The Eye and the I: Identification and First-Person Narratives in Picture Books

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There is an essential doubleness about stories told in books containing sequences both of words and of pictures. They are unlike movies or television narratives, which provide us with simultaneous access to both visual and verbal information, for we cannot simultaneously read the words and observe the pictures in a picture book and must alternate our attention between them. Even when children hear a picture-book text read to them by someone else as they look at the pictures, they experience the words and the pictures as two separate and distinct streams of information. Moreover, as listening children look at the book, they have no choice but to see not just the pictures but also the visual signs of the words they are hearing. Even those children who can't read must separate these two sources of visual information—discard the visual signs for the words in order to make proper sense of the pictures.

Furthermore, the basic differences in the nature of the two media mean that pictures inevitably convey a different kind of information from words, and do it in different ways. These differences stem from the fact that pictures, which occupy space rather than time, lack an easy means of expressing the temporal relationships of cause and effect, dominance and subordination, and possibility and actuality that the grammar of language so readily expresses. Our knowledge of grammar allows us to understand immediately how the words in a sentence relate to each other, to words in previous sentences, and to the real objects and ideas they represent; a picture can't tell us directly how the objects in it relate to each other, to objects in previous pictures, or to the real objects or ideas they represent.

Pictures communicate this sort of information by other, less specific means—through conventions of the meanings of particular visual objects and of the implications of their spatial relationships to each other, through references to a repertoire of conventional

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assumptions about the meanings of shapes, colors, and styles, and, most significantly, through verbal information—through titles, captions, and verbal descriptions that focus our attention on specific details of pictures in specific ways (see my *Words about Pictures*). Words cannot easily communicate the detail and depth of information about the overall appearance of physical objects that pictures so readily convey; even the most complete verbal description of a face or a setting is far more focused on the implications of specific details than the most simple caricature, which readily conveys the sense of a visual whole.

Because words and pictures communicate different kinds of relationships in different ways, the doubleness of picture books is not simply the repetition of the same information in a different form. The pictures inevitably convey a different story from the words. As a result, any given picture book contains at least three stories: the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures, and the one that results from the combination of the first two. This last story tends to emerge from ironies created by differences between the first two. In a discussion of the different ways in which different media communicate, Susanne Langer says, "There are no happy marriages in art—only successful rape" (86). Picture books represent this sort of rape.

The doubleness of picture books is nowhere more apparent than in books containing texts with first-person narrators. In most such stories in picture books, the first-person narrators tell of events they themselves are centrally involved in; these are examples of the kind of narrative text that Gérard Genette calls "autodiegetic" (245). In verbal narratives of this sort the distinctness of the speaker's perceptions of what happens to himself or herself is always a matter of interest, a focus of a reader's attention; but a picture, even one in a narrative picture book that contains an autodiegetic verbal narrative, cannot so directly and so obviously focus a viewer's attention on the distinctness of its narrator's perceptions of the same events.

This does not mean that pictures cannot be told, or shown, in the first person. In fact, they never do anything else, and we tend to value visual art based on the extent to which its style and its form express the individuality of an artist's perception. Nevertheless, pictures rarely convey the effect of an autodiegetic first-person narration in which the same person is both the teller of the story and a key figure within it—where what Genette calls "oneness of person of the narrator and the hero" (198) occurs.

The rare exceptions are those paintings labeled as self-portraits. It's not insignificant that we need the label to perceive the doubleness, the knowledge that the artist is observing him- or herself. Even then, what the picture shows is not what the artist usually sees. Self-portraits conventionally depict faces and eyes—aspects of ourselves that are physically impossible for us to see except on those relatively rare occasions when we look into mirrors. A more legitimate form of self-portrait might be an attempt to depict the spaces an artist occupies as the artist sees them—as Van Gogh did when he painted his room in Arles.

Unlike that Van Gogh painting, picture books in which narrators tell of events they are significantly involved in almost always express an acute doubleness by implying in the pictures what they don't imply in their texts: an objective observer who perceives the speaker performing the events the speaker describes from some distance. In purely verbal narratives, Genette distinguishes between the person who speaks (the person who tells the story) and the person who sees (the focalization, or the person from whose point of view the events in the story are seen) (186). In an autodiegetic verbal narrative, the two are one and the same; but in most picture books with autodiegetic texts, "who speaks" is not "who sees." In books like Ellen Raskin's *Nothing Ever Happens on My Block* and Mercer Mayer's *I Am a Hunter*, the words are in the first person but the pictures seem to be in the third.

As an adult reader with some consciousness of the subtle implications of narrative point of view, I find this odd. The intended audience of books I'm talking about consists of the least experienced of readers and viewers; yet these books combine two quite different forms of focalization, each of which requires a subtle understanding of a different set of assumptions. Of particular significance is the common belief that these different focalizations demand greatly varying degrees of empathy from readers. The many adults who believe that young readers "identify" with characters in texts whom they see as being like themselves think they are especially likely to identify with autodiegetic narrators: the "I" who tells the story becomes the "I" who reads it. To complicate this already complex situation by combining a text that demands empathy with pictures that imply the objectivity of distance would seem to demand far too much of young readers. But that is just what most picture books with autodiegetic texts do.

The oddities of such books might easily cause confusion. In a

book intended for the youngest of readers, John Burningham's *The Baby*, a first-person narrator declares, "There is a baby in our house"; the accompanying picture shows three people, seen from some distance away—a baby, an older child, and an adult. Although we might logically assume from the set-up of the picture that the speaker is somebody outside it, the author clearly expects us to understand that the words are being spoken by one of the people in the picture. Even so, unless we automatically assume an identification between a child reader and the child depicted, we need to ask who it is. It's clearly not the baby, but it might well be either of the two other people; it isn't until the speaker speaks of helping Mummy some pages later that we know for sure that it's the child.

A similar confusion develops in the relationship between G. Max Ross's text and Ingrid Fetz's pictures for *When Lucy Went Away*—and it is never resolved. One of my students wrote, "The narrator is one of the children who belong to the family that takes care of the cat Lucy. The reason I say one of the children is because there are two children involved but I am never sure which of the two is explaining the situation in the story. When I am introduced to the child telling the story . . . the picture does not help to distinguish whether it is the girl or the boy." Like Burningham, Fetz and Ross have combined a first-person verbal narrative with a third-person visual one without considering the implications of doing so.

Clearly, then, this combination is a convention of children's picture books—and, like all the unspoken conventions that writers, illustrators, and adult readers take for granted, its implications do need to be considered. Such conventions require a knowledge of interpretive strategies that adults simply take for granted but that children may not yet possess. A survey of some picture books with first-person narrators should not only reveal the presence or absence of a number of such conventions but also suggest the need for adults to work more actively than we currently tend to do to equip children with strategies for making sense of these books and deriving pleasure from them.

A very few picture books with autodiegetic texts do attempt to show in the pictures the same subjective point of view expressed in the words. Ann Jonas's *Now We Can Go* begins conventionally; the text says, "Wait a minute! I'm not ready," and we see the child who must be speaking these words from some distance. But then there's

a switch. As the child moves objects from a box to a bag, we no longer see the child; instead, we see the box on the left side of each succeeding double-page spread and the bag on the right side, both shown in extreme close-up and from an angle most easily understood as suggesting what the child who speaks would see (fig. 1). In a sense, these are autodiegetic pictures—what we see is what the person who speaks sees. I find it revealing that this book made me, a mature viewer with a wide experience of picture books, uncomfortable on first viewing: its autodiegetic pictures transgress the admittedly less logical but much more common practice of showing the speaker rather than what the speaker sees.

Jonas's *Holes and Peeks* represents a subtle compromise between the two possibilities. The narrator is again a child, seen from a distance on the cover and again on the first page. As the text says, "I don't like holes," the child disappears from view, and we shift to a view of what the child sees—close-ups of the drainhole in a bathtub and of a toilet. But surprisingly, we then pull back to see the child *in* the picture again, as it peeks from underneath a towel. This makes sense in terms of the basic idea of the book. "Holes" are what the child sees; but since "peeks" are what the child does with a hole it can look through, we must see the child doing it in order to understand the concept. Nevertheless—and perhaps even more surprisingly—we are still seeing the child from a child's point of view, or at least that of someone short; as the text says, "I can watch my daddy through a peek," we see the complete child but daddy only from the waist down, as another child might view him (fig. 2). So the book shifts between the narrator's view of objects and what appears to be another child's view of the narrator; it implies a third party, another child not mentioned in the text but nevertheless taking part in the action. What we see is not exactly what the person who speaks sees, but something quite a bit like it.

Diane Paterson's *Smile for Auntie* also uses close-ups to imply a child's point of view. But while this book has a first-person speaker who is involved in the story, it's not that person's point of view that we see in the pictures; it's the point of view of another person, of someone looking *at* the speaker. As Auntie tries unsuccessfully to make a baby smile, we do occasionally see the baby; but most of the time we see Auntie herself, from so close up that her face seems to be sticking uncomfortably out of the picture. The pictures make it clear that the first-person words of the text come from the mouth

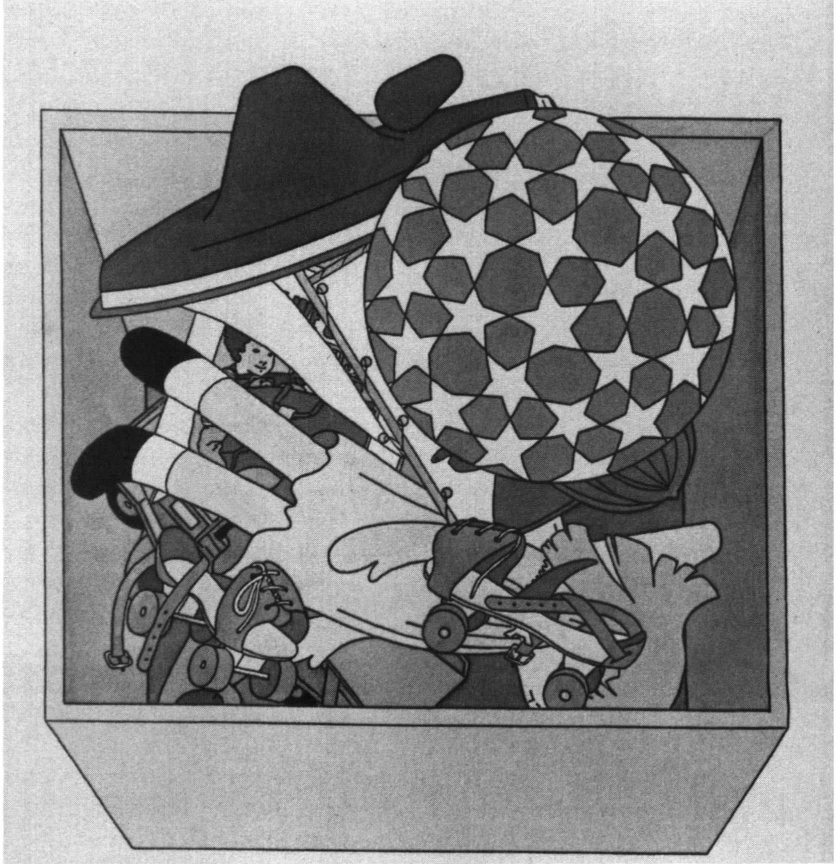
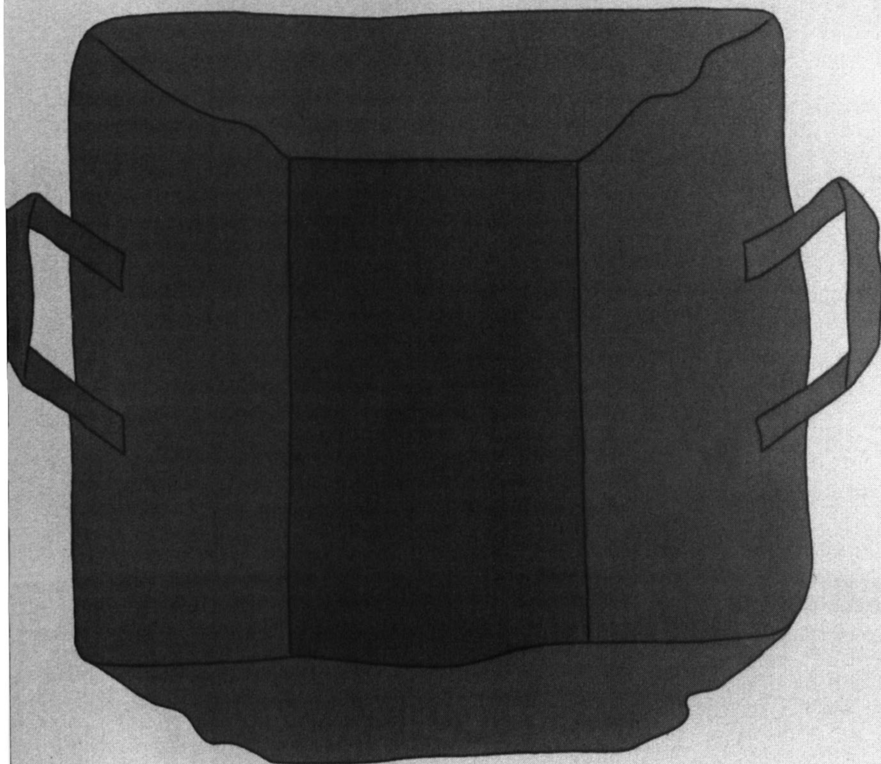


Fig 1. An "autodiegetic" picture—we see what the speaker sees. From *Now We Can Go* by Ann Jonas. Copyright © 1986 by Ann Jonas. Reprinted by permission of Greenwillow Books (a division of William Morrow & Co.).

I need my bag,



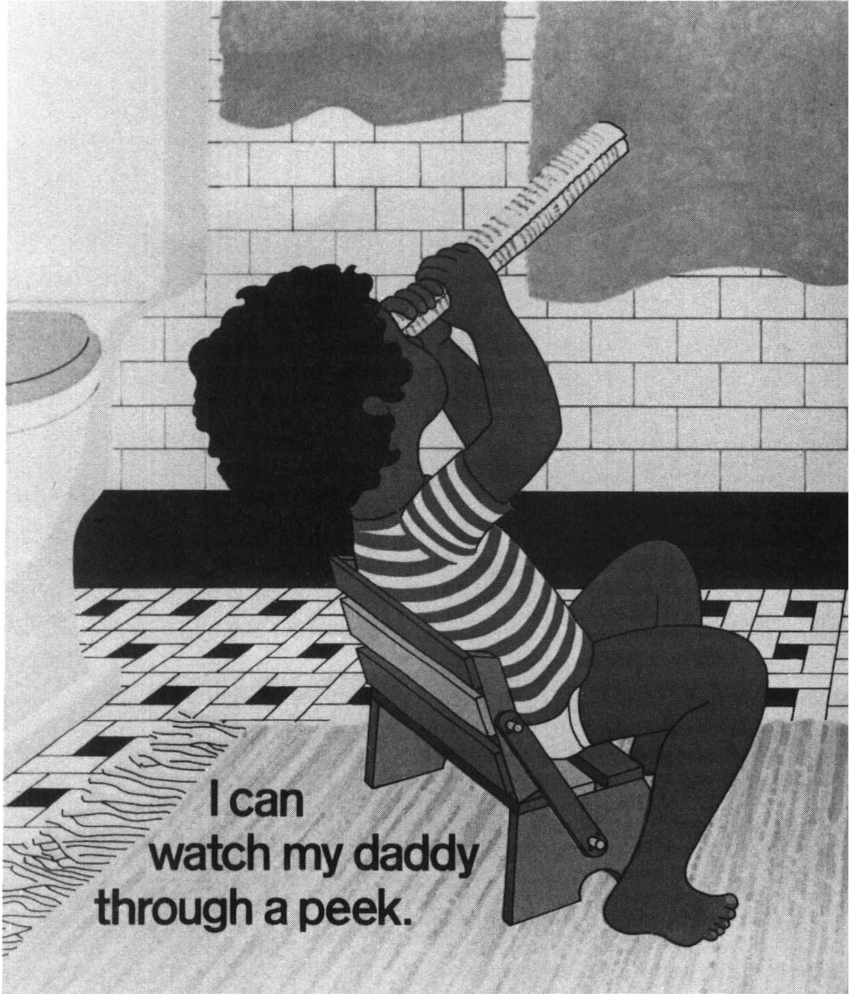
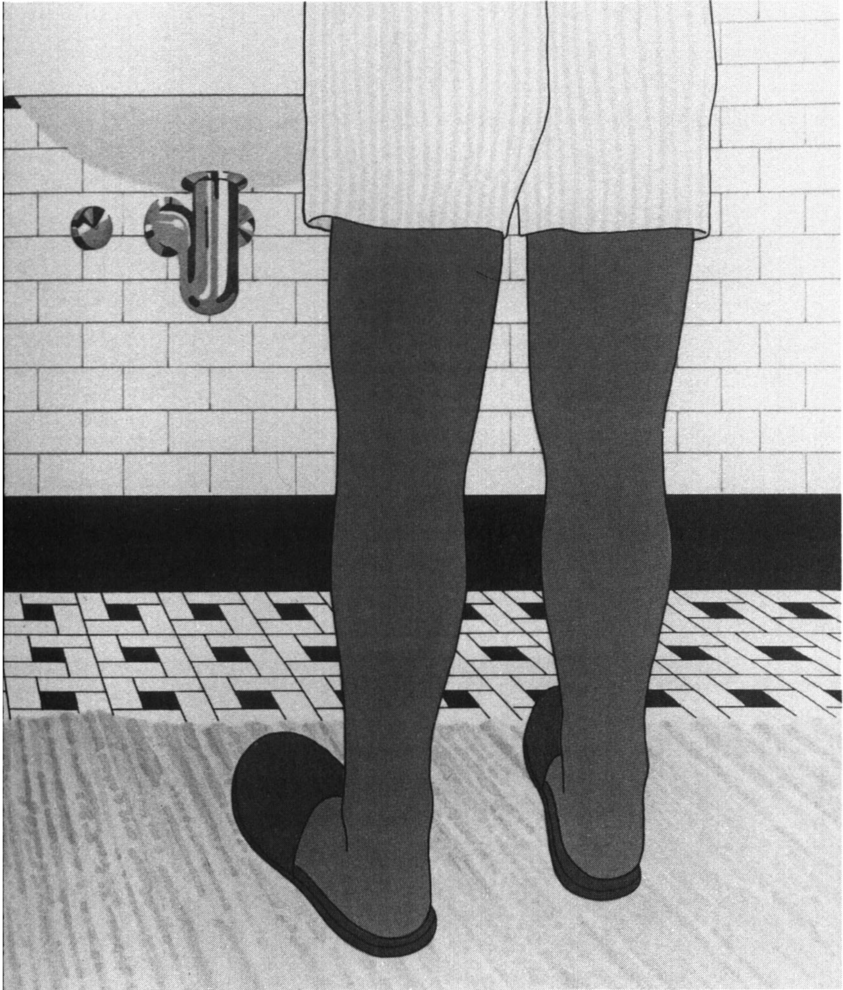


Fig 2. An implied child-sized viewer observes the child who speaks. From *Holes and Peeks* by Ann Jonas. Copyright © 1984 by Ann Jonas. Reprinted by permission of Greenwillow Books (a division of William Morrow & Co.).



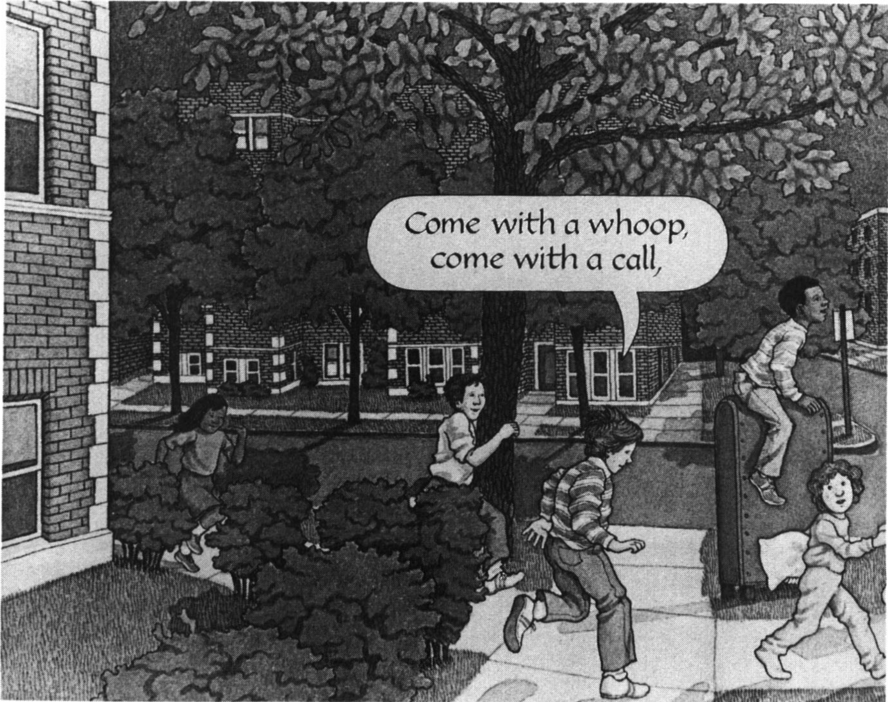


Fig 3. Why are the words of the nursery rhyme placed in speech balloons and assigned to just one of many characters performing similar activities? The answer comes only later, when the use of the word "I" implies an autodiegetic narrator involved in the events he relates. From *Come Out to Play* by Jeanette Winter. Copyright © 1986. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf.

of the person we're looking at—just as happens in real life, or in the simulations of real life that take place on a stage or screen. Although we usually assume that readers, particularly young ones, tend to identify with first-person narrators, we can feel no particular closeness to Auntie, for the pictures force us to view her, and thus to understand her words, as other and distant. In other words, the pictures undercut the autodiegetic quality of the text, and make the words part of a larger narrative that can best be described by Genette's term "heterodiegetic"—as in drama, the narrator is absent from the story he tells.

A similar heterodiegetic quality develops in many of the picture books which imply—usually through the use of speech balloons—that, as in our experience of drama, the words of their texts are actually emerging from the mouths of characters we are seeing from some distance. Jeannette Winter's *Come Out to Play* (fig. 3) is an interesting example. When considered on its own, the Mother Goose rhyme that begins, "Girls and boys, come out to play," seems like general advice, not words spoken by any one particular speaker in a particular situation; so on first glancing at Winter's picture-book version of the rhyme, we might wonder why she has put the words in speech balloons, thus implying that the rhyme is actually the speech of one specific boy chosen apparently at random from the group of children depicted. The reason becomes clear later in the rhyme, when the grammar demands our consciousness of a particular speaker; "You'll find milk, and *I'll* find flour" (italics mine). Having specified an "I," the text suddenly becomes a first-person narrative, which it apparently was all along. By placing the words inside speech balloons, Winter makes the narrator a character involved in the events from the beginning—and just one of many characters observed from some distance; this makes sense of the relationship between the words and the pictures.

But apart from books containing speech balloons, most picture books with autodiegetic narrators do demand a closer identification with the speaker. Judith Viorst's *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday* begins, "It isn't fair that my brother Anthony has two dollars and three quarters and one dime and seven nickels and eighteen pennies." The person speaking to us is the central character in the story that follows. He presents himself sympathetically—and the text provides no evidence to suggest that we shouldn't adopt his point of view and sympathize with him. Alexander is like a first-

person narrator in a story by Katherine Anne Porter described by Wayne Booth:

> Very little heightening of her character is needed to make us unite with her against the hostile world around her; simply because she is the only sensitive person visible . . . she wins us irresistibly. . . . She must be accepted at her own estimate from the beginning, and that estimate must, for greatest effect, be as close as possible to the reader's estimate of his own importance. Whether we call this effect identification or not, it is certainly the closest that literature can come to making us feel events as if they were happening to ourselves. [276–77]

It is exactly this effect of identification that elicits praise for books like *Alexander*.

Yet if we try to consider their implications without reference to our usual assumptions about how children read, we have to acknowledge that the pictures accompanying Viorst's text do much to destroy the identification. If the pictures paralleled the text, they would also show us the world as the narrator views it; presumably, then, the words about Anthony's money should be accompanied by a picture of Anthony gloating over his money. But what we see in Ray Cruz's picture is not a gloating child, but an unhappy-looking one with his hands jammed into his obviously empty pockets; we are obviously looking at the narrator himself, rather than seeing what he sees. The picture implies something that a conventional third-person verbal narrator might: an objective onlooker, someone who observes the central character from an uninvolved distance. From that distance, furthermore, the narrator is seen as comical. The cartoon style of the drawing focuses our attention on how cute and silly this narrator looks in his despair, in a way that undercuts the validity of the despair itself.

As I suggested earlier, this combination of sympathetic first-person verbal narrative with uninvolved third-person visual narrative is so typical of picture books that we tend to disregard its oddity. But the ways in which such books allow two different points of view to undercut each other defies our usual assumptions about first-person narratives written for children.

Many novels for inexperienced readers are in the first person because we believe that children find it easier to identify with—or, to use a suggestive metaphor, see themselves in—characters who tell

their own stories. The basic strategy required for reading books like Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* is absolute sympathy with the narrator. Interestingly, such sympathy is often difficult for adult readers, who not only approach such novels with a broader sense of the meaning of experience than that available to Margaret and those of her readers who do identify with her, but who also have more sophisticated expectations of fiction and more sophisticated strategies for reading it. Indeed, for sophisticated readers, the central pleasure of first-person narratives is an ability, as another suggestive metaphor says, to see through them, to understand the events we are being told about differently from the way in which the narrator perceives them; and writers often leave clues in the narrations of first-person narrators that clearly imply the inaccuracy of the only words we actually read. Someone who reads *Are You There, God?* in the light of a previous experience of more sophisticated fictions and with knowledge of the strategies required to read them may well see Margaret as a self-pitying and self-indulgent little brat, and believe that Blume has managed to create a "self-portrait" of a typical adolescent that cleverly reveals the limited vision of adolescents.

But, of course, that wasn't Blume's intention; she rightly assumes an unsophisticated audience unlikely to perceive ironies. Even so, many members of that audience are likely to have read (and enjoyed) books like Viorst's *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich* in which the pictures provide an ironic objective counterpoint to the subjective identification being demanded by the text. Apparently these simple picture books require a more complicated response than many novels intended for older, more experienced readers; yet younger children do respond to these books with as much enthusiasm and as appropriate an understanding of their tone as older children respond to those apparently more simple novels. Either our understanding of the process of identification is wrong or else we need to understand more about such picture books.

We can explore both possibilities by looking at those picture books that require the most concentrated form of identification —not first-person narratives, but second-person ones, in which a reader seems to be asked to believe that the events of the story are happening to what Genette calls the "narratee"—the audience implied by the narration. These are, quite literally, stories about "you,"

and because "you" is, most reasonably, the person actually reading the book, such stories imply particularly unsettling relationships between narrator and reader. A person who calls me "you" is clearly separate from myself; yet this other person not myself is in the process of telling me about what are purported to be my own experiences, described exactly as I might myself experience and describe them.

This is a passage from Robert McCloskey's *Time of Wonder*, describing how a rainstorm develops over Penobscot Bay:

> The rain comes closer and closer.
> Now you hear a million splashes.
> Now you even see the drops
> on the water . . .
> IT'S RAINING ON YOU!

For me, indeed for most readers, this is a lie. As we read the book, we do not in fact get wet.

But of course, my effort to read without reference to conventions has made me too literal. Once realizing that, I might more sensibly assume that this is meant to be not a description of real, present events but an evocation of possible ones. The beginning of the book provides a context which suggests just that: "Out on the islands that poke their rocky shores above the waters of Penobscot Bay, you can watch the time of the world go by, from minute to minute, hour to hour, season to season." The anonymous person speaking to me here is asking me to experience as I read—that is, imagine myself experiencing—something I have never actually experienced.

I can guess that the anonymous person actually has experienced it, though; the passage would make perfectly good sense if "you" were replaced by "I." Indeed, the thrust of the passage is to make me as reader share another person's experience—to allow me to feel as I read what he or she has felt in actuality. In a sense, then, this text demands absolute identification. It demands that "you" as reader cease to be conscious of your own past and become one with, and thus totally empathize with, the feelings and perceptions of the narrator.

In order for this to work pictorially, "you" would have to see the scene as the narrator sees it. In looking at the pictures accompanying the passage about the rain over Penobscot Bay, you may believe you do—at least to begin with. The first picture, which accompa-

nies a text about how "you can watch a cloud peep over the Camden Hills, thirty miles away," shows the scene as viewed from what appears to be high on a hill, looking down across the bay and over to distant hills beneath the cloud the text describes; and on the next page, the picture does show how "the rain comes closer and closer."

But the point of view of this picture is slightly different from that of the previous picture. We seem to have come down from the high hill in order to view the scene from a lower angle, even though the text hasn't described any movement on the part of "you." The next picture (fig. 4), accompanying the words "IT'S RAINING ON YOU!" implies an even more disconcerting switch. Instead of seeing the bay from the shore, I seem to be seeing the shore from the bay; I must assume that I am standing in the water and getting my feet wet (or perhaps more accurately, considering the specific angle of the picture, hovering a few feet over it). It's obvious that McCloskey has no qualms about showing what "you" see from points of view "you" aren't likely to take.

Even more unsettlingly, this picture of the shore shows two girls and a dog. If I apply a conventional understanding derived from other picture books to this, I must reach the conclusion that the "you" it is raining on are now being visually depicted. "You" are these children and this dog—not me, but the characters I am seeing, two quite unique and distinct human beings, separate from myself. The text, which first seemed to be addressed to any "you" who read it, actually has a specific audience in mind—these children are its narratees, not me. The identification the text demands is disrupted by the picture. Once again, the pictures transform the narrative implications of an apparently autodiegetic text and give it the heterodiegetic quality of a drama: we appear now to be eavesdropping on one side of a conversation between the narrator and the children depicted in the picture.

And yet the text does ask a reader to empathize with the sensuous experience it works to evoke. We might conclude that child readers would simply identify with the young children depicted in the picture, and so achieve that empathy. But the specific details of their appearance as viewed with the objectivity of distance make the possibility of identification more theoretical than actual. Readers can imagine being in similar situations, but not in the exact same one—even though that's exactly what the text seems to be demanding of us. Unless we imagine that the text is explicitly addressed

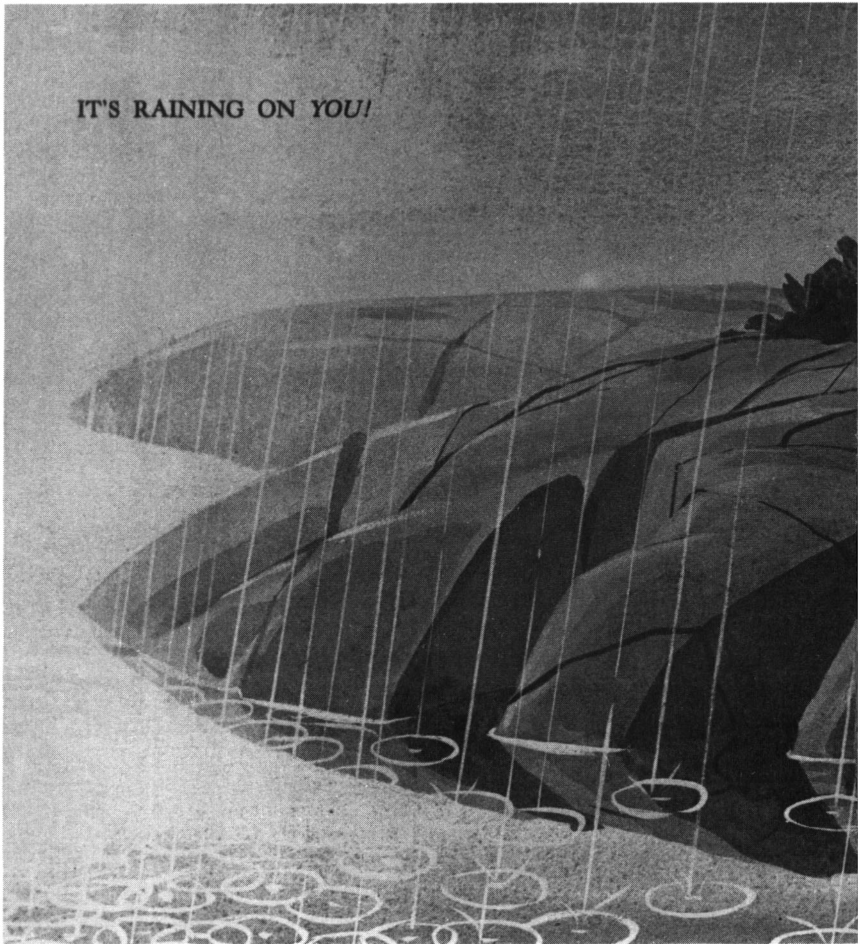


Fig 4. As the visual point of view shifts from that of earlier pictures, this picture changes the meaning of the words by specifying a narratee separate from the actual reader. From *Time of Wonder* by Robert McCloskey. Copyright © 1957 by Robert McCloskey. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin USA Inc.

by a clearly defined narrator to two real human beings who look exactly like the two girls depicted in the picture, the words and pictures imply quite different points of view that contradict each other disconcertingly.

Yet, paradoxically—and revealingly—each does accomplish what this book seems to have set out to do. As its title suggests, *Time of Wonder* is an attempt to evoke in readers a Wordsworthian experience of the implications of the beauty of natural objects and landscapes, an experience the text conveys most immediately through its use of the second person; it is literally a story about you and the wonder you yourself might feel in response to nature. Even though pictures can convey such responses, they cannot be so literal. A picture that showed us only what our eyes would actually see while rain falls on us could not show the state of mind or metaphysical conclusion we might reach as a result of feeling rain fall on us. Such a picture could express only the appearance of rain as we would see it, and since it would then necessarily be falling only on objects we could see—that is, objects other than ourselves—it could not easily convey our response to it.

Of course, impressionistic drawings like those in *Time of Wonder* can convey more about such responses than literal photographs might. As I suggest in *Words about Pictures*, artists can imply something of the response they desire to a scene by the way they choose to depict it. For those familiar with the conventional meanings of particular shadings and combinations of color, of varying intensities of line and shading, of patterns of shapes and light sources, pictures communicate surprisingly specific emotional responses to the objects they depict. Throughout *Time of Wonder*, consequently, McCloskey does reveal much about how he expects us to respond to the beauty of the landscape simply by the way in which he depicts it—through the colors, lines, and patterns he chooses.

But he does something else, too, something that conveys much more specific feelings—as we see, for instance, in the picture accompanying the words, "In the quiet of the night one hundred pairs of eyes are watching you, while one pair of eyes is watching over all." A picture showing nothing but what one would see while sitting in a boat and looking at the stars shining over a lake might convey a beautiful peacefulness, but it could not readily express a particular response to the meaning and significance of that beauty and peace—the complex sense of feeling small in relation to nature's

immensity but having faith in one's security that McCloskey implies in his reference to the "one pair of eyes." What does express that double sense of security and immensity visually is nothing so literal as the actual depiction of an invisible pair of eyes; it is the inclusion in the picture of a relatively small figure of a boat, dwarfed by its surroundings but still, because its singleness makes it stand out, the part of the picture most likely to attract a viewer's attention. In a sense, this picture turns us as viewers into the "one pair of eyes . . . watching over all" but with a specific concern for the human figures we see; if we then identify with those human figures, as the text demands, we must temper their sense of insignificance with our own consciousness of the protective viewpoint of immensity. This outsider's distant view of the "you" the text describes may appear to be at odds with the immediacy of the text; but it nevertheless allows a different medium to express a parallel state of mind. The pictures in *Time of Wonder* clearly convey how we might feel about what we see by showing other people seeing and feeling it.

Paradoxically, then, pictures seem best able to convey complex emotional responses we might identify with by showing other people experiencing them. The extent to which that is true becomes even clearer in another book in the second person—this time in the second-person imperative. Betty Miles's text in *A Day of Autumn* consists of a series of commands; for instance:

> Listen—a morning in autumn.
> Hear doors bang, cars start,
> Birds call, bottles clink.
> Hear the wind blowing.
> Listen—a clock rings.
> Time to get up!

As we have learned to expect, Marjorie Auerbach's picture for this text shows not just a bedroom as seen by an awakening child but an awakening child. The pictures once again change the implications of the text by specifying a narratee; the instructions seem to be directed specifically to the child depicted, and the voice of the narrator becomes less a one-sided exhortation than a contributing part of a heterodiegetic drama.

In this case, the heterodiegesis is particularly necessary, for it would be impossible for a picture to show through visual means what the text asks us to perceive: the nonvisual experience of

sounds. Throughout this book the text instructs readers to enter into experiences that cannot be visualized in pictures: not just "Listen" and "Hear" a number of times, but also "Taste the sweet juice" and, perhaps least visually depictable of all, "Sleep through the autumn night." The text of this book is unillustratable except by indirect means; and the pictures, which show figures as solid blocks of color, so that mauve children sit at a brown desk cutting orange paper, do not directly evoke the way things look. The pictures use other visual means—exaggerations of shape and line, conventional implications of color—to convey the moods the words directly assert and demand. As these pictures reveal, it makes sense that third-person pictures should accompany first-person texts, especially when those texts demand emotional empathy from a reader—for it is exactly such emotions that the visual conventions of "objective" pictures can convey.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that the same emotions are communicated in two different ways inevitably changes the nature of the communication. As we've seen again and again, the presence of pictures turns first-person narratives into heterodiegetic dramas that establish the extent to which reading a picture book is more like watching a play than reading a novel. In their essential doubleness, picture books are as inherently dialogical, as dependent on ironic relationships between different forms of information, as theater is.

If we return to *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich* in the light of what we have learned from these second-person narratives, we can see how theatrical it is. The pictures don't merely disrupt the intentions of the text; as do the setting and costumes of a play, they affect our response to the text in a way that subtly changes its meaning. Alexander is not simply an intensely sympathetic person telling his own story, but a person telling his own story in a context that surrounds him with specific scenes and people and separates him from us. Rather than becoming immersed in his words, we tend to respond to them as we do to the dialogue of a play—or as we do to words in speech balloons. There may be identification, but it can't be the absolute empathy which we assume to arise between young readers and a sympathetic first-person narrator who is not also shown in pictures. Instead, we adopt a double-sided perspective on Alexander that mirrors the doubleness of words and pictures. We sympathize with him even as we see through the exaggerated significance

he gives to his situation and laugh at him. We both see ourselves in Alexander and see him as someone separate from ourselves.

As I suggested earlier, this doubleness would seem to separate such picture books from novels like Blume's *Are You There, God?* But if we stop to think about such novels in the light of these picture books, we will realize that they are not so different after all. No reader ever experiences complete empathy with a fictional character, even one so determinedly "typical" and therefore so widely identifiable with, as Margaret is. The simple existence of specific names like Margaret, specific family situations, and specific locales that differ from one's own creates some distance between readers and characters; and even those who claim to share Margaret's feelings will always be conscious of other feelings of their own that Margaret does not share.

Indeed, the inevitability of that sort of difference is one of the main reasons why we read fiction. Real life is mysteriously random and endlessly complex: what happens to us in life may be interpreted in an infinite number of ways and may or may not make sense in terms of our previous actions and expectations. But our understanding of fictional characters is always limited by the specific context of the text in which they appear, and they always make sense in terms of their previous actions and expectations as reported to us; even characters whose lives are meant to suggest that life is mysteriously random have only a limited number of experiences that suggest randomness. The inevitable limitation of fiction allows us insight into our own situations exactly because it simplifies and clarifies—because it differs from our own actual experience to the extent that it is a limited, orderly construct. Suggesting that all art represents a reduction of reality either in scale or in terms of the number of properties depicted, Claude Lévi-Strauss says that "this quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power over a homologue of a thing, and by means of it the latter can be grasped, assessed, and apprehended at a glance" (23).

Fictional characters may not always be quite so easily grasped. But to "identify" with them is nevertheless an act of self-understanding that depends on our seeing them as homologues and applying a simpler model to our own more complex experience; we could not identify with characters we truly understood to be exactly the same as ourselves because they would no longer offer us the order and clarity of fiction. Paradoxically, Blume offers young

readers that order and clarity exactly to the extent to which her novels seem oversimple to more mature readers; but even young readers must experience these novels as fiction—that is, as more orderly and more limited than reality—before they can indulge in the process we label as "identifying."

Furthermore, Blume wants readers to "identify" so that they can learn better ways of handling their problems—so that they can see them from a different, more mature, and more objective perspective, as the events of her story bring Margaret to do. In other words, such fictional identification is designed to bring readers to the same two-sided perspective, the same combination of subjective self-indulgence and objective understanding, that third-person pictures bring to first-person texts. The picture books turn out to be not so different from the novels after all.

If we return to picture books with the idea that the objective distance implied by their pictures is a source of strength rather than a disruptive weakness, we can explore that distance with greater understanding of its effects. In *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich,* for instance, we can note that the distance shifts in intensity throughout the book. While the text of the first page implies that Alexander is speaking to us, the picture shows him with his mouth closed. We might conclude that he is actually *thinking* rather than speaking these words. If that is so, then the divergence between picture and text becomes even greater: while the picture keeps us at a distance, the words invite us into private thoughts. Later in the book, however, other pictures imply different relationships. As Alexander is saying, "And most of the time what I've mostly got is . . . bus tokens," he looks out of the picture toward us, as if he knew we were there. Since his mouth is still not open, we know he is not talking to us directly; but he does seem to be conscious of our presence and making an appeal for our sympathy—which requires our consciousness of him as separate from ourselves. But then, as Alexander tells us on the next page that he used to be rich, the picture shows not just his daydreaming face but also, floating behind his head, another image of him, happy and surrounded by toys and chocolate bars (fig. 5). This must be Alexander's image of himself: so we *do* see into his mind in this picture, and we presumably feel less distance. But then we can understand that we are seeing into his mind only by also seeing what Alexander cannot see—himself and the expression on his face as he pursues this memory. These

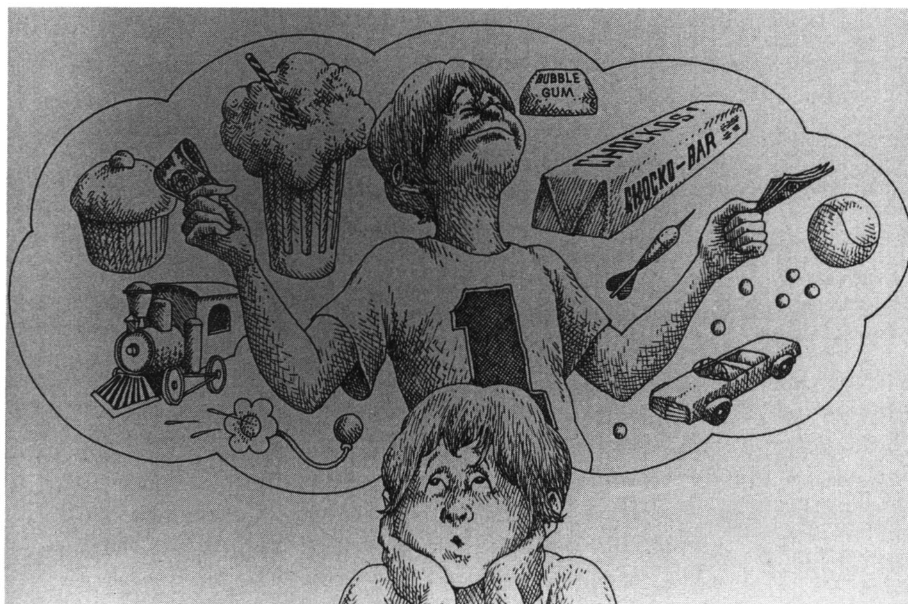


Fig 5. By showing both Alexander's thoughts and Alexander himself, the picture qualifies a reader's empathy with him. Reprinted with permission of Atheneum Publishers, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company, from the illustration by Ray Cruz in *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday*, by Judith Viorst. Illustrations copyright © 1978 by Ray Cruz.

shifts subtly imply variations in the intensity of a reader's intimacy with and objective assessment of Alexander.

There is less variation later in the book. As Alexander describes what happened to him earlier in the week, the pictures show us the remembered scenes. Alexander is in those scenes, just as he was earlier in the book; but now this implies a more obvious relationship with the first-person point of view of the text: we can assume that we see the scenes as he sees them in his memory. Although this doesn't change the book's subtle combination of intimacy and distance, it does lessen the chance for confusion or misunderstanding. Not surprisingly, a similar convention operates in many picture books with an autodiegetic narration in the past tense; and de-

spite its relative simplicity, clever illustrators still manage to create evocative manipulations of point of view while using it.

The first picture in Molly Bang's *Dawn* shows a man whom we must take to be the speaker of its text talking to a young girl. But the text makes it clear that it is not we as readers who are being addressed here: "A long time ago, Dawn, before you were born, I used to build ships." We are overhearing a conversation, just as we overhear conversation in the theater, so there is nothing unsettling in the fact that we see the speaker of these words from the same sort of distance from which we view actors in a theater. Since the text that follows is the speaker's reminiscence, we must assume that the pictures are, too, even though the artist uses no obvious convention to suggest any difference between the reality of the first picture and that of the later ones. Indeed, some of the pictures imply points of view impossible for the speaker to have taken—we see, for example, a sailboat which is supposed to contain him and his family from a great height above. But there are subtle differences in some of the pictures that do suggest the specificity of the point of view. Many of the memory pictures, including almost all the ones showing the strange young woman who came to live with the speaker, do not depict the speaker himself but imply the point of view he might take if he were watching the scene himself—as obviously, in his deep love for her, he did spend much time looking at her. Furthermore, she returns his regard; in three separate instances she stares directly and lovingly out of the picture, presumably at the person observing her.

Chris Van Allsburg's *Wreck of the Zephyr* is also a reminiscence—indeed, two reminiscences, for the original narrator's story is about how he once heard a story told by someone else. On the first page a first-person narrator says, "I followed a path out of the village, uphill to some cliffs high above the sea. At the edge of this cliff was a most unusual sight—the wreck of a small sailboat." The accompanying picture shows a man in a brown suit, presumably the speaker, looking at a sailboat. As in *Dawn*, the text implies a speaker, conscious of an audience, telling about events he himself was once involved in; the picture then represents what he remembers as he remembers it. So does the last picture in the book; as this original speaker comes to talk of himself again, we again see the brown-suited figure.

Both images of the narrator show him from behind, as he looks

into the picture at the significant objects mentioned in the text: the sailboat in the first picture and an old man limping in the last. Although we see the narrator in the scene, our attention is drawn away from what he looks like to an outsider and (if we assume that backs are less interesting and less evocative of personality than faces) onto what he sees. Something similar happens in the first of Deborah Ray's illustrations for Jeanne Whitehouse Peterson's *I Have a Sister—My Sister is Deaf*, which depicts two young girls, most likely the narrator and her deaf sister; we can tell which is which because one of them has her back turned to us and looks into the picture toward the other (fig. 6). Such pictures seem to create the peculiar fiction that we identify ourselves with those whose backs are turned toward us.

Most of *Wreck of the Zephyr* is the story the original narrator once heard from an old man. The story seems to be about a third person, a boy who is neither of the two narrators; since this doesn't seem to be autodiegetic, there's a great distance between the voice of the narration and the visually depicted events. But some of that distance may be illusory; the last page of text hints that the boy might actually have been the old man who tells of him, who would then have been deliberately creating an artificial distance between himself and the person we see in the pictures that represent his story. But even then, the fact that this narrative is embedded in another narrative demands our distance from it and objective understanding of it. Perhaps that is why Van Allsburg has balanced the distancing effect by making the frame narrator a less distanced "I." Or perhaps, by insisting that he himself did actually hear this story, he is only trying to imply the truthfulness of what is clearly imaginary.

Much of the pleasure of books like *Dawn* and *The Wreck of the Zephyr* is their ability to make fantasies seem real. In terms of narrative voice, words and pictures seem to work to that end through opposing techniques. Words are more convincing when spoken by an "I"—and both Bang and Van Allsburg provide us with first-person narrators to bring an aura of conviction to their fantastic stories. But both also present highly detailed, apparently objective pictures which show their characters as viewed from a distance that implies the uninvolved objectivity of truth.

Van Allsburg pushes this combination of first-person narrative and third-person visual information to an extreme in *The Polar Express*, where we see the events described by the first-person narrator

Fig 6. In accordance with a frequently used convention, the person who speaks the words of the text has her back to us. From *I Have a Sister—My Sister is Deaf* by Jeanne Whitehouse Peterson, illustration copyright © 1977. Reprinted by permission of Harper and Row.

in pictures that not only include him but often present the scenes he speaks of from angles he could not possibly have seen them from. One picture of the interior of the train as he would have seen it accompanies his description of his trip, but there are also a number of pictures showing the train as seen by a distant observer—sometimes so distant that the train is merely a tiny line in the background.

Such pictures force our attention onto the ambiguous differences between pictures and texts in order to assert the reality of their fantasies; but many picture books with first-person narrators present fantasy situations which are clearly meant to be seen as fantastic. The pleasure is not in considering the possibility that the impossible might have happened; it is in understanding that the impossible never did happen, that it was all in the mind of one person—the narrator. Such books are the clearest examples of how pictures can transform autodiegetic texts into heterodiegetic dramas.

In Steven Kellogg's *Much Bigger than Martin*, as the narrator tells how his brother has victimized him by giving him uncomfortable roles in imaginative games, the pictures move between real, remembered scenes and imaginary versions of them—depictions of the characters inside the fantasy worlds of their games. Once we accept as a convention the idea that we are sometimes seeing the world as it is seen in the mind of the narrator, then this movement between fantasy and reality makes good sense; sometimes the narrator's mind sees what his eyes see, and sometimes it imagines quite different scenes.

The relationship between imagined visual scenes and first-person narratives is not always so clear-cut. As the narrator of Mercer Mayer's *I Am a Hunter* first tells us, "I am a hunter, and I hunt a snake in my backyard," the picture shows a child, presumably the narrator, about to take an ax to a vicious-looking giant snake. Since it's hard to accept this situation as literal fact, the most logical explanation is that the picture shows what the narrator imagines. On the next page, as the narrator says, "But my father doesn't like me to go hunting," we see the same ax-wielding child, only now beside a chopped-up garden hose and in the company of an angry-looking man. This is obviously the same scene from an objective outsider's point of view. This alternation between the narrator's view and that of an objective outsider continues throughout the book; the effect is like a joke, a move from confirmation of imagined reality to de-

struction of it, a constant dispersal of the personal vision with the cold light of objectivity.

But if these switches are meant to undercut the fantasy, the ending of the book is a surprise. The narrator tells us that he is a sea captain, and the picture confirms that he is on a ship; and, as expected, when the next page tells us that he's really only taking a bath, we see him in the tub. But when he says his last words, "But I am a sea captain, and I just sail away," the picture shows a disconcerting combination of real and imaginary vision, the boy sailing in his bathtub as the bathroom actually turns into an ocean. The last page returns firmly to fantasy, as we again see the boy on the ship, sailing off over his imaginary ocean. Or is it imaginary? If it is, why are we still seeing it? We might conclude that we are viewing the world of the narrator's mind once more; but if so, then the book becomes a chilling portrayal of schizophrenic withdrawal. Alternatively, we might assume that the story is literally true—that we must trust the evidence of our eyes and conclude that this apparently imaginary event is not imaginary at all.

Two books by Ann Jonas are similarly ambiguous. As the narrator of *The Quilt* says, "I have a new quilt," the pictures show a young girl, obviously the speaker, pointing to the patches in the quilt that she mentions. The pictures imply that she is conscious of being observed, and that her words are explanations for our benefit. But then the child falls asleep—and as she does, we see stars dance through the window and the quilt change into a landscape. It seems that we are now in the middle of the child's dream. As rarely happens in picture books, these pictures show us the world from a first-person speaker's perspective—since the child is no longer conscious of an audience, the effect of an outside observer disappears, and we look down on the scenes from above, just as the child looks down on her quilt from her pillow.

The switch from external observer to first-person point of view would be less ambiguous if it were not for the one picture in which the transition between quilt and landscape occurs. In this picture, as in the picture of objectively perceptible reality on the page preceding it, we are observers looking down on the child's bed from somewhere behind its head: we see the quilt and the child's arm holding a stuffed toy. But we also see the quilt transforming, so that we are both inside the child's dream and outside of it at the same time. This gives the dream itself a mysterious ambiguity.

Jonas also establishes a world somewhere between subjective and objective reality in *The Trek.* As the narrator says that her mother "doesn't know that we live on the edge of a jungle," we see the shapes of exotic animals lurking everywhere from shrubs to storefronts and front stoops in her apparently urban world. But we also see the narrator herself, and this gives what she claims to see herself the same degree of reality as our own objective knowledge of her visibility. The speaker's friend, whom we can also see in the pictures, also shares the fantasy; furthermore, the speaker never names the creatures she claims to see, but since we ourselves can see them clearly enough to identify them and provide them with their appropriate names, we have to acknowledge the visible reality of their existence.

But the speaker says of someone we can see in one of the pictures, "That woman doesn't know about the animals. If she did, she'd be scared." This amounts to a kind of teasing, an admission that what we see might not in fact be seeable—might not really be there at all. Other picture books with first-person narratives push this sort of questioning of the speaker's reality even farther: the pictures create an intensely dramatic situation by deliberately contradicting the information and the point of view provided by the text.

Faced by this sort of contradiction, we inevitably accept the objective truth of what our eyes see and doubt the truth of a text clearly spoken by one specific person who claims to see something different. We refuse to accept the narrator's brave claims in Dr. Seuss's *I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today*, simply because the pictures show us the look of dismay on his face as he regards the thirty malevolent tigers he claims he can lick. And in Ellen Raskin's *Nothing Ever Happens on My Block*, we know that Chester Filbert's claim that his block is a boring place is wrong because our own eyes can see the interesting things happening behind his back. Our acceptance of the truthfulness of visible actions is so strong that we happily doubt Chester's version of events, even though many of the things that he *doesn't* see but we can—trees that grow huge almost instantaneously, multiplying witches—are improbable, even impossible.

These books use the differences between the subjectivity of a first-person narrator and the distanced objectivity of third-person pictures in a decidedly ironic way; but in less extreme ways, so have all the books I've discussed here. The pleasure all these books offer depends on our perception of how the different implications of

text and picture combine to create a third, far more dramatically dialogical story. In this specific and unusual way, these books duplicate the effects of more complex literature: our sympathy with any given character is qualified by our understanding of the context of the whole. There are still unanswered questions about the ways children can be taught to cope with the sophistications of point of view in picture books. But to read well is always to read with a sense of the doubleness of literature, which requires us to become involved in, even to identify with, its characters and situations but also to stand back and understand those characters and situations with some objectivity. In the clear-cut doubleness of their words and pictures, picture books like these can offer inexperienced readers an introduction to one of the most basic and most rewarding of literary competences.

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