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While the illustrations in David Wiesner's picture books evoke similar-looking worlds, the books tell stories that belong to different genres—or so literary theory suggests. After exploring how the similarities of these pictures challenge that theory and expose some of its assumptions, the author proposes that the books and the theories in question both celebrate and undermine the liberating potential of fantasy.

Private Places on Public View: David Wiesner's Picture Books

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> *The finest fantasy art is a liberation from reality that never loses sight of its point of departure.*
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> —Terry Reece Hackford, "Fantastic Visions."

In David Wiesner's Caldecott-winning book *Tuesday*, frogs fly in formation through a typical American town. In his book *June 29, 1999*, giant vegetables fly in formation through ordinary American landscapes. While the landscapes in his *Free Fall*, a book depicting a boy's dream world, are somewhat less ordinary, groups of birds, papers, walls of buildings, maps, fish, and leaves fly in formation through them. Even in Wiesner's *Hurricane*, a realistic book about a storm, leaves driven by strong winds fly in formations much like those of other objects in the other books. In the final picture of *Hurricane*, a bird appears to be imagining fish flying in formation in the heavy rain it views through a window—a motif picked up in Weisner's latest book, *Sector 7*, in which groups of children, cats, and even actual fish in a river see skies full of fish-shaped clouds flying in formation.

There are other similarities also. The main effect of both *Tuesday* and *June 29, 1999* is the incongruity of the flying objects in otherwise ordinary landscapes. *Sector 7* creates a similarly incongruous relationship between its fish-like clouds and the realistic landscapes of Manhattan they fly

over. *Free Fall* depicts croissants and chess pieces as incongruously gigantic in relation to humans as *June 29, 1999*'s vegetables, and also shows a child in contemporary pyjamas incongruously entering a mediaeval castle surrounded by a crowd of knights. In its central pages, similarly, *Hurricane* shows us two boys in ordinary contemporary dress as they imagine themselves in play, sailing the seas with pirates and exploring outer space, just as the central pages of *Sector 7* show a real boy in ordinary winter clothing surrounded by humanized clouds on a visit to a cloud-distribution centre in the sky that looks suspiciously like New York's Grand Central Station. Wiesner's illustrations for Dennis Haseley's non-fantasy book entitled *Kite Flier* intriguingly replicate the effect of his own fantasy texts and confirm the peculiar consistency of the world that his pictures represent in quite different verbal contexts. Without consulting the text to determine that they represent actual kites in a perfectly possible way, the objects in the pictures look like surrealistically gigantic insects, fish, and roses. The illustrations in these books all evoke a world that looks very much like the same strange place. But despite that, they tell stories that belong to different genres, or so literary theory would suggest. This perplexing resemblance of illustrations for theoretically dissimilar stories deserves exploration.

To begin with: What characteristics in these stories show that they represent different genres? The answer is simple: They offer differing forms of explanation for the strange events that they depict. Quoting Robert Philmus, Darko Suvin says, "Naturalistic fiction does not require scientific explanation, fantasy does not allow it, and SF [science fiction] both requires and allows it" (65). It turns out that the vegetables in *June 29, 1999* have been jettisoned by a passing alien spaceship. The presence of this "scientific" explanation—or, in the absence of any hard evidence on the actual existence of aliens, this theoretically scientific pseudo-explanation—for fantastic events makes the story science fiction. In connecting fantastic possibilities with our own reality and our rational systems of accounting for it, such explanations make science fiction what Suvin identifies as a literature of "cognitive estrangement"—one that "use[s] imagination as a means of understanding the tendencies latent in reality" (8). Because it allows readers to see possible and potentially liberating connections between the worlds they imagine and the one they know, Suvin identifies science fiction as the worthiest form of fantasy.

Tuesday, on the other hand, offers no explanation, either for the frogs' sudden ability to fly or for the equally sudden cessation of that ability. For Suvin, that would make this story mere fantasy, which is "committed to interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment"

and therefore, "inimical to the empirical world and its laws" (8). It can be dismissed for that reason: "Commercial lumping of it into the same category as SF is thus a grave disservice and rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon" (9).

But then, exactly because of its anti-empirical lack of explanation for its estranging oddities, *Tuesday* also represents what J.R.R. Tolkien calls "imagined wonder" (19) and celebrates as the most powerful form of imaginative literature: the sense of mystery created when no explanation is offered for strange events opens readers' minds to wider possibilities, particularly spiritual ones, which are, by definition, beyond rational explanation. For Tolkien, *June 29, 1999* (indeed, all science fiction), fits into a lesser "class of traveller's tales. Such tales report many marvels, but they are marvels to be seen in this mortal world in some region of our own time and space; distance alone conceals them" (18). They therefore lack the requisite wonder.

Tolkien goes on to "exclude, or rule out of order, any story that uses the machinery of dream, the dreaming of actual human sleep, to explain the apparent occurrence of marvels" (19). Suvin would exclude those non-estranging sorts of explanation also, and both exclusions would apply to both *Free Fall*, which depicts a boy's dream-life, and *Hurricane*, which depicts what its protagonists imagine in their play.

They might also apply to *Sector 7*, which intriguingly sums up the theoretically conflicting natures of these different genres by ambiguously suggesting all of them. The book might represent a sort of daydream, in which its protagonist transforms his close-up view of clouds on a trip to the observation deck of the Empire State Building into a satisfying wish-fulfillment fantasy. It is he, already established as an artist in a first view of him drawing exotic fish in the frost of a bus window, who shows the clouds how to defy their conformist human masters and take on exciting new shapes. The pictorial sequence in which the boy, standing on the observation deck, is enveloped by a cloud and then discovers the cloud's human personality might represent a transition from an outside observer's realistic view of the boy to what he himself imagines in his mind. Or it might not. It might instead, in the light of the ambiguity of that transformation sequence, be something that readers are expected to think of as actually happening in the world of the book, which would make *Sector 7* a fantasy. Or again, in the light of the mundane business-like atmosphere of Sector 7, the presence of clipboards, schedules, and blueprints for cloud shapes and the pragmatic explanation for how clouds get shaped that this atmosphere implies, the book might be science fiction. Or it might not be. It occupies a shifting territory somewhere between the genres represented by Wiesner's other books.

In the light of the apparently significant generic differences proposed by the theorists that I've referred to, that ought to be impossible. How can one text seem to belong to two different genres that are supposed to be totally at odds with each other? For that matter, why do the pictures in these books in such different genres look so much like each other?

It might be simply because they are pictures, because of qualities inherent in pictorial representation. Divorced from a context (such as the specific written texts that accompany them in each of these books), pictures always mean much less, and much less specifically, than they do within a verbal context. While visual images can represent something and sometimes, as in many photographs and realistic drawings, do so obviously, they do not easily inform viewers of *why* they are looking at it, and therefore, about how they might be expected to respond to it.

In a sense, of course, that is as true of verbal texts as it is of visual images. Whatever their immediate denotations are, their specific meaning and purpose always depend on their context. But a visual image is a special case, for, as E.H. Gombrich says, "Unaided it altogether lacks the possibility of matching the statement function of language" (82). A picture of a cat might be trying to tell us what cats generally look like, or what a specific cat looks like, or what a wonderful collar the cat has on. Without a caption or some other specific context, it says none of these things in particular. But with a caption it does, and different captions make the same picture convey different meanings. Even an obviously representational photograph says one thing when labelled "Portrait of a Loving Father and Child," another when labelled "The Scandal of Paedophilia." Similarly, Wiesner's different sorts of texts transform the significance of the world he offers for view in his pictures and makes it represent anti-cognitive wonder in one verbal context, cognitive estrangement in another, and something ambiguously one or the other in a third.

But, even without an accompanying text, a photograph of a man embracing a boy makes sense as a representation of objects that most viewers can be expected to know to exist, in relationships that they can be expected to believe to be possible. The viewers implied by the existence of such a picture have contexts both of previous knowledge and of language to express that knowledge, and that provides them with an unspoken caption even in the absence of an actual one. If, however, we removed Wiesner's pictures of flying frogs and giant vegetables from the texts that accompany them in his books, providing them with this sort of unspoken caption would not be so easy or so automatic. Viewers can be expected to identify frogs or lima beans and can equally be expected to identify flying. They are less likely to take for granted the idea of frogs or lima beans that fly.

Indeed, that is what makes the pictures in Wiesner's books so much like each other. The objects and events that they depict in such great and apparently accurate detail do not match—indeed, clearly, are not supposed to match—their implied viewers' previous context of knowledge of the world and its logical possibilities. The pleasure offered is in the very lack of matching—in the unexpected strangeness of what the pictures show.

We might reasonably expect inexperienced child readers unfamiliar with the history of fantasy illustration that underpins Wiesner's work to respond with just that sense of strangeness, although not necessarily with pleasure. Widespread assumptions about the limited capabilities of children proclaim their susceptibility to being unsettled by the unfamiliar. Children whose literary experiences have been limited by common adult concerns about distressing them might well have not developed any means to cope with the unfamiliar other than the expected distress with it.

Quite differently, my own pleasure when I first looked at Wiesner's pictures was not the least bit distressing and had less to do with the shock of the strange than with the comfort of what did in fact seem quite familiar. As an adult with a specific repertoire of previous experience, I viewed them in the context of my knowledge of the work of painters like René Magritte and Salvador Dali, as examples of surrealistic art.

Nevertheless, my identification of them as surrealistic meant that I was still focussing on their lack of congruence with actual possibility. Because I understood them as making no logical sense, I made sense of them as representations of a type I know to be called surrealistic, a type of art that, by definition, depicts that which does not actually exist as if it did. By and large, I suspect, most viewers are likely to share my sense that what is most striking about these pictures is the way in which they do not match our sense of what is normally possible in reality. Whether possessed of expertise in the history of art or knowledge of next to nothing, real viewers of all ages seem likely to have their own versions of the perception of strangeness clearly expected of the implied viewers of Wiesner's pictures.

For me, Wiesner's giant lima beans flying over a suburb evoke the same disruption of normally expectable reality as do paintings like Magritte's *Le sens des réalitiés*, which depicts a boulder floating in the sky, or *La chambre d'écoute*, which focusses on a giant apple filling a room. It seems logical, then, to try to learn more about the meanings and implications of Weisner's pictures by considering how painters like Magritte understood their art. According to David Sylvester, "Magritte wanted his pictures to be looked at, not into, wanted their mystery to be confronted, not interpreted, seeing it as a mystery latent in all things" (318). In other words, the pictures are a

sort of visual equivalent of what Tolkien identified as "imagined wonder": that which is magical and compelling exactly because it is ungrounded in the rational and *not* explained. Sylvester says, "Magritte's art subverts our habits of taking the world for granted by pushing things to their logical conclusion. [...] It is as rigorous as logic. It denies fact but not reason" (280). This insistence on "reason" might identify it with Suvin's cognitive estrangement. But for me, at least, the effect is in fact the opposite. I do not so much see exciting new potential for a different and better reality as I feel distressingly (and nevertheless pleasurably) unsettled by the subversion of what I took for granted. I don't imagine the real possibility of a rock being suspended in mid-air so much as I enjoy the real impossibility of what I am nevertheless, unsettlingly, seeing. Wiesner's pictures, divorced from their text, convey the same sort of unsettling mystery.

Indeed—and like Magritte's pictures in relation to the often peculiar titles with which he provided them—the mystery of Wiesner's pictures survive the attempts of the texts to ground them even when the texts are taken into consideration. For one thing, his texts are noticeably sparse, containing very few words at most, and sometimes almost none. Except for its title and the words that appear in places within its pictures like newspapers and signs, *Tuesday* contains only the few words that operate as time markers at its beginning and end. Except for its title and the words that appear on signs and other objects in its pictures, *Sector 7* has no words at all. *Free Fall* might be considered equally wordless if it weren't for the poetic text that attempts to account for what happens in it, a text that appears not within the book but on its front-cover flap. There is something tantalizingly and unsettlingly unaccounted for by the meanings and explanations offered by these minimal texts, something that reveals, in the very act of not being accounted for, the limitations of normal language and meanings. How can it merely and matter-of-factly be "Tuesday evening, around eight" if frogs are flying through town in formation?

Some theorists believe that fantasy is a function of language, based on our ability to combine the words we've invented to describe the actual world in forms at odds with reality. But referring both to the cave paintings of pre-literate men and to pictures by Magritte, Brian Attebury suggests that "fantasy is to some extent independent of language and may even predate it" (5). Indeed, Wiesner's pictures might well represent the state of fantasy itself. More exactly, they might represent that which makes fantasies fantastic: their divergence from what we identify as normal reality, and therefore, from language, the system of meanings that defines normal reality for us. Fantasy might quite literally be independent of language, beyond its constraining grasp. Consider the ways in which psychoanalytic theory talks about the

fantastic imagery of dreams as revelations of the unconscious: that which exists outside the repressions and limitations both of conscious reality and of the grammar of the conventional language that describes it. In this context, it is interesting to note how often picture-book artists produce fantasy sequences without words in the middle of stories grounded in reality that otherwise provide verbal texts. Maurice Sendak's famous book *Where the Wild Things Are* is only one of many possible examples. Instructively, the wordless sequence in it depicts a "rumpus": anarchy presumably beyond the order of language or apprehensible meaning and pleasurable for that reason. In the sparseness and inadequacy of their texts, the fantasy sequences in Wiesner's books seem to aspire to that condition of pleasurable anarchy beyond linguistic constraint.

If fantasy transcends the constraints of language, what Tolkien and Suvin contest in the statements that I quoted earlier is less the fantastic itself than the uses to which it is put. For both, it represents what the world actually is or could be, beyond our limited usual perceptions of it. All they disagree about is what the world actually is: in one case a mere shadow of a larger spiritual truth, in the other an imperfect place with the potential to be better. In fact, both are in the business of dispelling the inherent unreality and lack of meaning of fantasy; it represents what is and/or can become true. Their theories make the meaningless (because not representative of anything actually possible) meaningful, and the unsettling comfortable.

Indeed, that is true of just about all theories of fantasy. Attebury says, "The essential content [of fantasy texts] is the impossible, or, as I put it in *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, 'some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law.' [. . .] Others define the impossible slightly differently—Kathryn Hume refers to 'departure from consensus reality.' [. . .] C.N. Manlove mentions the supernatural, Jane Mobley calls it magic—but there is general agreement that some such violation is essential to fantasy" (14-15).

What Attebury does not say here is that these theorists all go on to offer explanations for the meanings of fantasy that tie them down into the real world of possible meaning and already known language. Manlove insists that many fantasies "present worlds that are intended to partake no less in reality than our own" (28-29), and Hume, who sees fantasy as an impulse to literary production as basic as mimesis, states, "My own primary assumption is that *literature is a meaning-giving experience*" (27, emph. Hume's); Attebury himself asserts that "the freedom [fantasy] offers is offset by the need to be understood. [. . .] [The writer] trades away a measure of freedom in exchange for the possibility of meaning" (9).

But the fantastic is inherently resistant to meaning, reason and comfort; and it is so, paradoxically, exactly because of its inevitable relationship to what we know or believe to be real. We could not make any sense of a fantasy that had no elements of reality in it. A fantasy must, then, always be merely the real re-juggled, reorganized, its laws and assumptions violated. And, in its unavoidable "violation of dominant assumptions," says Rosemary Jackson, fantasy "threatens to subvert (overt, upset, undermine) rules and conventions taken to be normative" (14). Consequently, while nearly all depictions of the fantastic provide explanations that divest it of its subversive danger, the hint of danger always remains. In imagining what is not, it seems, readers and viewers are inevitably invited to be involved in the process of questioning what is—considering whether or not what we usually call reality is, as it always claims, all the reality there is.

Wiesner's pictures of turnips floating through a misty forest or of clouds with human faces inspecting blueprints or of a boy tumbling amidst the utensils and foods of a giant breakfast are a good example. While they show us what is not, what is not is merely an unusual combination of what is. These pictures are unsettling because they represent intrusions of the anarchic into the orderly. In other words, what they show mirrors their inherent nature as fantasy pictures in relation to a rationalizing text. They represent the intrusion of something beyond meaning into a meaningful context.

Furthermore, the stories told by the combination of pictures and verbal text in Wiesner's books are about exactly such intrusions: about frogs, vegetables, pirate ships, or fish-shaped clouds entering spaces where reason tells us they do not belong. They are, literally, fantastic: violations of conventional expectations of normalcy.

Logically, then, they ought to be frightening. But in fact, for myself and for the viewers of all ages I've discussed them with, they are not. That is another thing that these theoretically different worlds have in common. The most unsettling thing about them is just how non-unsettling they seem to be. Furthermore, it seems clear that they are not intended to be unsettling, at least not for long. The pictures themselves work to diminish and even erase the force of their own unsettling elements.

For one thing, the people who experience the events that the pictures depict are not horrified. From a reading of the characters' facial expressions, it is possible to assume that they do, at least at first, feel some alarm. There are open mouths and popped eyes in all the books. But there are not all that many of them, for the stories tend to focus on the positive aspects of the theoretically disruptive events. At the height of the hurricane, the text

says, the family in *Hurricane* "felt safe," and later, the text dwells on the pleasure afforded by the felled tree and says nothing about the negative effects of the storm.

In *Tuesday*, meanwhile, only one of the only two human beings who are actually shown confronting the frog invasion seems alarmed. The other is sound asleep. Nor is a hysterical response evident at the end. Instead, Wiesner shows how easily the real world absorbs apparent aberrations from its normalcy. As a police detective calmly tries to reason out an explanation for a street covered with lily pads, a television crew turns the frog invasion into yet more grist for its daily mill. Here, as in *Hurricane*, the people of Wiesner's world simply accommodate themselves to what ought to be upsetting and find a way of making use of it in terms of their usual activities: making money and making sense.

In *June 29, 1999*, the surprise is even less, the accommodation even greater. As soon as the giant vegetables appear, people take them for granted. While the *Time* magazine shown in one picture is perplexed enough to ask "Why?" on its cover, the *Star* is more interested in the fact that one of the radishes "has the face of Elvis," a theoretical strangeness of a sort familiar enough to divest it of its real oddity. As people carve houses out of giant gourds and presidents' faces out of giant potatoes, the text says, "Vegetables become very big business." It is hard to feel horror about what is so completely accepted, except perhaps, a different sort of horror at the ease and self-seeking nature of the acceptance.

But, even more significantly, and more paradoxically, the most distinctly strange characteristic of the anarchic intrusions that Wiesner's pictures depict is their orderliness. Things come in like groups and fly in symmetrical patterns.

Even the apparently naturalistic pictures of normal events in *Hurricane* reveal a fascination with repetition and symmetry. In the living room, there are repeated flowers on wallpaper and furniture fabric. In the boys' bedroom, the wallpaper is a mysteriously unusual pattern that repeats again and again the images of ships, elephants, and rocket ships that will appear later in the pictures of what the boys imagine as they play in the felled tree. An earlier picture of the kitchen seems to contain two of almost everything: the two boys with two similar looks on their similarly angled faces, two paper bags, two buttons, two batteries, and two tin cans, one of which shows a picture of two tomatoes. The only prominent singular object, a flashlight, is a grey object overlapping a brown bag, an exact echo of the grey overcoat sleeve overlapping the duplicate brown bag on the opposite side of the picture; and its lighter grey front end duplicates

in shape both the light grey ends of the batteries and the light grey top of an upended cat-food tin.

Nor is the hurricane that disrupts all this compulsive order much less symmetrical. As winds create havoc, there are leaves and twigs distributed evenly over the picture plane. They look as much like the repeating patterns of wallpaper as do the evenly mottled shapes of leaves seen in later pictures as the sun comes out and the organized fish the cat seems to be imagining at the end of the book.

It is logical, of course, that a hurricane should blow leaves all in the same direction, but the regularity of Wiesner's patterns is intensified by a sense of movement in one direction even in his depictions of illogical fantasy situations. The mysteriousness of the flying vegetables in *June 29, 1999* is not just that they mirror each other and fly. It is also that they all fly in the same direction, and mostly from left to right, which is, as I suggest in my book *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*, the usual direction that objects move in picture books and therefore the one that ought to seem most logical and least strange (163). Here, in an estranging situation and left unaccounted for, it seems very strange indeed.

Tuesday most clearly demonstrates the disturbing effect of this sort of regulated movement. The main joke of the book is that, once set in motion, the frogs seem incapable of changing their direction. They fly ever forward in regular battalions, entering windows or flying into sheets if the windows or sheets should happen to be in their path.

In *Free Fall*, there is also absolute consistency of movement from left to right: the left edge of each picture exactly matches the right edge of the picture on the previous double-page spread, thus implying that the landscape of the book, despite its unsettling transformations, nevertheless and just as unsettlingly all fits seamlessly together, and that the viewer is scanning the entire topography in a weirdly orderly movement that follows the boy's weirdly orderly movement from left to right.

In fact, for all the apparent anarchy of its constantly mutating world, *Free Fall*'s mutations are more noteworthy for their orderliness. It makes perfectly good sense that the trunks of trees would turn into the pages of a book, mountains into croissants, cornflakes into autumn-coloured leaves: these objects have visual elements, shapes and colours, in common with each other in the first place. Furthermore, the book establishes a clear, logical, repetitive pattern. We soon understand that each new set of objects that the boy confronts will quickly transform into something different that nevertheless has visual elements in common with it. This supposed dream world seems directly antithetical to the distressingly anarchic world

of actual dreams, in which transitions are never so comfortingly logical nor repetitive.

The world of *Sector 7* is equally non-anarchic, albeit for more obviously thematic reasons. The human employees of *Sector 7* all wear the same clothes and tend to have the same or similar postures and gestures, like the chorus in a Broadway musical. But then they seem quite obviously to represent the conformity of the kind of conventional thinking that turns out boringly repetitive cumulus or cirrus clouds rather than ones in the exotic shapes of tropical fish. Paradoxically, however, the clouds who wish to rebel against these conventional ideas also have similar faces and gestures, and they all end up as a school of fish flying in regimented formation from left to right. For Wiesner, it seems, the freedom to fantasize means the freedom to disrupt reality with more organized versions of it.

As an explanation of why the disruptions of fantasy should so unsettle us, Jackson suggests that fantasy literature "does not introduce novelty, so much as uncover all that remains to be hidden if the world is to be comfortably 'known'" (65). In other words, it shows us what we have preferred to forget: that which we have repressed into our unconscious in order to feel at ease with what we then call real. Viewed in these terms, Wiesner's fantasies seem inherently paradoxical. Their fantasy elements seem to represent exactly the kinds of regularized artificial patterning that the human mind imposes on the world when it wishes to forget a larger, more random or more perplexing mysteriousness beyond the confines of normative reason and conventional language. The ease with which Wiesner's characters accommodate these theoretically disruptive elements is not surprising, then. These objects merely make manifest the ordering, regularizing principles that always govern our human sense of the normal. The apparently fantastic in these stories is the opposite of what fantasy is theoretically supposed to be: logical, symmetrical, not subversive at all.

Or is it? I might interpret the paradox another way. It might be exactly the regular symmetry of the fantasy elements in Wiesner's pictures that makes them subversive. The "hidden" that they uncover might be the extent to which the symmetry of human organization *is* strange, fantastic, alien to the world we impose it on. Like Magritte's pictures, Wiesner's books might do so by revealing the inherent unnaturalness of human logic by taking it to its logical extreme.

But, if they do invite that unsettling revelation, Wiesner provides contexts that quickly erase it. If anything is subverted here, it is subversion; and it is subverted by logic.

This subversion by logic happens most obviously in *Free Fall*, the end of which offers a final view of the boy's bedside that grounds the fantasy firmly in normal reality, and it does so in a way that divests its internal logic of its oddity. We see real parallels to all the components of the dream: buildings, birds, fish, croissants, maps, chess pieces, the belts worn by the knights, old books, dragon-like toy dinosaurs. Even the leaves are explained by the pattern of the boy's wallpaper. In *Sector 7*, similarly, the final picture shows the boy asleep in his bedroom, which also contains a tank of tropical fish, look-alikes to, and therefore clearly the inspirations of, his creations for the clouds. Not only is the provenance of the cloud creations explained, but also the clouds turn out to be grounded in existing beings, not the free flights of the boy's fantasy that they might so far have seemed. A similar grounding occurs in *Hurricane*, in which everything the boys imagine as they play in the tree is prefigured in the wallpaper of their room.

According to Jackson, "Fantasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material that it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts" (6). But, while the surrealistic images of *Free Fall* or *Sector 7* or the fantasy pages of *Hurricane* might tempt a reader to that kind of interpretation, information offered elsewhere in these books about their mundane basis grounds them in conscious, shareable, comforting reality.

June 29, 1999, in its own way, also offers an explanation that transforms the fantastic into the rational, the anarchic into the orderly; and all five of these books imply a bland acceptance of the strange that undercuts the unsettling nature of its intrusive force. The place Wiesner describes is a world that at first appears odd but gradually grows either less odd or less noticeably odd. The effect is of a puzzle either solved or with its puzzling nature simply ignored. Speaking of fantasy as "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss," Jackson goes on to describe what sounds like the effect of Wiesner's books: "In expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways. [. . .] It can *tell of*, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can *expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force). In many cases, fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be 'expelled' by having been told of and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader" (3-4, emph. Jackson's). Wiesner's books all tell of something desirably strange and subversive and then divest it of its strangeness and subversion.

In her discussions of fantasy, Jackson always assumes that the anarchic playfulness of individual human imaginations is the most subversive of all forces, the strongest tool we have against ideologies that might repress us. But, according to Louis Althusser, "there is no practice except by and in ideology" (244), and that would have to include the practice of fantasy. From this point of view, everything we are capable of imagining is merely further evidence of the nature of the particular ideology that contains us. Furthermore, if fantasy is, as Jackson suggests, a danger to culture, then culture will allow only those uses of fantasy that subvert the danger. Consequently, the ways in which Wiesner's fantasies tantalize readers and viewers with theoretically subversive possibilities may merely represent a pattern and purpose common to all fantasy art: an expression of that which might subvert an ideology, organized in a way that seems to support but in fact defuses the force of its subversion.

This may be why the contexts that Wiesner provides for the fantasy world of his pictures celebrate the wonderful freedom of imagining, and why they focus so much on the power of the individual imagination. *Sector 7* clearly implies the triumphantly liberating effect of the boy's imaginings, on himself and, if he is not just daydreaming, on others. According to the front-cover flap of *Free Fall*,

> In the silence
> of a dream
> our adventures move
> in seamless progressions
> as we conquer our dragon
> [....... ....]
> and float
> free.

And, in *Hurricane*, we are told that the felled tree "was a private place, big enough for secret dreams, small enough for shared adventure."

The irony of both these statements is simply that, literally speaking, they are not true. In the "dream" of *Free Fall*, it is not we as viewers who float free but a boy put on display for us. As viewers of this action, we are peeping Toms viewing what are claimed to be someone else's private imaginings, just as we view the theoretically "secret" dreams of the boys in *Hurricane*.

It is particularly revealing that Wiesner should both insist on the privacy of these places and show it to viewers of his images. While pretending to celebrate the individual imagination, he subverts the desire or need to imagine by imagining for his audience. If he successfully persuades viewers that what

they see somehow represents or opens up their own private imaginings, they can believe that they are being imaginative and free but actually imagine nothing on their own and therefore nothing likely to be freeing or subversive. It is then only logical that what they are given to imagine should be so totally logical and anti-subversive, so filled with rational meanings. It is not only the fantasy writer who, to borrow Attebury's words, "trades away a measure of freedom in exchange for the possibility of meaning." The fantasy reader/viewer does it too.

It is important that this loss of freedom should be happening in books intended for children. It often does. The ideology of our culture insists that childhood is a time of free play, free imagination, free fantasy. But it is also understood that the most important job of children is to learn to be responsible, law-abiding citizens of their community, not only in their future lives as adults but also right now as socially acceptable, "good" children. If they are to do those things successfully, they had better not indulge in imaginings that might be subversive or otherwise culture-threatening. A major task of the literature for the imagination that we provide for children is to resolve this apparent contradiction and to do so in a way that confirms existing communal values. It must appear to privilege free imagining while in fact divesting it of its freeing quality and confirming the value of its opposite. Wiesner does this in the same way that authors of most children's books do. He occupies the imaginative spaces that he theoretically encourages with the already (and safely non-subversive) imagined fantasies of an adult. The overall thrust of this endeavour is to encourage children to be childlike in the ways that adults have imagined childhood to be, to replace their own sense of who they are with an adult view of what they ought, as members of the category *children*, to be.

Furthermore, the same or similar adult ideas about what children ought to be recur, not only in books intended for children but in the vast discourse about childhood that adults produce for each other, as parents, teachers, and specialists in a number of academic disciplines devoted to the study of childhood. As I argue in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (71-85), all this self-confirming discourse insists that children are different from adults in ways that require adults to understand childhood—not only for each other but also for children—as the basis for adult interactions with specific young people. In other words, a major goal of this discourse is what appears to be the intended effect of Wiesner's books: to transform children into what adults already understand them to be.

That is, of course, necessary, if we wish to teach children to exist comfortably, in childhood and in their later life as adults, within the

conventions and constraints required of all members of any community. It is also rather depressing; it is a co-opting of freed imagination that masquerades as the very thing it is co-opting.

Rather than finish with that bleak thought, however, I want to reiterate something I suggested earlier: because imagining what is not involves readers and viewers in the process of questioning what is, the possibility of subversion always remains. Adults like myself who wish to liberate child readers of books like Wiesner's from unquestioning acceptance of normative adult views of what they are can develop means of encouraging these children to be more questioning, less acquiescent, to help them acquire what Roderick McGillis calls "the reading skills that allow for meaningful resistance and for informed choices" (129). Doing that would still be teaching them how to be childlike in terms that we adults have imagined for them; but what we have imagined would be less repressive, more truly liberating.

But first, of course, we need to imagine that children are indeed capable of asking such questions. The resources I have listed in the sections entitled "Children as Readers" and "Teaching Literature to Children" at my website, *Reading about Children's Literature: A Bibliography of Criticism,* confirm in a variety of encouraging and useful ways that they can be, if only adults act in the belief that they are.

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