

Having Their Say: Engaging with Contemporary Picture Books at Work and at Play

Charles van Renen

Summary

Can picture books offer something of value to readers who might otherwise encounter difficulties with texts not published in their home language? It is suggested in this article that picture books, particularly those which engage readers with different kinds of metafictional devices, can encourage them to respond in their additional language, where more conventional texts in the additional language might be less effective. Critical attention has fallen increasingly on works containing "post-modern" or "metafictional" characteristics, as authors and illustrators appear to extend traditional boundaries of both content and format. Readers are frequently drawn into "games" by texts that abound in verbal and pictorial wit. Examples of such texts are discussed in the first section.

It is proposed that student teachers can benefit from exposure to high-quality picture books, both through expanding their own language horizons and through discovering a rich learning resource for the classroom. Novel and unusual features appearing in some of the texts should have the potential to elicit responses from readers who might normally feel diffident about expressing their opinions on what they are reading. This is borne out to some extent by the responses of EFAL first-year BEd students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), South Africa, to selections of picture books, including some with metafictional features. There is also evidence that some of the above respondents perceived a link between their own responses and how they might use such resources in their own classrooms.

Opsomming

Het prentboek, selfs die wat in die lesers se addisionele taal gepubliseer word, die potensiaal om lesers uit te lok en aan te moedig om hul reaksies op die inhoud en formaat van die boek in hul addisionele taal uit te spreek? In hierdie artikel word die moontlikheid ondersoek dat prentboeke, veral dié wat verskeie "postmoderne" eienskappe openbaar, sodanige potensiaal wel kan ontlok. Prentboeke, veral dié wat as "postmodern" beskryf kan word, word al hoe meer 'n fokuspunt vir kritiese aandag. Hierdie soort prentboek, wat tipies die tradisionele grense van prentboeke oorskry, toon die kapasiteit om die lesers op 'n besondere wyse te betrek. Enkele voorbeelde daarvan word in die eerste deel van hierdie artikel bespreek.

Bo en behalwe die potensiaal van prentboeke as leermiddel in die klaskamer, kan hierdie tipe boeke ook opvoedkundestudente se eie taalhorisonne verbreed. Die buitengewone inhoud en formaat van "metafiksionele" werke kan lesers wel aan-

spoor om hulle menings te lug oor wat hulle lees, waar hulle normaalweg effens huiwerig sou gewees het. Hierdie aanname is in 'n sekere mate bevestig deur die reaksie van groepe eerstejaarstudente aan die Nelson Mandela Metropolitaanse Universiteit (NMMU), Suid-Afrika, op 'n keur van prentboeke – insluitend sommige met metafiktiewe kenmerke. Sommige van die studente het ook aangedui dat hulle wel 'n verband raakgesien het tussen hul eie response en moontlike strategieë om prentboeke as leerbronne in die klaskamer te gebruik.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly to highlight key features in examples of contemporary picture books, and secondly to examine how some students, whose home language is not English, responded in English to selected examples of such picture books published in English. Closely related to this second point are possible implications of their responses for their own classroom practice.

The picture book genre includes texts in which pictures serve merely to illustrate what is conveyed by words, ones in which words and pictures are in a dynamic relationship with each other, and the kind that contains only pictures, such as Quentin Blake's *Clown* (1995). Lewis (2001: 74) maintains that the picture book, rather than constituting a fixed genre, "is an omnivorous creature, ingesting, absorbing, co-opting pre-existent genres – other ways of speaking, writing, picturing – in order to make its texts". Changes in these genres, which occur within the contexts of social change, follow through to changes in picture books. This gives them "an open-ended quality. We can never be sure exactly what the picturebook will do next". Marriott supports this view:

Picture books are so wildly varied and diverse in format, style, subject matter and putative audience, so heterogeneous in their intertextuality, so eclectic in their reference to the structure and the form of the novel and the short story, to painting and photography, to film and television ... that it is hardly surprising that they are also extraordinarily flexible and versatile in use.

(Marriott in Evans 1998: 3)

It is therefore not surprising that the picture book is frequently the site of experimentation in themes and structures. Moss (1992) highlights the "paradoxical" status of the picture book, initially identified by Egoff, that while it may seem safe and comfortable and ideally suited to a very young audience, it "actually produces the greatest social and aesthetic tensions" (Moss 1992: 51).

Most critics will probably agree that the many ways in which words and images interact create the central dynamic of the picture book. Sipe (1998: 98-99) describes the interaction between pictures and words as a "synergistic relationship" in which the reader also plays a role in terms of what she

or he brings to the individual reading of a text, a concept of central importance in reader-response criticism. Lewis refers to an “ecological” perspective in picture books, where both words and pictures are “incomplete” on their own. The words “on their own are always partial, incomplete, unfinished, awaiting the flesh of pictures,” he says. Conversely the pictures are filled with “potential narrative meaning, indeterminate, unfinished, awaiting the closure provided by the words” (Lewis 2001: 74).

The list of references for this article suggests that picture books have been attracting more and more critical attention over the past two decades and more. This could be accounted for in part by the publication of works that display characteristics some critics describe as “postmodern” or “meta-fictional”. These kinds of books extend the “traditional” boundaries of the picture book. Goldstone ([2001]2002: 363) refers to postmodern texts not following linear narrative patterns, being “self-referential”, where “the characters of a story may refer to the physical presence of the book” or the process of making it, having an offbeat, mocking or cynical tone, and inviting the reader to “co-author the text”. Lewis (2001) identifies indeterminacy of plot or situation and boundary breaking in respect of narrative conventions as important features of “postmodern” picture books.

This, with verbal or pictorial wit, keeps the reader alert and involved. In Browne’s *Piggybook* (1996), for instance, it is easy to miss small background details to some of the pictures at first, for example the pig’s head shadow of the self-important and demanding Mr Piggott, or the flower pattern of the wallpaper and other smaller objects being turned into tiny pig-head images. What happens here is that the implied comparison between the behaviour of Mr Piggott and his sons with that of pigs is conveyed by means of *pictorial metaphor* – more striking by far than a mere verbal statement that Mr Piggott and the boys were “behaving like pigs”.

When readers are drawn into the games or playfulness of texts such as *Piggybook*, their sense of involvement and level of response are likely to be enhanced. This benefits not only young readers, but also the adults who share these books with them. It is to this scenario that groups of NMMU first-year students studying to become teachers were introduced in an “experimental” activity in May 2009. Its purpose was to gauge the nature and articulateness of their responses, as English First Additional Language (EFAL) students, to a selection of picture books containing English verbal texts. It was thought that there might be some surprising results, considering the sophistication levels of the works concerned.

Picture Books at Work: The Relationship between Visual Images and Words

Nikolajeva and Scott (2000: 225-226) describe the different kinds of interactions between pictures and words as “*symmetrical*”, where the two

media essentially “tell the same story”, “*enhancing*”, where one aspect expands more fully the meaning of the other, or “*complementary*”, when the same process is taken to an even more significant level. On the other hand, depending on the degree of different information conveyed, a “*counter-pointing*” dynamic may develop where words and images collaborate to communicate meanings beyond the scope of either one alone”. An extreme form of the above, say Nikolajeva and Scott, is “*contradictory*” interaction, when words and pictures seem to be in opposition to one another” (my italics throughout). They add, however, that picture books rarely if ever fall neatly into one category or another.

Examples of works with non-contradictory but complementary picture-word relationships are Piet Grobler’s *Please Frog, Just One Sip!* (2002) and Katharine Quarmby’s *Fussy Freya*, (2008) illustrated by Grobler. In both cases the visual dimension enhances key animal or human characteristics that are central to the theme. In *Please Frog, Just One Sip!* the vast size of Frog in relation to the other animals, including Elephant, is conveyed by a picture that emphasises the huge quantity of water that Frog had selfishly scooped up at the expense of all the other thirsty animals on a very hot day (Figure 1). Grobler makes frequent use of double-page spreads in this work, which expands the canvas of the action taking place and provides scope for delineating the spatial relationships between Frog and the others, as well as for depicting different attitudes in the animals, such as consultation and confrontation. Grobler employs a highly distinctive drawing style, reflective of the way in which a young child might perceive and give expression to animal figures and perspectives in graphic art. The illustrations also contain lots of detail not conveyed in words.

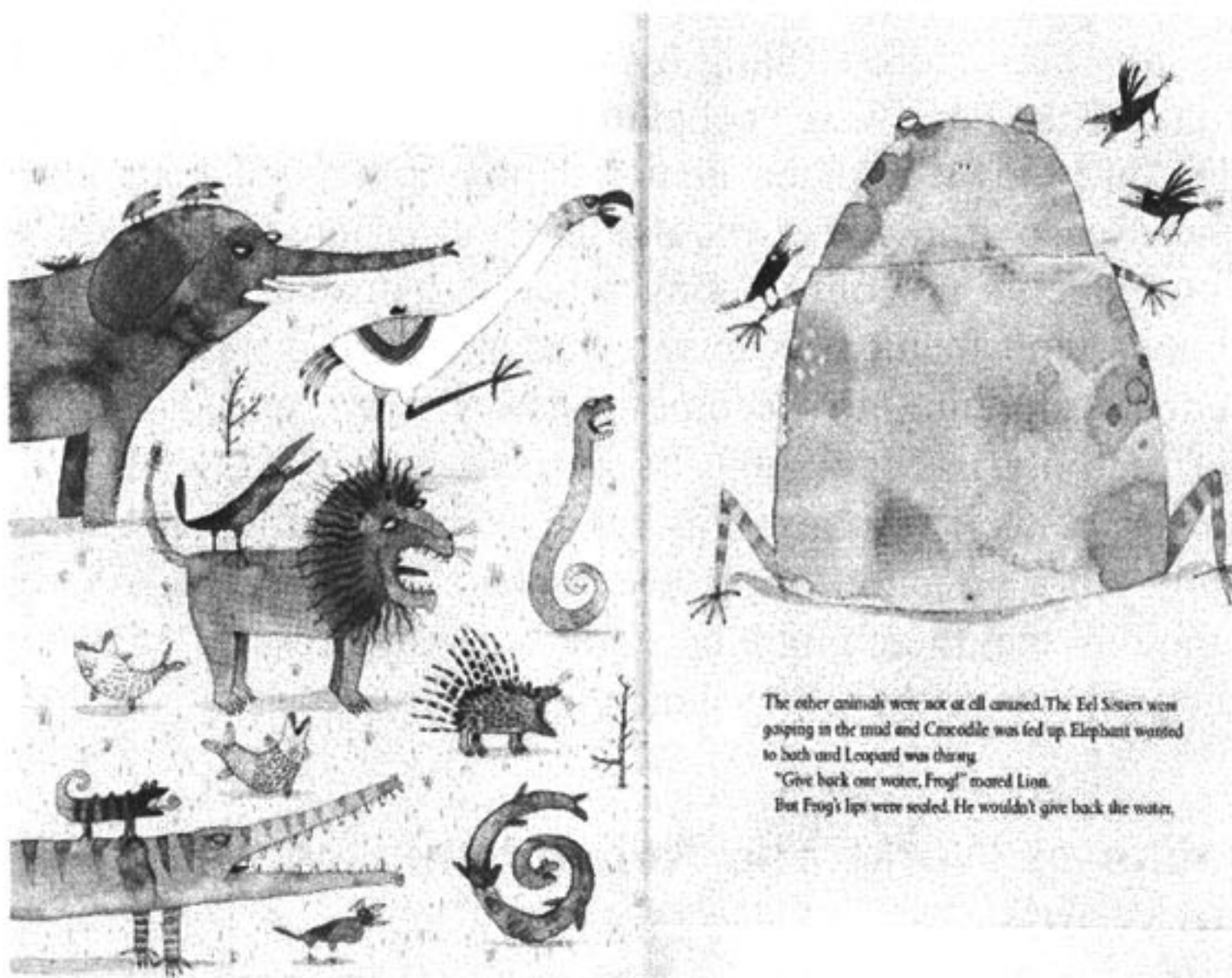


Figure 1

Grobler's illustrations in *Fussy Freya* complement the verbal text ("Did Freya mind a little? Not a little, not a jot.") by creating images of a feisty, even eccentric title heroine. Indeed, all the characters appear larger than life and strike dramatic poses in colourful pictures with strong kinetic qualities. Witty little "asides" are added in the form of labels loosely attached to figures, as well as other pictorial details (Figure 2).



Figure 2

An example of a work with a partially symmetrical relationship between words and pictures is Pat Hutchins's *Rosie's Walk*, where there is no tension between the uneventful-sounding 25-word sentence which constitutes the entire verbal component, and the actions of Rosie the hen walking around the farmyard, as conveyed in the pictures. What the misleadingly simple words do not refer to at all, however, is the constant presence of a fox that is stalking Rosie, but that clumsily triggers one mini-disaster after another as he trails the hen. So while the text appears to be "symmetrical" with the actions of Rosie, there is a strong element of "dramatic irony" in that the reader can see what Rosie cannot. This difference of perspective brings about an ironic relationship between the actions of the fox that we can see, and the words that do not refer to the fox at all. This duality of narrative is thus brought about by differences in perspective, by a divergence between everything the reader can see, and what the title character can see.

In some works, ambiguous or ironic interactions between pictures and words create different or even contradictory stories. Nikolajeva and Scott (2000: 234) cite an example, *Lily Takes a Walk* by Satoshi Kitamura, where differing perspectives of words and visual images (the so-called "counter-point") lead to contradiction and ambiguity. A little girl, Lily, takes her dog for a walk through the streets; the words inform us that she feels safe

because the dog is with her. Meanwhile, the *pictures* show us that the dog is thoroughly frightened by different things that *he* sees, but that Lily does not, and that the narrator does not refer to. Examples are a letterbox that bends over, showing vicious teeth and spilling out letters into the street, and the moon and a tower clock together forming a frightening pair of eyes. We readers share the dog's perspective rather than the girl's, and so discover the sources of the dog's fear. In this story the title character, like Rosie, is unaware of other things happening that the reader can see. What the reader sees in the pictures, however, represents what the *dog* sees, or imagines, rather than something literally present, like the fox in *Rosie*. What complicates the perspective in *Lily* is the question of just how reliable the dog's perspective is, which creates some ambiguity about what is really happening in the story.

The words and pictures in Anthony Browne's *Gorilla* seem at first to carry a similar narrative weight, with illustrations complementing the printed text. Closer inspection of even the second page, however, reveals that the relationship between words and pictures is not so straightforward. The text on the first page reads that Hannah's father "didn't have time" to take her to the zoo, adding that he "didn't have time for anything". The picture on the right-hand page, however, reveals Hannah's father reading a newspaper, which contradicts the words. Even more significant, is how it is shown that there is no contact between father and daughter. They sit at opposite ends of the table in a sterile-looking kitchen dominated by cold blue colours (Figure 3). This contrasts strongly with the close proximity of Hannah and the Gorilla and with the warm colours in the later scene when the two share a meal (Figure 4). The father's complete lack of attention is vividly shown in the picture of him at his desk at night, with Hannah in a slightly strained pose, keeping a little distance between them. So while the words are comparatively straightforward, it is the pictures that leave room for interpretation or fuller response.

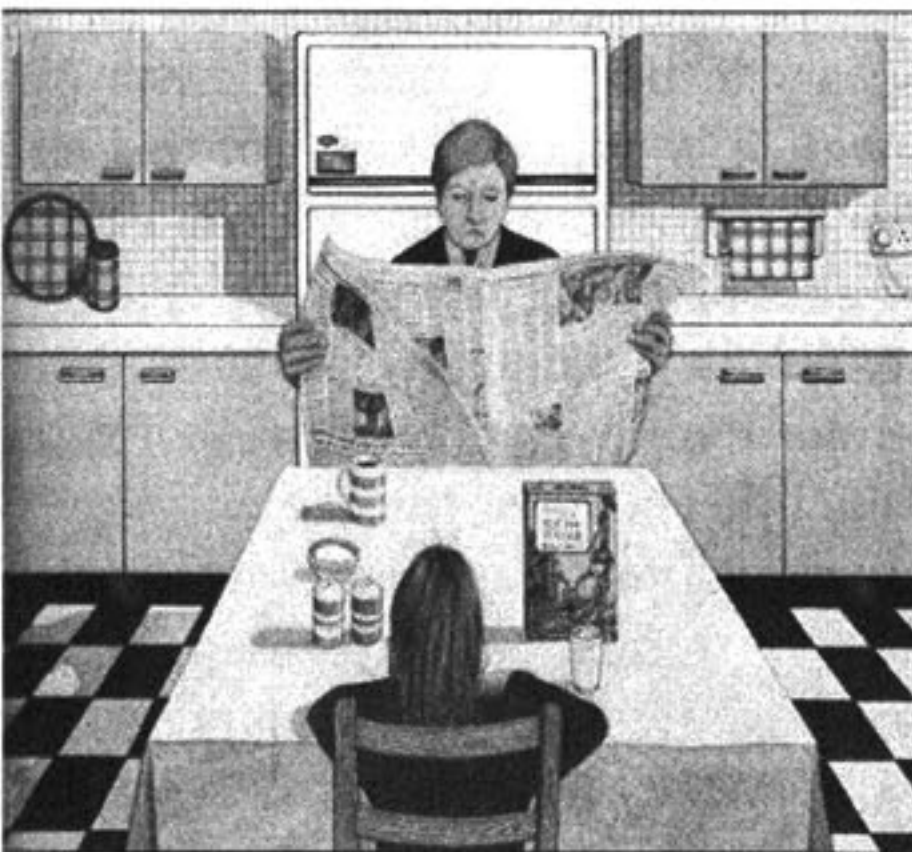


Figure 3



Figure 4

Another picture book in which the pictures add scope for a fuller response is Simon James's *Leon and Bob*. A little boy, Leon, moves to a new neighbourhood while his father is away, and feels so lonely that he creates in his imagination a friend called Bob who accompanies him everywhere. Early on, the text states explicitly that no one else could see Bob, but Leon "knew he was there". The pictures therefore do not surprise the reader, who sees Leon all alone, but they do develop the irony more fully. For example, at one point the text states that Leon does not mind that his mother cannot always walk with him to school, because Bob is always there to accompany him. The picture on the adjacent page, however, shows Leon cutting a very forlorn and lonely figure on his way to school.

Responding to Texts

Sipe (1998: 98-99) acknowledges the views of Wolfgang Iser and other reader-response critics in regarding the reader as "co-creator of the work by supplying that portion of it that is not written but only implied", and because readers differ, each fills in the "gaps" in either words or pictures in his or her own way, "thereby acknowledging the inexhaustibility of the text". From a reader-response perspective, then, the potential meaning even of wordless picture books may be realised by what readers contribute during their reading. Picture-book makers themselves must be aware that their readers will participate in creating meaning in texts. When Evans asked Anthony Browne what he felt about the

many varied and diverse "translations" that are made of his texts, he replied, "I deliberately make my books so that they are open to interpretations, most of which I never hear about (probably just as well). Once a work is finished, I have to let it go, like a child. What happens next is out of my control" (Browne 1998, p. 195). Responding to literature therefore involves a direct relationship between the reader and the text in a way that is personally meaningful to the reader.

(Evans 1998: xvi)

Browne's work offers good scope for readers to make detailed explorations and to form their own conclusions. An example is *Bear Hunt* with its extraordinary abundance of incongruous detail in the background scenes, the way the central character himself plays a role in the storytelling, and the interplay between different narrative perspectives. Another example is *Gorilla*, where readers can form their own conclusions regarding issues of dream and reality.

Victor Watson (Watson & Styles 1996) describes his shared reading of various picture books with two young children, noting seemingly inappropriate reactions at times as well as very different responses, possibly attri-

butable to personality and experience. Their responses to John Burningham's *Granpa* are particularly interesting because the disconnectedness in narrative and dialogue creates different possibilities. For example, on the left-hand side of one page opening it says, "There would not be room for all the little seeds to grow", followed by "Do worms go to heaven?" Although it is easy to conclude that words written in one kind of typeface are attributed to Granpa, and those in a different one to the little girl (a metafictional device drawing attention to the book as an artefact), it is not so straightforward to place the fragments of conversation into a coherent context. The reader thus has ample opportunity to fill in narrative gaps and it is also left to the reader to work out the connection between the smaller sepia-coloured drawings on the left-hand pages and the full-size pictures on the right.

An exception to this pattern is the double-page spread showing hurt feelings ("That was not a nice thing to say to Granpa") as the two face away from each other, each gravitating towards the outer edge of the left or right page (Figure 5). Just as the page division in the middle of this opening signals a (temporary) barrier between the girl and Granpa, so the last double-page spread, featuring no words at all, shows the little girl huddled on a stool on the left-hand page, looking across the page division at an empty chair where Granpa used to sit, bridging the gap in her mind between herself and the empty chair, and between the present and the past (Figure 6). *Granpa* thus offers ample scope for reader input.

That was not a nice thing to say to Granpa.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Contexts and Manifestations of Postmodernism

One would expect tendencies in contemporary society and culture such as postmodernism to find their way into the world of the picture book. Regarding such influences, Evans notes that “[m]ore than ever before people are beginning to see that they live in a ‘postmodern’ world ... postmodern society brings with it changes in the way people are able to make sense of texts There has been an upsurge in the way readers have started to look at and relate to visual texts” (Evans 1998: xiii-xiv).

Moss (1992: 54-55) observes that “postmodernism pictures a subjective, relativistic world which is so full of contradiction and so dependent on individual observers for its definition that there is little certainty about anything”, adding that in this kind of world “the human being is not a unity, not autonomous, but a process ... perpetually open to change”.

Meacham and Buendia explore the link between the cultural and social experience of postmodernism, and post-structuralism, which has “been applied primarily in the areas of language and philosophy”. Both concepts indicate a far greater room for interpretation of meanings in texts: “Derrida argues that the ‘structure’ (of meaning) of a text ... is not actual, but metaphorical. Therefore, literary interpretation is not the identification of the single structure within a text, but what Derrida (1978) would refer to as the ‘play’ (p. 280) of the text’s many interpretive possibilities ... a mode of literary interpretation known as ‘deconstruction’” (Meacham & Buendia 1999: 512).

According to Lewis (2001: 90) postmodernism *in fiction* appears in departures from linear story structure, offering alternative endings and other devices, but all postmodern fictions “have one thing in common, they are all inherently metafiction; that is, they comment upon, or direct attention to, the nature of fiction in the process of creating it”. He distinguishes between postmodern fiction and metafiction, however; the former being a historical phenomenon, and the latter more a set of devices used by a writer “for undermining expectations or for exposing the fictional nature of fictions” (Lewis 2001: 93).

Picture Books “at Play”: Postmodernism and Metafiction in Picture Books

Regarding *picture books* that display aspects of postmodernism or metafictional devices, Lewis (2001: 96) refers to the indeterminacy of certain works “that [leave] relationships and outcomes obscure” as happens, for example, in David Macaulay’s Caldecott Award-winning *Black and White* (1990), which is described as “an incredibly complex metafictional picture-book” (Pantaleo 2007: 46). Indeterminacy is attuned to a social and cultural milieu in which some major certainties in life are being displaced by an

element of relativism that makes it difficult to predict outcomes or to define relationships. Moss (1992: 62) comments that picture books that contain complex or “multi-layered narrative” afford children the opportunity to “read and write a text at the same time”: they can find a text entertaining at its simplest level as well as become “engaged in the active pursuit of complex meaning. Such books are saying: there is not one story, one voice here, but many”.

“Boundary breaking” is another characteristic highlighted by Lewis. In Anthony Browne’s *Bear Hunt* (1979), for example, “characters within a story are allowed by their author to wander beyond the narrative level to which they properly belong” (Lewis 2001: 94). In this book the pencil-wielding title character is allowed to assume a direct role in shaping the outcome of events. Incongruity is another form of boundary breaking in this work. While the main action involves attempts by two hunters to capture Bear, who continually eludes them by using his pencil, the forest backdrop contains a surreal mixture of incongruous elements freed of their normal contexts. Moss (1992: 60) refers to this kind of effect in Browne’s work as a “surrealistic scattering of visual jokes”. Examples are plants wearing collars and ties, watching eyes at the tops of stalks, a procession of shoes filing past, fish floating by, and a strange-looking bird blowing bubbles in the air as if it were a fish in water. The sheer randomness of many images creates irrationality, while the disappearance of the forest backdrop whenever Bear uses his pencil to draw himself out of trouble is a striking metafictional device. At each of these points of danger Bear creates his own story on a blank sheet of paper, thus interrupting the author’s own storytelling. Yet it could be the author himself who initiates the interruption: at each critical moment (of which Bear seems happily unaware), the simple words of the narrative are substituted by another “voice” urging Bear to look out or to do something to save himself. It is as if the author switches from telling the story to the reader, to addressing Bear directly, and empowering him to carry on with the story. The playfulness of *Bear Hunt* is augmented by a double dichotomy: between the simple words describing the basic action and the complexity of the backdrop, and between the backdrop and the one-dimensional, childlike illustrations of Bear and the hunters. It is difficult to imagine any reader – even the most reticent – failing to respond to the metafictional fun of this work.

Bear Hunt is not the only instance of a character in a story playing an active role in shaping it. This also happens in April Wilson’s *Magpie Magic* (1999), a wordless picture book, which, like *Bear Hunt*, possesses intriguing elements that can hardly fail to elicit a response across a wide readership – both child and adult. The reader witnesses a pair of human hands drawing a black-and-white magpie, modelled on a “real” bird outside the window. The artist then proceeds to draw other more colourful objects. The artist’s hands, which appear on most pages, are positioned in such a way that they could be

the reader's. The hands are also very expressive of the artist's state of mind and emotions. A "metafictive" element emerges when the completed magpie soars off, escaping – or perhaps released from – the outstretched hands of its creator. Soon the magpie begins interfering with the process itself, snatching berries or popping a bright orange balloon that have been drawn. The artist's hands show exasperation as the magpie snatches a broken yellow pencil point to create a fire, which the artist promptly has to douse. The artist eventually resorts to drawing a cage and enticing the bird into it. Illustrations of a lock and key serve to secure the captive, but the magpie, having watched the hands rubbing out the key, snatches the eraser which is left too nearby, rubs out part of the cage (Figure 7) and so escapes. After further mayhem the artist has no option but to rub out the magpie itself, but not completely, and so a solitary claw, a beak and an eye work together to reach the pencils – also not removed out of reach – and the magpie undergoes reconstruction. It goes further, however, using different pencils to transform itself into an exhibition of multicoloured splendour, thus exceeding the imaginative efforts of its original creator. Like Bear, who escaped from a "real" cage with a "drawing" of a saw in *Bear Hunt*, the magpie flies off in triumph – in this case escaping from another fictitious creation – at another level – by the "real" artist. The metafictive devices of *Magpie Magic* lie in the conceit of the title character brashly assuming the role of the artist, whose own hands had taken over the role of the real-life artist who created the book in the first place. Making this possible is a double-layered secondary world. At one level of fictional reality we have the artist's hands, the bird outside and the drawings, while at a further level the illustrated magpie come to life and making its own creations. Thematically, there is much that can be said about the issues of control – who has the right to control whom and how. In both books, the central characters use their own initiative to transcend their circumstances, transforming themselves in the process. Bear does so at his creator's instigation; the magpie as an act of defiance. Both *Bear Hunt* and *Magpie Magic* transcend normal parameters of fiction: both ask questions about the real identity and location of the authors.



Figure 7

“Performance” is another metafictional characteristic identified by Lewis. Many books, he says, “are constructed to be deliberately interactive and participatory ... they foreground the nature of the book as an object, an artefact to be handled and manipulated as well as read” (2001: 98), which helps to deconstruct the notion of an imaginary, self-contained secondary world. An example of this is Gravett’s *Meerkat Mail*. The dust cover resembles brown paper packaging, complete with string tied into a knot, postal franking marks and stickers. The last two items are glossy compared to the “brown paper” of the “parcel” – the book cover. If you turn the book over you notice that the string reappears at the corresponding point on the back cover, creating almost a 3-D effect. The metafictional device of focusing attention on the book as a physical artefact is continued between the covers. Sunny the Meerkat packs a suitcase and treks off to find another place to live in the Kalahari Desert, sending his family postcards from various places. Some of these are attached to the pages, to be folded back and read on the reverse side, reminiscent of the device involving envelopes used in *The Jolly Postman* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. Metafictional touches in *Meerkat Mail* include the use of photographic images, for example a crocodile-skin suitcase, introduced into the illustrations, incongruous items such as an electric fan, and ragged edges of a fold-out postcard near a trail of desert ants. Finally, another playful element, reminiscent of *Rosie’s Walk*, is the presence of a fox that stalks Meerkat throughout the book, but which is never mentioned in the words of the text. The diverse nature of the images, the characters, the story and the presentation of the book as an artefact combine to create a work that would have a multilayered appeal for readers in the primary school.

Undergraduate Education Students Responding to Selected Picture Books

How then, did thirty-six students, having in common English as an additional language, respond to a selection from the works discussed in the foregoing sections? And what conclusions could be drawn from the ways in which they responded? Students were organised into small groups, mostly of three or four per group, for the purpose of reading, discussing and making written responses to a set of 9-10 questions set by the writer on the book allocated to them. Most of the respondents were in training for teaching in the primary school, the rest being involved at secondary school level. One aspect of their response was whether they saw any potential use for picture books in the classroom, but an especially important consideration was their readiness to respond, as adult readers, to the books.

The questions were aimed at fostering discussion and reflection on the students’ own responses, accuracy of expression not being a central issue.

Students had the opportunity to discuss the book allocated to them before writing down their answers. All of the answers on a specific book were recorded question by question in the interests of gaining an overview of responses for each question. Errors in spelling and other areas of language in the responses, although retyped, are not corrected. Competence in written English is looked at, but more important to this exercise is evidence of their *willingness to write about what they had experienced* in their reading, thinking about the picture book concerned, and discussion of it.

Bear Hunt

Responses indicated that close observation of the pictures yielded rewards that they did not expect from a picture book for children. This raises the question of picture books potentially having some currency in the context of teaching and learning – possibilities that future teachers are empowered to discover through their own responses.

QUESTION: “They saw Bear”. What differences can you see between this picture and the picture on the front cover of the book? Two respondents had this to say:

- Flowers are missing
- Eyes in the background
- Colour differences
- Trees with ties and T-shirts
- Thickness of the bear’s head
- An apple is missing.
- Some flowers are missing, there is a bird inside and not on the front page.
- The bushes with shirts and ties aren’t on the front page.
- More detail in the book
- The big flower and the tree branches

This is an early question, which enables students to come up with quite literal answers, albeit ones that relate to highly unusual visual elements. These set the scene for further discussion about the incongruity of the background in relation to the action taking place in the foreground. This progression from simpler and more concrete data to the progressively more complex is a sound pedagogical principle which the students bring to life through their own engagement with the texts.

QUESTION: In the written text, words like “Look out!”, “Well done”, “Run”, “Stop”, “Clever Bear!” and “Do something” are used in a very unusual way in a story. Explain why.

- They are written in such a way that it sounds as though someone else is telling the story
- Because you are speaking to the bear, like he can hear you
- It is used in a very unusual way ... because someone is telling bear what to do
- To get the reader in the story. That is what you would say to the bear if you were there

These respondents are clearly picking up on the “unusual” features like the shifting narrator and the metafictional element of an outside narrator seemingly able to communicate with the main character. One student homed in on reader involvement. Once again, an important principle – reader involvement – is brought into direct focus through their interaction with text. The answers are in the main clearly articulated.

QUESTION: What do you notice about the background to the pictures every time Bear uses his pencil? Why do you think this happens?

- The background is white ... to focus the attention ... on what the bear is about to draw.
- The ... objects he uses to escape are also white. Bear uses the background to escape.
- The background goes away ... so that we can focus on what bear does ...
- The background is white ... It is all focused on the bear drawing

The respondents continue to play on the notion of a storytelling strategy.

Concluding Comments: Five of Them Are as Follows:

- I really enjoyed this book, because unlike many children’s books, this one has a strange “feel” to it that makes it more appealing and interesting.
- The colours and weird pictures used is very enjoyable and subtle to the eyes.
- It was a nice book. I think it will keep children interested and you can get a lot of feedback from this book by asking questions. I loved the way it was drawn and the creativeness the writer shows. I think even adults would enjoy reading this story.
- I liked the book about Bear. It is interesting and I think little children will also find it interesting. The strange pictures and objects in the background are a bit confusing though.
- I liked this book a lot. There are different things to look at. It is not a boring book. The book is colourful and the pictures are nice and big. It was a nice activity. This activity helped me to look “deeper” into the story and its pictures.

The word “interesting” is mentioned several times; the book is also seen as “strange”, and that it has a special “feel”. It is also described as “weird”,

though “subtle to the eyes”; another respondent refers to it as being “confusing”. While one student actually mentions that adults would enjoy it, this opinion is endorsed by all saying they liked the work. Others felt it would suit their preferred style of teaching, opening their eyes to different perspectives and making them realise how easy it is not to see “deeper meanings”. From a teaching point of view it is significant that one respondent notes that “it will keep children interested and you can get a lot of feedback from this book by asking questions”.

Gorilla

Respondents interpret this story in terms of deficient family relationships, and tend to identify closely with the neglected little girl in the story.

*QUESTION: Turn to the first **two** page openings. What do you learn about the people in the story from the **pictures** alone?*

- ... The father looks very distant and caught up in his own world of work. The little girl looks very lonely.
- They both live in separate lives although they are father and daughter.
- It's important to have a close relationship
- No mother in the picture. The father looks distant.
- The girl loves to read about gorillas and she does not have much of a talking relationship with her dad. Her father does not have time for her.
- The girl looks curious. The man is ignoring her.

The point can be made that in answering this question, respondents do not have to deal with written text and are given space to articulate their responses to what is depicted in graphic form only. As is the case when listing visual items in response to the early *Bear Hunt* question, this provides a lead-in to a discussion about broader issues in the text. This is a further example of a pedagogical principle that students can discover through their own reading of texts chiefly aimed at children. The broader issue in this case is about human, specifically family, relationships that are defective in some way.

The next responses reveal awareness of the little girl Hannah's state of mind being reflected in the use (or lack) of colour to create a general mood of loneliness or dejection. Students have started to become really involved in the text, judging from their answers:

QUESTION: Look carefully at the detail in the large picture in this page opening. Write down things that strike you about this picture.

- The darkness of it clearly shows the girls unhappiness ... how cold and dark this little girl feels inside.

- ... shows how lonely she is In the dark area on the wall you can see the outlines of a lot of scary things ... associated with the darkness, like bats. In the area where the light falls, around the girl ... are things you associate with daylight ... shows that she has a big imagination.
- The girls face is sad and she is alone in a corner. The rest of the picture is sad and shows scary images, witches, bats, skulls and only around her in the light of the television is it colourful and bright.
- The wallpaper looks like a portrait of animals. (forestry background)
- There's animals (bats, hippos, crocodiles
- The girl is sad, alone in front of a television
- The butterflies and the flowers implies how she wants to be (Happy)

The first two answers by two of the respondents bring some analytical perspective to the page opening above, while the third point, made by a third respondent, and the last four, by a fourth, are more literal in nature. All the answers, however, reveal that the picture has made a distinct impression on all the readers. They did not skim over the details, but observed them rather closely. This could be due at least in part to the striking features and overall impact of the picture itself. Like so many of the illustrations and accompanying text in picture books like this, they cannot be ignored.

QUESTION: Skip a page opening. In the one with the words "You'd better go in now, Hannah," how do the sizes of the pictures tell you what is happening?

- The small picture is used to show how big the gorilla is because only his face fits into it. The next picture is a big one to indicate that the gorilla has shrunk again. It is made clear that the girl is now bigger than the gorilla, like before.
- In the small picture the gorilla is still big, but in the bigger picture the gorilla is small – 'ironic'.
- On the one the gorilla is big and they are outside and on the other she is big and the gorilla is small and back in bed. This could show that she was only dreaming.
- She was dreaming. The one on the left symbolises night and the one on the right she wakes up next morning smiling at her toy gorilla.

The first two responses present a fairly literal impression of what is seen on the pages, although the second perceives an ironic dimension. The last two reveal an element of thematic interpretation arising from the relative sizes of gorilla figures depicted in this page opening. This is a promising step in the students' progress towards formulating articulate responses to meanings that do not exist merely on the surface. Interpreting visual elements continues:

QUESTION: Were you surprised that Hannah's father asked her if she wanted to go to the zoo the next day? Why? Say something about the pictures on the last three pages.

- No I was not surprized because a father stays a father and they always know what their children want although they do not always give it to them. These pictures feel more alive and filled with happiness than the rest. The father has a bannana in his back pocket which tells me that he already took Hanna too the zoo but he went in the form of the gorrilla. He did this to “herstel” the relationship between him and his daughter because he knew how much she loved gorillas.
- Yes, because he has never had time for her or do something with her, and was surprise that he had ask if she wanted to go to the zoo.
The picture show that Hannah had a love for gorillas and her father soon realise that, and her father begin to show that he know that she loves gorillas. And that is what bring them so close together.
- Yes, the whole book he does not come through as caring to do anything with her and now he wants to go to the zoo. Through the book aswell the gorilla in her fathers coat and hat, makes us see the 2 things she wants the most! her dad and a gorilla.
- Yes, she was already at the zoo (in her dreams) in the middle pictures she was never taken to the zoo by her father, but she had a nice dream about a gorilla and she felt save

These four responses show the students to be at a point where their interpretations are allowing them to reach conclusions about the overall significance of the work – evaluative responses preceded by observation and discussion of details on various page openings. The insights gained through observation of pictures and written text working together are given authentic expression, albeit in language which is technically flawed in places. In the context of this exercise it is the attempt and the willingness to express personal awareness that assumes a greater importance than complete technical accuracy.

QUESTION: A few page openings further (“Afterwards they walked down the street ...”) the large picture makes one think of one much earlier on. Which picture does it remind you of, and what are some of the differences between the two pictures? Is there anything else you have noticed about either of these two large pictures?

- ... the 1st picture ... hardly gave her attention ... a cold atmosphere ... due to the use of blue and white colours The other picture gives one a warm cosy feeling because of the colours (warm) and the interaction between the gorila and girl.
- ... the large picture on the first page opening The colour and atmosphere created in the second picture is much happier ...
- ... with her father at the table, but here the colours are brighter and colourful ... the gorilla is paying attention to the girl.
- ... at breakfast table. In her dream she is enjoying the scene Now she can finally enjoy the atmosphere. (Happy)
- ... where Hannah sits at the table with her father ... the girl and the gorilla

... close to each other. In the room with her father a lot of space is shown to indicate the space between them.

Here the respondents make a cross reference to an earlier picture because of an ironic contrast that is conveyed by visual images only, with the choice of colours providing a crucial ingredient in delineating the different kinds of relationships in the story. The visual impact of the predominant colour in each picture is easy to pick up on, while the contrasting colours in the two pictures create further emphasis. This gives a solid basis for discussion, both of what is literally present in the bold colours, and of what is implied by this contrast. Once again it must be stressed that such thinking beyond the literal level is facilitated by the very accessible medium of colour pictures and uncomplicated written text – a point that should not be missed by students who will one day be wanting to foster such abilities in their own charges, many of whom are quite likely to share with them the fact that English is an additional language.

Concluding Comments on *Gorilla*

- I enjoyed it because I now noticed so many more ... details. It was interesting to hear your partner's opinion
- ... more interesting than I expected it to be. I enjoyed this ... something different ...
- I enjoyed doing this exercise a lot. The type of questions and answers helped me what to ask the children in my class one day ...
- I found it interesting that my partner didn't notice ... things like I did. We helped each other and enjoyed it. It taught me to look at things in detail. Thank you.
- ... you think a bit wider than normal and the more you look ... the more you see and learn something else ... not just the girl, but the gorillas in captivity as well. I really enjoyed doing this.
- ... Good story to enhance a child's imagination. I'm impressed.
- I found ... the whole activity very interesting and I have realized by myself also how important pictures are, especially the details, it allows you to use your own imagination.

The above comments are eloquent regarding the usefulness of collaborating with a discussion partner, and how a book such as this can stimulate broader and more critical thinking through appeal to the imagination. There is no sign of any reticence in the comments given above. Moreover, not only have the students succeeded in engaging with the text, but in their concluding comments they have taken a further step in reflecting on their experience of responding to the work.

Granpa

The two respondents showed substantial involvement with the human and formal elements of this story, observing the link between the structure and the theme.

QUESTION: Turn to the first page of the story. What do you think of the style of the picture?

- The little girl is running to her grandpa They love each other very much
- The style of the picture suggests that there is a bond or close relationship between the child and her grandfather

QUESTION: Turn to the next page opening. Who is saying which words on the left page, and why do you think so?

- The little girl is saying the first sentence ... grandpa said the second sentence because he is wondering about heaven. I think he knows that his time is near.

One can observe that human values such as love and family relationships are emphasised here, so one could expect that this work would find fertile soil in the primary classroom for the growing and nurturing of positive attitudes and values.

The response to the next question reveals an awareness of how space across a full double-page spread is used to create an opposite effect to that in the previous one:

QUESTION: Why is the picture in the next page opening so different to the one before it?

- The picture is contrasting to the one before it Grandpa and the child are facing each other and interacting The background in the previous picture was very plain and gloomy

QUESTION: Turn to the last double-page picture. How does it (the picture) tell the story – why are words not necessary?

- The picture tells the story very clearly This indicates without use of words that her grandpa was sick and had passed away. The fact that earlier in the book he “asked” if worms go to heaven also gave a thought that he might know that he is going to pass away soon.
- The position of the child and Grandpa’s empty chair give us the idea that Grandpa has passed away. The child looks sad and the background is plain and gloomy again suggesting the lonely, sad mood that is created. The fact that Grandpa was sick previously contributes to this last scene.

The nature of the illustrations and their placement in relation to one another create a strongly poignant effect; much is conveyed without having to be overtly stated. Teachers may welcome this.

Concluding Comments on *Granpa*

- ... this experience was a lot of fun The book is quite difficult to understand and could be confusing to children. After studying and discussing the book I felt that I had a reasonably good understanding of it.
- I think that answering the questions was very helpful ... the questions can be interpreted differently The way the questions are asked allows you to think and look at the story from different perspectives.

Both comments are a positive endorsement of the book: despite the difficulties offered by the ways in which the words and pictures are structured, exploring possible meanings from different perspectives proved not only worthwhile but “a lot of fun” too. If young adult readers preparing to teach in the primary school regard this as “fun”, it bodes well for how they might turn a book such as this to good account in their own classrooms.

Piggybook

QUESTION: On the next two pages there are no surprises, are there? But isn't there something odd or strange in the picture with Mr P sitting in his chair?

- On the next two pages the morning cycle almost repeats itself through Mrs Piggott cooking and cleaning again for her husband and sons. In the picture of Mr Piggott his shadow resembles a pig-like figure and every picture in the paper is that of a pig and the button on his suite.
- Yes, his shadow turned into a pig while the picture in the book drawn of him is more human like. This indicates Mr. P is being a pig.

These two answers report on what is to be seen in the pictures and they also offer some comment. The association between the pig-like shadow and Mr Piggott's character is made more explicit in the second response.

QUESTION: Look at the next two page openings. We still do not see Mrs Piggott in the company of her husband and sons. Why do you think this is the case? What is the difference between the pictures showing Mrs P and the pictures showing Mr P and the sons?

- We do not see Mrs Piggott in the pictures with her husband and sons, because she is constantly working and doing all the cooking and cleaning.

The pictures where Mr Piggott and his sons are in is more colourfull, because they enjoy their lives. The pictures where Mrs Piggott is in, is dull, because her life is not enjoyable.

- Firstly, Mrs P's life seems so dull (the picture in book proves that) because she is constantly busy with chores, while Mr P and sons are relaxing and having life easy and exciting (as the pictures prove with colourful shades). Why don't they see Mrs P & Mr P together, because Mrs. P is too busy with chores to be able to connect with her husband and rarely see each other.

Both responses make direct associations between colours and their connotations in the context of the story. It is in the context of the overall theme that such associations are made. At the same time the concrete element of colourful pictures is the catalyst for seeing reality depicted at different levels, and deriving meanings at both literal and figurative levels. This could be a boon for teachers wishing to follow inductive approaches to introducing young readers to concepts that are essentially abstract, but which can be given concrete form.

Some concluding comments are presented here:

- I really enjoyed this exercise ... made you look at the finer details
- ... it would be nice if a person get a chance to present or perform a task in front of the whole class
- I think this book has a good message in it. Woman should not let their husbands and children abuse them ... if everybody helps around the house then everybody will be happy.
- This ... helps me to ... dig a little deeper. This excersize is so soothing and without any stress barriers. And such cute and worthy lessons.
- It was a good experience and fun doing it. It shows that everyone should do their bit
- This is a good experience. It helps you realise ... that a picture realy is worth a thousand words.

The above comments are particularly interesting in the way they refer to the “moral imperatives” of the story as well as the process of “decoding” meaning from visual cues. One respondent feels that such an exercise promotes logical thinking “without any stress barriers”, in a sense an endorsement of the use of picture books as a non-formidable approach to negotiating English-language texts. The fact that one of the students felt positive about doing performance tasks based on this kind of text is encouraging as well.

War and Peas

Only one of the four respondents grasped the pun in the title of this picture book (“... you would expect the word ‘peas’ to be ‘peace’”).

Respondents understand the power of visual images to create atmosphere and to spring surprises. The arid landscape of Lion’s kingdom vividly illustrates the plight of the animals, compared to the contrasting images of gross excess in the land of the fat king.

QUESTION: If you looked only at the pictures on the first two double-page spreads and not the words, what would you learn about the situation in the story?

- The King Lion looks sad because he is worried about the other animals.
- The picture looks lifeless and without hope The characters look sad and without hope.

Most of the respondents move beyond the literal level and draw conclusions when responding to the next question, for example:

QUESTION: The pictures show a large variety of different kinds of food, but what do most of them have in common, and what does this tell us about the people who live in the land of plenty?

- ... The people are so fat like the king because there are only luxuries besides the peas
- The food shown are all ... kinds of sweet stuff ... this is an unhealthy way of eating.
- It is luxury food. It’s more like desert.
- They ... live unhealthy.

Concluding Remarks

With regard to the texts, it can be said that modern picture books offer a vast variety of themes and artistic approaches, revealing infinitely variable relationships between visual images and words. Artists like Macaulay disturb traditional narrative structures, leaving much for the reader to do. Aspects of visual imagery such as line, colour, movement, size and location, some elements of what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) call a “grammar of visual design”, are skilfully embedded in the pictures, as in work by Burningham and Browne. Metafictive devices used by authors and illustrators like Gravett lead to a focus on the objective reality of the book as an artefact in the hands of the reader, thus opening up manifold possibilities. Other picture book makers lean towards satire (Foreman) or parody, even taking liberties with conventions of book format. Picture books that offer

sophistication and an element of the extraordinary thus have the potential to appeal to a wide audience.

Most students in South Africa do not have English as their home language, yet need to use it for study purposes. What picture books can do to facilitate the “taking on board” of English in learning and teaching is to offer material that readers can relate to. Recognising that readers have imaginations and a sense of humour that inspire and reward careful observation, thought and exercise of the imagination, is both challenging and appealing. In the light of this there is no reason at all why learners of any age should derive any less enjoyment or benefit from using picture books than those who interact with texts in their home language.

When considering the students’ responses to the texts they read, it can be argued that picture books also have a lot to offer in the context of teaching and learning. Because of their refreshing qualities, many texts challenge while they entertain, and vice versa, making them fun to work with. The fact that the first-year undergraduate students discussed here engaged so positively with texts they had not encountered before at this level, gives reason for optimism about their future roles in the classroom. Two important points emerge from the exercise described above. Firstly, young adult students for whom English is an additional language gain exposure to a genre of literature for children, to which they themselves can respond constructively and with enthusiasm. Secondly, these very students discover some important implications in this for their own classroom practice. They have been able to observe at first hand some key pedagogical elements at work, brought about by the accessibility of picture text as a medium. The respondents in this exercise have witnessed and reflected upon the power of the visual medium, working in synergy with written text, to lead the reader through surface detail to further levels of meaning. One might venture to suggest that the teaching and learning potential of the picture book in the South African educational context is both endless and exciting.

References

- Ahlberg, A. & Ahlberg J.
 1986 *The Jolly Postman*. London: Puffin.
- Blake, Q.
 1995 *Clown*. London: Random House Children’s Books.
- Browne, A.
 1994 *Bear Hunt*. London: Puffin.
 1996 *Piggybook*. London: Walker.
 2002 *Gorilla*. London: Walker.
 2004 *Into the Forest*. London: Walker.
- Burningham, J.
 1990 *Granpa*. London: Red Fox.

- Evans, J. (ed.)
 1998 *What's in the Pictures?: Responding to the Illustrations in Picture Books* London: Paul Chapman.
- Foreman, M.
 2002 *War and Peas*. London: Andersen.
- Goldstone, B.
 [2001]2002 Whaz Up with Our Books?: Changing Picture Book Codes and Teaching Implications. *Reading Teacher* 55(4): 362-370.
- Gravett, E.
 2006 *Meerkat Mail*. London: Macmillan.
- Grobler, P.
 2002 *Please, Frog, Just One Sip!* Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Hutchins, P.
 2001 *Rosie's Walk*. London: Red Fox.
- James, S.
 1997 *Leon and Bob*. London: Walker.
- Kitamura, S.
 1987 *Lily Takes a Walk*. New York: Dutton.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T.
 1996 *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, D.
 2001 *Reading Contemporary Picture Books*. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Macaulay, D.
 1990 *Black and White*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Marriott, S.
 1998 Picture Books and the Moral Imperative. In: Evans, J. (ed.) *What's in the Pictures?: Responding to the Illustrations in Picture Books*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Meacham, S. & Buendia, E.
 1999 Modernism, Postmodernism and Post-structuralism and Their Impact on Literacy. *Language Arts* 76(6): 510-516.
- Moss, G.
 1992 *My Teddy Bear Can Fly: Postmodernizing the Picture Book*. In: Hunt, P. (ed.) *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*. London: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva, M. & Scott, C.
 2000 The Dynamics of Picture Book Communication. *Children's Literature in Education* 31(4): 225-239.
- Pantaleo, S.J.
 2007 Everything Comes from Seeing Things. *Children's Literature in Education* 38(1): 45-58.
- Quarmby, K. & Grobler, P.
 2008 *Fussy Freya*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Sipe, L.
 1998 How Picture Books Work: A Semiotically Framed Theory of Text-Picture Relationships. *Children's Literature in Education* 29(2): 97-108.

- Trites, R.
1994 *Manifold Narratives: Metafiction and Ideology in Picture Books.*
 Children's Literature in Education 25(4): 225-242.
- Watson, V. & Styles, M.
1996 *Talking Pictures.* London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Wilson, A.
1999 *Magpie Magic.* Dorking: Templar.

Acknowledgements

Copyright © 1983 Anthony Browne
From *GORILLA* by Anthony Browne
Reproduced by permission of Walker Ltd, London SE11 5HJ

Copyright © 1984 John Burningham
From *GRANPA* by John Burningham
Reproduced by permission of Random House Children's Books, London W5 5SA

Copyright © 1999 April Wilson
From *MAGPIE MAGIC* by April Wilson
Reproduced by permission of Templar Publishing, Dorking, Surrey RH4 1JE

PLEASE FROG, JUST ONE SIP! By Piet Grobler (originally published by Lemniscaat b.v. Rotterdam 2002)
Reproduced by permission of Human & Rousseau

FUSSY FREYA by Katharine Quarmby, illustrated by Piet Grobler (originally published by Frances Lincoln Childrens Books, Frances Lincoln Ltd London)
Reproduced by permission of Human & Rousseau

Charles van Renen
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth
Charles.vanrenen@nmmu.ac.za