures by definition cannot have a direct temporal relation to words or other pictures” (168). They neglect to notice that the verbal sign system as represented in books is itself visual information—printed letters—which does not in fact move and which can convey time no more directly or less inferentially than pictures can. Both words and pictures can convey time by means of conventional codes, for those who know the codes. Similarly, they argue that “pictures cannot directly and immediately convey ideology” (117), and that “pictures can only be didactic indirectly” (119). Both conditions apply to verbal language also. The insistence that pictures are different from words in these ways makes the two less like each other than they actually are. It is, also, once more, logocentric—a view of picture books so grounded in the superior communicative capacity of the verbal text that it downplays the ability of pictures to convey all kinds of information.

And that is the second major problem. The insistence that pictures have these limitations leads Nikolajeva and Scott to ignore a wide range of ways, described by myself and by other scholars of picture books and of pictorial semiotics and dynamics in general, in which pictures

do engage codes and conventions in order to convey much about time, mood, character, emotion, ideology—indeed, about story in general.

Consider, for instance, Nikolajeva and Scott's assertion—mandated by their urge to develop a complete system of all possible categories of picture books—that there is such a thing as a “symmetrical” picture book. In symmetrical books, they say, the words and pictures constitute “two mutually redundant narratives,” so that “the words tell us exactly the same story as the one we can read from the pictures” (14). In such books, “the pictures are more decorative than narrative” (16)—note once more the logocentricity of viewing the pictures as decorations of the actual narrative of the words, rather than vice versa.

According to Nikolajeva and Scott, Charlotte Zolotow's *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, illustrated by Maurice Sendak, is such a book: “few pictorial details go beyond the verbal text” (56). I find that simply astonishing. Most people I've shared this book with feel exactly the opposite. Details of color, style, and gesture in these pictures evoke a narrative so at odds with the apparent import of the words of the text that they utterly transform those words into something richer and stranger—just as the words counterpoint the pictures in ways that make them richer than they would be without the text. Nikolajeva and Scott's blindness to the subtleties here reveals a blindness at the heart of their theory. My own consideration of the work of a range of theorists of art and illustration leads me to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a “symmetrical” picture book—that it is a category required by the act of system-making but not existent in reality. The assumption that symmetrical picture books exist reveals a dismissive disdain for the possibilities of pictorial communication that undermines Nikolajeva and Scott's work as theorists of picture books.

The odd thing is that, despite their often crudely unsubtle theoretical pronouncements about the limitations of pictures and so on, Nikolajeva and Scott's interpretations of specific books often do useful work with visual details and arrive at subtle conclusions about them. Their work in discussing specific texts is far more persuasive—and far more representative of the work of earlier scholars—than are their more general theoretical pronouncements. If the book were as careful and as aware of subtleties at the theoretical level as it is in some of its interactions with specific books—and if its theory were more consistent with the conclusions reached about some of the individual books—it might have been a much better book than, unfortunately, it is.

Notes

1. My first "How Picture Books Work" was a paper I gave at the Children's Literature Association Conference in Minneapolis in 1981. A version of that paper was printed under the same title in the *Proceedings* for the conference, and then in the ChLA volume *Festschrift: A Ten Year Retrospective*, and, some years later, in the collection *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*, compiled by Sheila Egoff and others. A slightly different version of the same material, also titled "How Picture Books Work," appeared in 1984 in *Image and Maker*, a collection of articles about picture books edited by Harold Darling and Peter Neumeyer.

2. For some speculations about these matters, see my article, "The Implied Viewer."

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