

implied viewer

The Implied Viewer: Some Speculations about What Children's Picture Books Invite Readers to Do and to Be.

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Usually, when we talk about how picture books affect the children who read them, we talk about the form and content of specific books. We enthuse over how a particular set of pictures will delight them, or we think about whether they will be able to understand the visual style of an illustrator or the diction used in a particular text. We wonder if depictions of certain characters will encourage young readers to think in terms of gender stereotypes, or we worry about the morals they might derive from special tales. And of course, all of this is important. My own work as a scholar of picture books explores a range of ways in which individual writers can use semiotic and narrative codes in order to communicate specific meanings in individual books. I know, not only that these books do convey meanings, but that the meanings they convey are subtle and wide-ranging. Furthermore, I'm convinced that children can access these meanings in all their complexity, and both take pleasure and gain knowledge from doing so. We need only be willing to teach them the appropriate interpretive strategies.

But in focussing on these matters, I've ignored a number of ways in which picture books might affect child readers simply by virtue of the fact that they *are* picture books. The mere act of looking at the pictures in this particular kind of book requires a range of assumptions about it and attitudes towards it before one can even begin to make any sense out of it or gain any pleasure from it.

These attitudes and assumptions have profound implications. They help to shape our ideas about why we look at things (both pictures and the real objects they represent), and what in fact, the visible world is: what it is for, what it does, what it owes to us and what we owe to it. And in all these

ways, the basic skills required for us to be able to respond as expected to any picture book contribute to our sense of who we are and why we are that way. In what follows, I consider what it means to be a viewer of children's picture books. What do these books invite one to be, or to do, or to think?

The assumptions upon which I base my exploration emerge from semiotic theory, which describes systems of *signs*: symbolic ways of communicating informationⁱ. According to Marshall Blonsky, "The semiotic 'head,' or eye, see the world as an immense message, replete with signs that can and do deceive us and lie about the world's condition" (1985, p.vii). While words and pictures are different media and communicate different things in different ways, both are sign systems and share the basic qualities of sign systems.

Signs tend to be arbitrary. They are representations of other things which they don't necessarily resemble. There's no reason, for instance, that a red light should signify the need to stop your car. It might just have well been a purple light, or a loud siren. Consequently, signs and the systems they form can communicate successfully only to those already in possession of the knowledge required to make the not-necessarily-obvious connections between the sign and what it signifies. In an important sense, and merely in existing and being used, the signs themselves imply someone capable of making the expected sense out of them. A red traffic light conveys, not only the idea of danger, but also the conviction that someone exists outside itself capable of responding to it as intended – someone who will be able to decipher it successfully enough to be thinking about stopping.

Reader response critics speak of the 'implied reader' of a text – a person in possession of the knowledge and the methodology of thinking about signs that allow an understanding of the text more or less as its speaker or writer intended itⁱⁱ. Pictures, equally, can be spoken of in terms of their implied *viewer* – someone in possession of the knowledge and methodology of thinking about them that allows an understanding of the picture more or less as its creator intended it.

Pictures tend to be less arbitrary than written signs. A photograph of a cat resembles an actual cat far more obviously than do the letters *C A T*, so that it may seem a little less obvious that the implied viewer of a picture requires special knowledge in order to understand it. It is, nevertheless,

true. Anthropological literature describing early contact with groups unfamiliar with contemporary Euro-American civilisation frequently contain reports of people without previous knowledge of photographs or representational drawings who could make little sense of the examples they were shownⁱⁱⁱ. Meanwhile, my own college-level students, unfamiliar with the conventions of expressionist art as used in, for instance, Diaz' illustrations for Eve Bunting's children's story *Smoky Night*, often ask me why the characters' faces are blue or purple. Not knowing the sign system – not being the viewer these pictures imply – they interpret the information the sign system offers about emotional states of mind incorrectly, as literal information about the actually visible world.

The knowledge and the assumptions about the world and about people expected of both implied readers and implied viewers move well beyond just technical questions about knowing how to decipher a particular kind of sign or convention or image. They also include a range of assumptions about the reality the signs represent. Viewers won't be able to think about what a picture of a cat represents if they don't know what an actual cat is. They won't be able to figure out that the cat is a friendly one if they don't know how to interpret the shape of its mouth as drawn by the artist and identify it with a human smile, or that it is a poor cat if they don't understand the convention that clothing with patches sewn on in various places signifies the wearer's poverty, or that it is a French cat because of the beret it is shown to be wearing.

Furthermore, the conventions of visual representation add further information for a viewer about how to understand or make sense of the real objects depicted. Imagine, for a moment, a picture of a cat being thrown from a second-story window. Someone knowledgeable about the significations of certain styles of visual depiction will understand that laughter is the appropriate response if the picture is in a cartoon style, alarm if the picture is in a traditionally representational style, wonder if the picture is in a dream-like surrealistic style. The conventional means by which an artist or illustrator represents objects for us convey, not just the idea or the appearance of the objects, but also, how we should think about and respond to those objects.

Consequently, one of the effects for children of looking at pictures and picture books – particularly in the company of someone, a parent or a

teacher or another child, who already understands the conventions of viewing them – is to make a real viewer resemble an implied one. Once a knowledgeable viewer gives us some ideas about questions to ask about and things to look for in pictures, the pictures themselves contain the information that will allow us to make sense of them in the terms the illustrator intended. Pictures thus encourage us to become the viewers they imply. They partake of what theorists of ideology call the construction of subjectivity – the ways in which the culture we exist in encourages us to think about who we are and the significance of what we think and feel and do^{iv}. If we come to understand that the cartoon of a cat is supposed to be funny, and we find ourselves actually looking at the picture and laughing at it, we have become constructed by the picture as subjects with a particular understanding of when laughter is appropriate – an understanding we share with others who have accepted the convention that this particular style of visual depiction implies comedy and requests laughter. In other words, and paradoxically, we have accepted as an understanding of who we are in our most essential and individual separate selves something that identifies us with the values and understanding of our larger group.

All of this suggests the potential danger of pictures and texts. The readers and viewers they imply might not be people we approve of. The subjectivity they work to construct might not be a subjectivity we would wish for our children or ourselves.

And indeed, that is exactly the case in terms of a wide range of adult responses to specific children's books. As I suggested earlier, we worry about the messages being given or the gender assumptions texts are making, and so on – and that we do so simply asserts the degree to which we worry about what the readers and viewers texts and pictures imply and the subjectivity they construct. Fortunately, there are a number of defences we can take against these specific acts of construction. We can simply (and, I think, dangerously) keep our children away from the books that we worry about – not buy them for our libraries, not allow children access to them at all. We can, just as simply, (and, I think, just as dangerously), assume that children naturally respond to texts in a wide variety of different ways, that they are what John Fiske, speaking of texts of popular culture, identifies as “active” reader/viewers and that they participate in the meaning – making process in ways that free them from the repressive intentions of texts, so that we simply needn't worry about what the texts imply their

readers should be and do^v. Or we can, with more effort (and, I personally think, more productively), provide children with the ability to think critically about what they read and view – to become more active readers than they might already be, to be aware of how texts work to influence them and thus resist the negative influences.

But as I said earlier, my focus here is not on the specific content of particular books, but on the viewer implied by *any* picture in *every* picture book. Unless we want to deprive children of books altogether, this we cannot avoid. That makes it all the more important to become aware of the nature of this generalised viewer. I will return to these matters after a look at what that nature is.

Let me begin by exploring my conviction that it exists at all. Do all picture books, just by virtue of being picture books, imply specific qualities or forms of knowledge or attitudes or assumptions in their viewers? Why might they?

One reason they might is suggested by Marshall McLuhan's decidedly unfashionable but still stimulating ideas about the ways in which media of communication shape the meanings of their content and the ways in which audiences respond to that content, famously formulated as "the medium is the message." According to McLuhan, "... any medium has the power of imposing its own assumptions on the unwary. Prediction and control consist in avoiding this subliminal state of Narcissus trance. But the greatest aid to this end is simply in knowing that the spell can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of melody" (1965, p.15). We make assumptions along these lines when we talk about TV turning its viewers into couch potatoes, without reference to the actual content of the programming. While McLuhan's survey of the implications of various media in *Understanding Media* doesn't cover children's picture books, it does allow the possibility that these books do work to impose "assumptions on the unwary" just by virtue of what they are.

So what might those assumptions be, and what do they suggest about the inherent basic nature of an implied reader/ viewer? Let me outline some.

I begin with some qualities picture books share with other forms of children's literature. The implied reader/viewer is a child – a brutally obvious

fact, perhaps, but the obviousness masks a whole realm of fascinating assumptions about what children are or should be. While different children's picture books make different assumptions about their readers, all children's picture books make the common assumption that their readers *are* children. They take it for granted that the mere fact of their implied readers' age means those readers have qualities unlike older human beings and like each other, qualities that require the existence of a certain kind of book to suit their needs *as* children. For much of human history in most cultures, no such thing as a children's picture book existed – in part, presumably, because no such thing as a child in need of that specific sort of book existed. So the existence of children's picture books implies the existence of children as a specific, definable, and necessarily defined sub-category of being human.

Furthermore, the child who is the implied reader/viewer of any children's picture book must *know* that – or at least be in the process of learning it, becoming conscious of the ways in which he or she is childlike, understanding what it means to be a child and understanding it to be important knowledge. Before you can choose to read a picture book or ask to have it read to you, you have to assume that you might in fact be a potential member of its intended audience. Parents and others often work to foster exactly that assumption in children: "Here's a book just for you!" Children who accept that such a book *is* for someone just like them then understand that they *are* children.

Nor is being a child simply a matter of being young. It is a matter of having certain abilities or tastes or interests – the abilities, tastes and interests implied by the style, subject, and level of difficulty of the book which now invites readers to imagine themselves as the specific audience it seeks. They are being encouraged to think of themselves as having these needs or tastes or interests not because they were born with them or because their parents have them, but simply by virtue of the fact that they *are* children, and therefore, childlike in the way the book implies children are.

In addition to helping children to think of themselves as being children, the books also encourage them to understand that the category "children" is an exceedingly important one, a key issue always operative and never to be forgotten in their relationships with other people, both adults and other children. We are a culture in which children as well as adults know that

being a child means knowing that one is a child and therefore entitled to or expected to behave in certain ways defined as childlike.

Those ways are subtle and complicated – the books we offer children offer a range of different ways of being childlike. Picture books, for instance, imply an audience of *younger* children, and help children to understand that early childhood is a time when stories must be told in short and simple texts and when pictures are necessary to make sense of the words. They imply that early childhood is different in quality from later childhood, when longer books with fewer pictures become possible and appropriate. They imply, in other words, an idea of childhood as a time of development through a series of discrete stages: the idea that people get increasingly complicated as they mature.

In order to become more complicated one must start out being less complicated. Obviously, then, many of the qualities we define as childlike involve ways in which younger children are more limited than older children, and all children are more limited than adults – less wise, less capable, more prone to self-indulgence and more in need of certain kinds of adult control and regulation. Children who accept their resemblance to the implied child reader/viewers of children's picture books have been given the freedom to be less wise and more self-indulgent than adults are often allowed to be.

At the same time, though, they have been invited to understand how much their limitations force adults to control and regulate and supervise them. The implied reader/viewer of picture books knows, not just that the books are intended for specifically childlike readers, but also, that they are provided for those childlike readers, not by other children, but by adults, adults with the best interests of children in mind. The mere existence of picture books then implies a world organized so that children need and can depend on benevolent adult intervention in, and supervision of, all aspects of their lives—including their imaginative lives as influenced by the content of children's books. The books suggest in merely being there the entire social structure that creates and shapes the nature of childhood as a position of dependency for children in our culture.

The child reader/viewers I have just been describing are complex and ambivalent, caught in a complex field of forces, pulled powerfully in opposite directions. On the one hand, they are childishly free of adult standards of

behaviour, allowably amoral or anarchic since these are “childlike” qualities. On the other hand, though, because they are childlike they must accept adult supervision and control. On the one hand, they are childishly innocent; on the other, they *know* they are childishly innocent, have been taught to think of themselves as such, and know what childish innocence allows them – a form of knowledge that surely qualifies and undermines the innocence, since now the intuitiveness and spontaneity that define innocence are not actually intuitive and spontaneous but instead, it seems, performed, enacted by an actor who has learned to play it in order to satisfy adult expectations. This implied child reader/viewer is not so simple or straightforward or unlearned as our clichés about the childlike might suggest.

The learning the implied reader/viewer possesses has yet other dimensions. More generally, the implied reader/viewer of children’s picture books, like the readers of all books, understands some basic conventions about books. Books have a front and a back, a top and a bottom. The words and pictures on the cover are separate from but related to the actual story itself, which is found inside. The story, at least in books in the English language, emerges when a reader begins at what we call the front (i.e., with the bound margin on our left) and moves consecutively through the pages, and from left to right and then top to bottom on each double-paged spread.

A reader/viewer who knows all this and acts on it appreciates some basic principles of convention and order, and has a willingness to adhere to them. The mere fact that a child can leaf through a book in the right order in order to perceive a narrative within it then means that the child has come to understand something about the rules and patterns that allow for social intercourse and communication. We like to talk about children being free and spontaneous and creative. The spontaneity and creativity of any child who knows and makes use of these basic facts about books has been qualified by and governed by adults. Reading a book is inherently an act that moves a reader/viewer beyond individual isolation and the freedom of anarchy. A child who knows which way is up and reads books with that way up is on the way to becoming a good citizen in a shared social reality.

It is ironic, then, that many children’s books seem to be what Alison Lurie calls “subversive” – apparently celebratory of spontaneity and imagination and the defiance of adult values and assumptions. According to Lurie, “the great subversive works of children’s literature mock current assumptions

and express the imaginative, unconventional, noncommercial view of the world in its simplest and purest form" (1990, p.xi). But they can be so only for readers who have become conventional enough to respond to and make sense of the works more or less as intended. The supposed subversiveness emerges only once a safely conventional context has been established – and that, surely, dissipates any real danger to conventional values.

I spoke earlier of a child exploring books in a certain sequence in order to discover the narratives within them. The implied reader-viewer of these books knows about narrative – knows what a story is. Most picture books tend to be stories, and imply a reader who knows and takes pleasure in what a story is, in what it does and how it operates. Once more, this reader both knows and likes the satisfactions of order – in this case, the ways in which narratives organize events into a sequential cause-and-effect pattern and bring about a unified sense of completeness and closure that gives meaning to actions and events. The ability to take pleasure in these organizations of experience imply a more general commitment to meaning and order, and a flight from the spontaneity and freedom of random anarchy that confirms the ways in which picture books bind readers to their communities. As I suggested before, only once this binding has occurred can an indulgence in a safely contained and now merely fictional spontaneity and anarchy be allowed. Once more, the "childlike" becomes possible (and allowable for children) only within the context of an acceptance of an adult construction of reality which dissipates the actual subversiveness of anti-social behaviour.

An acceptance of the patterns of narrative also binds children to history, and perhaps to their very sense of what they are as individual beings. The master pattern of narrative – the sequence in which a moment defined as a beginning leads to a middle and eventually to an end – itself implies the idea that events can be usefully and satisfactorily explained in terms of what caused them and how they then lead to others. That concept not only organizes time's passage, but tends to become the shape by which we understand who we are. The idea that one can understand events in terms of their place in a chronological sequence of events is the basis of all developmental views of things in general. The idea that one can understand oneself by figuring out how previous events helped to shape one is central to our current sense of what our individual personalities and very beings are. Psychoanalysis, for instance, finds the sources and meanings of adult behaviour in the hidden events of childhood; and I have already spoken of

how age-related theories of development encourage both adults and children to think of children as being too old for certain books they might once have enjoyed, or too young for books they will one day get to. Knowing how to decode narrative structures places us in history and makes us historians, of the world and of ourselves.

Furthermore, and equally important: a child who has that knowledge and takes pleasure in it – examines books in the order intended, seeks out stories and is satisfied by their sequencing and closure – has become a consumer. The audience picture books imply, merely in offering certain forms of experience, are people who expect the reward of a certain kind of experience in return for a special kind of effort. Merely in being and in purporting to be attractive, picture books hold out the promise of pleasure and profit to those willing to consume them.

That books exist to offer readers pleasure tells readers that they deserve to, even need to, be pleased. In other words: that the book exists to fulfil a need implies that the need exists that then must be fulfilled and can rightfully be fulfilled. In different times and places, children were not encouraged to seek enjoyment in stories and pictures or even, in more general terms, to think of themselves as people with a need or a right to indulge these forms of pleasure. That so many picture books exist, that they are often so opulently illustrated and designed, and that we encourage children to take pleasure in the delights they offer and to seek out yet more books and get more pleasure from them without any need to feel guilty about it – all these are evidence of the extent to which picture books imply an entire economy of consumption driven by satisfying one's urge to please oneself in certain ways understood to be satisfying.

Furthermore, the mere fact that picture books exist is flattering for their intended audiences. The books are often sumptuous, complex, expensive – and they tend to be found in sizeable collections, in stores and libraries and even moderately well-off homes, for clearly, having just one is not enough, and the more the better. Indeed, current pedagogical theory often highlights the importance of providing children with a spectrum of possibilities from which to make choices and thus develop their individual tastes and values. The message is clear: All of this is being done for you, child reader, to teach *you*, to please *you*, to make *you* happy, to help *you* be the best you can be. That means you and your right to take pleasure are important,

that pleasing you has been an aspiration of a whole range of people, writers and illustrators and publishers and librarians and parents. To become the implied reader/viewer of these elaborate productions is, inevitably, to develop a strong sense of one's worth and one's desert – to understand that one does indeed deserve such elaborate attention and that wanting and getting what one wants are good things.

Meanwhile, however, the implied reader/viewer also understands that picture books don't just please: they also teach. One reads them to learn from them, to become a different and better version of oneself. In yet one more sense, then, these books allow pleasure only in order to co-opt it and undermine it: you are being pleased, and you are allowed to be pleased; but you are allowed only within the context of goals of self-improvement, and so just to be pleased is not enough. You may take pleasure only if you also understand how shallow it is to want pleasure in and for itself, and are prepared to move beyond it.

Often, in fact, children's books contain stories which replicate this allowing and undermining of pleasure, and work to make their readers feel guilty about the very pleasures they offer. These stories ask children to identify with characters who are creative or spontaneous or adventurous (and, perhaps, subversive), first, in order to enjoy the delights of adventurousness and spontaneity, and second, in order to learn how dangerous adventurousness and spontaneity are. The implied viewer of such books develops two intriguingly contradictory ideas about pleasure: it's good and bad, healthful and dangerous, harmless and harmful.

The two ideas tend to occur sequentially in texts – first the delightful indulgence in pleasure, then the dangerous consequences. But since so many books follow this pattern, a child reader of a series of children's books is taken back to the first stage and then moves on to the second again and again. The reader/viewer implied by a number of children's picture books taken together is, then, like the comically deficient characters on many American TV situation comedies, who delightfully indulge their vice or folly and then become aware of how badly they have behaved and learn to move beyond it in each episode, and then, at the start of the next episode, are always right back where they started, being vicious or foolish in the same delightful old way. These implied reader-viewers move back and forth between childlike folly and adult wisdom, between delightful subversiveness and sane conventionality, but never seem to completely give up one for the

other. These reader/viewers are, once more, complex and ambivalent.

Part of the complexity is a consciousness of incompleteness – of not being *finished* yet. That there is a lesson to learn means that you have not yet learned it – that you are not yet all you can be or ought to be. The incompleteness is confirmed by the master narratives of development I discussed earlier. The ways in which our thinking about how people become what they are make childhood the crucible in which adult personalities are shaped – and thus, a mere stage along the way to a more complete being. A child is, then, malleable, a subject-in-progress, a person in the making but not yet quite made. Such beings exist in time, and might change with it – indeed, must change, must always enter the next stage, must keep on moving forward. Their sense of self must be qualified by the knowledge that they are not yet the selves they should be and ideally ought to hope they will be.

Note, once more, the ambivalence. On the one hand, this magnificent book exists for *me* to enjoy: damn, I'm good. On the other hand, the book is about how someone like me turns out to be wrong. Or maybe it's just about things I don't know yet and obviously need to know before I can be a whole person. Damn, I'm not quite good enough yet.

But before becoming too depressed by the confusion of all this, I have to acknowledge that it is my own character as a reader – and also, I egocentrically suspect, the character of the readers implied by most literary texts. These readers hope to be gratified by the text's ability to please the people they already are, *and* they want to move past pleasure, to be unsettled by knowledge that there are new things to know, to learn to be different and better from it. I might go even further, and say that this is, perhaps, the ambivalent and eternally divided character demanded of all members in good standing of democratic societies, which gives us the freedom to be ourselves and please ourselves only in return for learning and acting on the knowledge that our freedom must always take place within the context of, and be constrained by, the needs of other individuals and of the whole communities to which we belong. The basic assumptions of children's picture books about their readers help to accommodate the readers to the opposing pulls of thoughtless (and possibly subversive) self-satisfaction and communal understanding and the constraint of individual desire it inevitably results in that will define their lives as adults.

It appears to be no accident, then, that children's literature in general and children's picture books in particular have come to exist specifically and mainly in the context of middle-class-dominated western democracies, and help to create subjects comfortable with the nature of middle-class-dominated western democracies as they have developed within the last few centuries. It is hard to imagine a society of pure egotists or one that was totally repressive of individual desire developing a form so determined both to gratify and to constrain, so unwilling to give up either pole of this bilateral ambivalence in the subjects it constructs. (And note how these two impossible extremes, the totally repressible subject and the totally irrepressible one, are mirrored in the two ideas about child reader/viewers I rejected earlier – the totally impressionable subject implied by censors, the safely active meaning-makers postulated by theorists like Fiske. Each view equally fails to account for the inevitable pull towards the other in the culture that we occupy and that occupies us.)

So far, the reader/viewer I've been describing is the one implied by children's books in general. Now I'd like to look at some qualities more specifically related to picture books.

Picture books contain pictures, and pictures imply a specific sort of viewer merely in being pictures, a viewer unlike the reader implied by the words of a text. Compared to printed words, for instance, they offer a relatively dense sensuous experience. Pictures contain textures, colours, shapes, lines – a variety of things for the eye to respond to and be pleased by, for these aspects of pictures are and are meant to be pleasing in and for themselves, without reference to the meanings or objects they have been made to represent. To look at, say, a patch of intense red is sensuously arousing without any reference to the apple or fire truck the patch of red might be representing in a particular picture.

Of course, the colours and lines and shapes in pictures book do represent other things – the red patch is indeed an apple or a fire truck, not just a patch of red. As I said earlier, pictures operate as a system of signs, and as I try to show in my book *Words About Pictures*, every aspect of them helps to convey specific meanings to knowledgeable viewers. Their implied viewer knows these signs, has a conscious or unconscious awareness of how they allow lines and colours on a flat page to convey ideas of people and place and things. Such an implied viewer is caught up in and constrained

by the cultural understandings that make the visible world meaningful. And as Fredric Jameson suggests, "as sight becomes a separate activity in its own right, it acquires new objects that are themselves the product of a process of abstraction and rationalisation which strips the experience of the concrete of such attributes as colour, spatial depth, texture and the like ..." (1981, p.63). To interpret sensuous information as a sign is to deflect attention from it as a purely sensuous experience.

Nevertheless, the sensuous information which contains and conveys abstracted and rationalised cultural knowledge has no choice but to remain, and to convey itself all the while it is conveying the cultural knowledge. The patch of red is still, whatever it represents, a patch of red. In order to understand what it represents, the implied viewer has no choice but to see it and to respond to it in and for itself as well as in terms of what it has come to represent. According to the psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva, that represents a path to liberation from the constraint of being constructed as a specific kind of subject placed within specific cultural values: "it is through colour – colours – that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic and so forth) that it, as a conscious subject, accepts ... The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm in language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of difference" (1980, p.221). So, too, it seems, do lines and shapes and textures shatter meanings merely by insisting on being themselves. The very act of observing that which contains and conveys meanings therefore undermines the meanings, just as the meanings undermine the pure sensations of the containers in and for themselves. The implied viewer, who can and must both respond to the containers and perceive the meaning they contain, is, once more, pulled in two ways, towards the meaningful and communal and constraining on the one hand and towards the purely sensuous and pleasurable and unconstrainedly anti-meaningful on the other. The implied viewer of picture books is a divided subject.

The division is confirmed by the fact that picture books contain both words and pictures. The viewer they imply knows not only what kind of information to expect from each of these two different media, each one requiring from those who would make sense of them a different set of assumptions, but also, how to put the information together into a whole. This includes some fairly basic strategies of meaning-making, such as, for instance, assuming that the house we see in a picture accompanying a text about a house is

indeed the house the text mentions – that despite the fact we have two different signs for it in two different sign systems, there is just one house. It also includes somewhat more sophisticated strategies, such as guessing from the appearance of the house in the illustration information about its age, its possible location in time or space as implied by its architectural style, the relative degree of wealth of those who live in it, the possibility of someone being content to live in such a dwelling. The implied reader/viewer also knows how to apply all this visual information to the situation outlined by a text – interpret the words and their implications in the light of information provided by a perusal of the pictures. Such a reader/viewer then knows how to be analytical, how to compare and combine information from different sources, how to make the implied sort of sense of a complex field of possibilities, how to solve a puzzle (and to enjoy solving it). Children encouraged to become such reader/viewers are becoming meaning-makers, actively engaged in solving the puzzles.

But there is, once more, a paradox, and a division: the mastery they develop as puzzle solvers masters them, as they increasingly become able to realise solutions to the puzzles that were the ones intended by the author and illustrator, become increasingly aligned with the subject the text intends to construct.

Meanwhile, the mere act of looking at both the words and the pictures in picture books in order to make meaning out of them adds yet a further dimension to the implied reader/viewer. In order to understand both the words and the pictures, we need to position ourselves at some distance away from them: we can't make anything like the sense an author might have intended out of the words and/or illustrator out of the picture with our noses pressed firmly against the books they appear in. Marshall McLuhan suggests that "Psychically the printed book, an extension of the visual faculty, intensified perspective and the fixed point of view" (1965, p.172). If that is true – and literally speaking, it is – pictures, even more intimately connected with the visual faculty, must do something similar. Both, then, require reader/viewers to distance themselves from what they observe in order to observe it in what they will then consider to be a meaningful and accurate manner. Such reader/viewers will tend to trust the value and validity of the detached, isolated point of view – and tend to mistrust the value and validity of what they perceive by other means – by touch, for instance. They have become gazers; I will say more shortly about the economy of the gaze and the character of he or she who gazes.

Younger children who have not yet developed that trust in the gaze often tend to scan picture books, giving equal attention to all parts of the picture plane – and they often find interesting or unexpected details that more experienced viewers miss completely. Experienced viewers, who know how to stand back and read the information in a picture that suggests perspective, and consequently, a focus on certain objects within it understood to be central – what the picture is “really” about – tend to interpret the discoveries of inexperienced, unfixed scanners as errors: they themselves know the one right way to view.

And the right way, merely in existing and in being right, establishes hierarchies, priorities, centres and margins. The act of looking at a picture and establishing which of the group of visual objects it depicts is actually its subject – the person, or the cat on the person’s lap, or the lamp on the table beside the person, or the flower in the drapery in the background – constructs the reader/viewer as conscious of and operating within the context of such hierarchies. Such a subject views the world politically: children who can read and enjoy picture books have become politic beings, conscious of and seeking out the inevitably varying dispositions of power and interest and attention in the world around them.

Yet they are, also, individuals with a consciousness of their individuality, their separateness from and difference from the world around them. According to Walter J. Ong, oral storytelling, which takes place in the context of a shared experience as many listeners become an audience, tends to create communities. Cultures in which oral storytelling predominates imply and therefore, presumably, tend to consist of people who think of themselves primarily in terms of their place in the community as a whole, and who take little interest in the subtle distinctions that make them unique or just different from others. In order to read a printed book, on the other hand, one must separate oneself from the community, have a private experience in isolation from others. Consequently, cultures with print imply and therefore, presumably, tend to develop individuals conscious of and interested in their separation from and differences from each other.

Picture books can and do offer that isolated and individuality-building sort of experience to solitary reader/viewers. But the books are often read by adults to children singly or in groups, and thus can also support more

communal forms of experience and self-perception. Furthermore, the pictures can be viewed by more than one person at a time, although, of course, all the viewers must be positioned in front of the pictures and at an appropriate distance from them in order to make something like the implied sense out of them. So picture books support the relatively un-self-conscious community of oral cultures as well as the self-absorbed isolation of books consisting of nothing but print and read privately. They suggest, once more, a compromise between the self and the communal, possibly even an ambivalent pull in both directions. Is the story just for you alone, or for you as a member of a group? Are you most significantly yourself, or a part of a community? Once more, a picture book viewer must feel both pulls at once – possess a divided subjectivity.

Finally, the division is confirmed yet again by the human figures who appear in the picture in picture books, and the relationships those figures imply between themselves and those who view them. Like the actors in a play or a movie, they are there to be looked at. In many books they even smile out at us, apparently conscious of and happy about the presence of viewers. Whether they acknowledge their position or not, these figures share in a somewhat less aggressive form the invitation to voyeurism that John Berger discovers in both contemporary pin-up photographs and traditional European paintings of nudes. Their implied viewer of all these pictures is a peeping Tom with the right to peep, to linger over details, to enjoy and interpret and make judgements about it. He or she is a person of great power in relation to that which he or she views.

In the depictions of nude adults Berger talks about, the implied viewer is someone quite different from the person being viewed: a male rather than a female, probably a clothed male rather than a naked one (such clothed males sometimes even appear in famous painting of naked women, looking at the women who look out of the painting at us as we view it), and specifically a male with the right to view. As Berger suggests, then, the person in the picture is defined in a power relationship with the viewer: men have the right to look, the power to hold what they see in their gaze; women are primarily that which men have the right to look at, a possession, something whose primary duty is to look good and to be seen. The nude and its implied viewer then sum up a power dynamic that defines what was the traditional relationship of men and women in the European civilisation that produced such paintings. Indeed, a sizeable feminist discourse based in the psychoanalytical theories

of Jacques Lacan talks about women and others becoming “subject to the gaze” – at the mercy of a more powerful being whose power is defined by the right and ability to stand at some distance from them and view them. In learning to become the implied viewer of picture books, children simultaneously learn to identify with the powerful gazer, and to subject others to their gaze. They learn to be in charge.

In picture books, however, the viewer and the viewee, the gazer and the gazed at, are, in some important sense, the same person. A child views a child who represents him or herself, for we encourage children to see themselves in terms of the characters represented in picture book stories – to identify with them in order to learn from their stories. If children are meant to see themselves in these pictures, then they must imagine themselves as having the power to gaze at themselves, and to see themselves as depicted. On the one hand, they have the power of the gaze. On the other hand, they are subjected to a gaze – which is, strangely, their own gaze.

In fact, picture books offer a repetition of the moment Lacan defines as the mirror stage; that moment in infancy in which a child identifies itself with its image in a mirror. At this point, the child, who previously lived in a seamless universe and made no distinction between itself and other things, develops an ego, a sense of self, and does so by realising that there are things outside it, such as the space around its image in the mirror. The child perceives it exists as a separate self only inside a context which is larger than itself, and which makes it feel small in relation to it. Once we identify ourselves with the smaller versions of ourselves we see in the mirror, therefore, we are always conscious of ourselves as diminished, lacking a wholeness we once had, eternally striving for it and never achieving it. The image constrains and constricts us – as smaller-than-life representations of children in picture books construct child viewers who identify with them, as the safely contained representations of subversive anarchy in children’s books contain children within adults ideas of the childlike.

Inevitably, furthermore, to be conscious of oneself in terms of the imagery of mirrors is to be divided. Lacan speaks of “the very bipolar nature of all subjectivity” (1977, p.10). A self is both that which thinks or views, the separate detached consciousness, and that which is being viewed or thought about. I am that which sees myself as this: in demanding and therefore confirming this relationship in the number of ways I have been describing,

picture books play their part in establishing what Lacan calls “an alienating identity” (p.4) built on what is only an “illusion of autonomy” (p.6). We are only what the pictures have encouraged us to believe ourselves to be – and inevitably sense how incomplete and illusory that is. We are free and not free, autonomous and constrained, isolated and enmeshed.

But of course, that can happen only for those whose subjectivity has been constructed as the books invite. A child inexperienced in the language of pictures might, for instance, look at a serious representational picture of the falling cat and laugh, or at a cartoon picture and cry—or even look at a picture of a child and not identify with it. Indeed, inexperienced viewers often have exactly this sort of unintended response—one that an illustrator who worked hard to convey specific information would probably view as inaccurate. Meanwhile, children with the knowledge and experience to view as implied might consciously or unconsciously refuse to do so, might actively participate in making a different meaning that implies a different sense of their own subjectivity. These possibilities raise an important question about the argument I have made here. How *do* young, inexperienced viewers look at pictures? Are they in fact the viewers the pictures in picture books imply?

I believe either that they are, or that they are in the process of learning to become so. Theorists like Claude Levi-Strauss teach us that all artifacts of a culture manifest and replicate their basic structures – that each of the artifacts contain a little or has some contrapuntal but still supportive relationship to the central meanings and values of the culture^{vi}. As artifacts of our own culture, picture books require and help to construct readers and viewers who will take their place in that culture. That place may appear to be oppositional to its central concerns, but if it’s possible to take it publicly, and recommended as a desirable position to take by those ensconced centrally or marginally within the culture, then the apparent opposition is bound to turn out to be just another way of supporting those central concerns. No other subjectivity is possible for the sane members of such a culture but some version of the form of subjectivity picture books help to construct.

If that’s true – and I find it hard to understand how it could not be true – then the sort of active participator in meaning-making postulated by Fiske would have to turn out to be less free from the constraints of our culture than might first appear. According to Fiske, his approach,

Instead of concentrating on the omnipresent, insidious practices of the dominant ideology ..., attempts to understand the everyday resistances and evasions that make ideology work so hard and so insistently to maintain itself and its values. This approach ... is essentially optimistic, for it finds in the vigour and vitality of the people evidence of the possibility of social change and of the motivation to drive it. (1989, p.20-21)

I accept the possibility of resistance, deny the likelihood that the change it allows actually threatens the dominant ideology in any serious way. A community that conceives of itself as a site of freedom for its members has to allow resistance to its dominant values – and obviously, has to do so in ways that prevent any real shift in those values or the power structure they support. The kinds of alternative meaning-making Fiske describes are best understood, I think, as allowable divergences from dominant values, allowable because they don't actually in any serious way threaten the dominance of those values. The most central and most paradoxical of those values is the idea that each of us is and must always be an individual, an ambivalent being essentially at odds with the community we essentially belong to, a community that then survives exactly by requiring and celebrating our sense that we are resistant to it in ways that co-opt and absorb true resistance.

We should not be surprised, then, that the reader/viewer implied by picture books is conflicted, divided, ambivalent. As I suggested earlier, our culture of equally free subjects sharing a single space is inevitably and necessarily conflicted about insoluble issues of separation and community, freedom and constraint. In learning how to look at picture books, then, in becoming the conflicted, divided, ambivalent subjects they imply, children are merely in the process of entering into the conflicts, divisions, ambivalences and complexities of life as it is in our time. Their – and our – one chance of changing that situation in any truly fundamental way comes with the development of an awareness of it, and particularly of the ways in which our culture allows and at the same time polices and defangs the making of meanings that appear to threaten its dominance.

Notes

- i For more about semiotic theory, see my discussion in *Words About Pictures*, (1988, p.9-10).
- ii The basic ideas of reader-response criticism, including the concept of "implied reader" are discussed more fully by Wolfgang Iser.
- iii See, for instance, my discussion of these matters in *Words about Pictures*, (1988, p.10-16).
- iv For more about construction of subjectivity, see my *Pleasures of Children's Literature*,

(1996 p.136-139).

- v While Fiske's ideas relate to texts of popular culture such as television and advertising, they represent a view of the freedom of reader/viewers frequently found in discussions of children's literature, and frequently used to downplay the significance of implied refers and viewers. It's for this reason that I refer to it here.
- vi Lévi-Strauss speaks, for instance, of "the unconscious structures underlying each institution and each custom" of a culture (1967, p.21).

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