

## Postmodern Picture Books

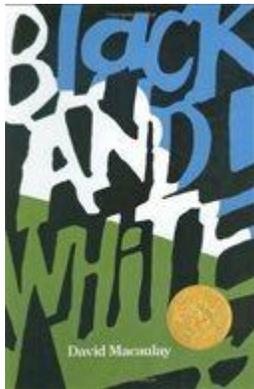
In my last two essays, I have written about the importance of picture books and how to use picture books in the classroom. For my third essay, I will examine postmodern picture books, the focus of my workshop;” Words and Art – A Creative Synthesis”.

The postmodern picture book is a specific and unique genre within the picture book family. This unique genre can be defined by its special characteristics, which include:

- expanding the conventional borders of the picture book
- containing non-linear structures and storylines
- offering numerous perspectives or realities to the reader
- being self-referential---they discuss their own existence
- leaving gaps for the reader to “fill in”
- including elements of uncertainty or irony
- often containing surrealistic images
- including the juxtaposition of unconnected images
- poking fun at traditional (modernist) formats
- often being sarcastic or cynical in tone
- behaving like hypertexts in web pages in that postmodern books do not have a linear format; readers can choose how to read them to create their own paths through the stories
- promoting the reader as a producer, not a consumer of texts
- containing Inter-textual references, which require the reader to make connections to other texts or knowledge, in order to better understand the picture book
- exhibiting a variety of design layout and a variety of styles of illustrations

To be identified as being postmodern, picture books of this genre have to exhibit at least one of these characteristics. They usually have a non-linear structure that includes illustrations that are surrealistic in nature. They have multiple story lines or narrators and have components of self-reference.

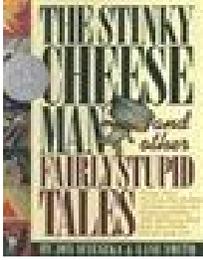
A classic example of this particular genre is David Macalay's, Caldecot award winner, Black and White (1991). There are four separate but related sub-plots in this book, but the reader has to make a decision about how the book may become meaningful to him. Macalay intrigues the reader with a warning that appears on the inside front cover of this book: "WARNING: This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. But it may contain only one story. Then again, there may be four stories. Or four parts of a story. Careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended."



Other examples of postmodern picture books include: Davis Wiesner's The Three Pigs; Fly Away Home, by Eve Bunting with illustrations by Ronald Himler; Jon Scieszka's The True Story of the Three Little Pigs and The Stinky Cheese Man with illustrations by Lane Smith; Anthony Browne's Voices in the Park; and Bamboozled by David Legge.

In Wiesner's, The Three Little Pigs, the reader is intentionally made aware of the fact that the book is calling attention to itself. The illustrator has drawn the pigs appearing to climb outside of the book. There are several pages where one sees the pig's hooves, or the pig's ears at the bottom or the top of the page. On the back cover, the wolf observes... "Everybody knows the story of The Three Pigs. Or at least they think they do. But I'll let you in on a little secret. The real story is...I was framed!" This book will intrigue, delight, and puzzle children, as they wonder where the pigs go.

In The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales, Jon Scieszka pokes fun at the traditional fairy tales and in the process changes plots, characters, names and outcomes. For example, the ugly duckling does not grow up to be a beautiful swan, but remains a really ugly duck. The illustrations are surreal and dark. On the inside of the back cover, in very small print you can read the following: "The illustrations are rendered in oil and vinegar. Anyone caught telling these fairly stupid tales will be visited, in person, by the Stinky Cheese Man."



Post modern books have appeal to the population of children known as “cyber kids”, “digital youth” and the “net generation” because they invite the reader to interact with the book. They demand participation from the reader in that the reader can choose the storyline. So, like a child “clicking a mouse”, the reader is enticed to move in any direction and thereby construct his or her own narrative. This genre of books challenges the reader to go beyond the obvious in finding meaning thereby engaging higher cognitive skills.

The illustrations in postmodern books are as important as the text because the illustrations don't just support the meaning of the text but in many ways the illustrations carry their own meaning separate from the story.

The postmodern picture book attracts boys because of its interactive nature. It also appeals to a wider age span and range of reading levels.

According to Laura Colker, “A postmodern storybook has the potential to extend the definition of reading comprehension to new, unexplored levels.” (“The Postmodern World of Picture Book Illustration” in Reading is Fundamental, P. 1)