A Global Lens for Viewing Children's Literature

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1 Visual Literacy

"Dad, you have to come see this," Oliver said as he was looking at one of his many books. A prep student in Australia (Kindergarten in the United States). Oliver had no idea how crucial this "looking" at would be with what he had found in the book. While Oliver was showing me the book about the body which had full colour illustrations and lift the flap sections with flaps within the flaps, it reaffirmed to the author how complex and visual children's literature has become. The development and growth in children's literature has put a huge focus on the visuals in books.

It is quite natural that children are able to focus on visuals so easily as is seen in this anecdote. As Piro (2002) noted over a decade ago, "Because of early responses to picture books as a first reading experience, children do not think only in written language but in visual image as well" (p. 128). This may explain Oliver's ease at learning about the human body and interacting with the flaps and visuals in his book. However, it also shows the necessity for educators to instruct children in developing these skills.

The emphasis on the visual in children's literature has gained a bigger and bigger emphasis globally and is something that must be taught to students throughout the school years to assist in comprehension as well as engagement.

The goal of this chapter is to provide background for the reader about visual literacy, how the visual has been found within children's literature traditionally, and the global rise of visuals in children's literature currently, as well as introduce a new genre that has a strong emphasis on the visual.

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Winch et al. (2011) state, "the essence of visual literacy (and beware—many of the current usages are loose and rather muddy) is the making of meaning out of images that may be signs, objects, lines, circles, dots, tables, diagrams, charts, maps, comics, cartoons, numerals, varying mixtures of all the above, AND WORDS" (p. 620, emphasis theirs). It is important to note how complex their definition is, especially when one considers what defines the image being examined. While once children may have looked at a picture that supported the text, now the visual sometimes stands alone to tell the story or provide the information. If one were to continue to look, they would find a plethora of definitions. Williams (2007) notes, "although a concrete definition of visual literacy is elusive, at its core is an emphasis on the personal construction of meaning from any type of visual image" (p. 637). What Williams states best here is that there are so many different formats that the visual image might take in that it is important to include a large range of options.

This validates what Winch et al. (2011) introduced in their definition. They support this idea of multiple formats, stating how, "students will increasingly interact with an overwhelming number and variety of visual images generated by television, motion pictures, personal computers, video games, and other technologies. As images continue to evolve as the dominant text of our society, students of all ages need the experience of reading such texts in order to be successful" (p. 642). The experiences children are provided are what will help them to become better readers and viewers of such diverse visual images. Serafini (2011) supports this as well, "visual images are drawn upon with increased frequency to make sense of one's world often overshadowing the once dominant mode of written language" (p. 86). Thus, the multiple forms of text in the definition show that written text does not have the sole importance it once did in previous definitions of literacy in general. Perhaps, though, it is not just one definition of visual literacy or literacy in general that needs to be considered. Williams (2007) believes that the definition of literacy has expanded. "By shifting from the singular *literacy* to the plural *literacies,* the idea of reading escapes the narrow confines of the printed text to encompass a wide range of cultural, technological, and visual elements"(p. 636). One of the key ideas behind this is that culture plays a big role in the visual elements that readers or viewers are finding and how they are interpreted. This idea of culture within the visual helps identify that this is not a local issue, but rather a global one.

Most importantly though is that this issue of visual images and the teaching of them is something that must occur in classrooms worldwide. Many believe that more instruction of the skills needed to comprehend visual literacy is needed in classrooms (Serafini (2011), Williams (2007), Unsworth et al. (2004). Serafini (2011) discusses this further, "This lack of pedagogical attention to visual images and visual systems of meaning presents serious challenges to teachers at a time when image has begun to dominate the lives of their students" (p. 86). The stress on visual images is very much needed as Serafini contends and was also seen by Williams (2007) where she described that she did not see a focus for teaching how to engage and interpret visual images in classrooms at any age level. This is alarming because, as was mentioned earlier, children around the world are being exposed more and more to an abundance of visual images in almost any form of text they see. Unsworth

et al. (2004) even discuss how the role of images in relation to print and meaning is increasing in their study examining how standardized tests are emphasizing visuals and visual literacy. In their study they found that while some of the test items "purport to address 'viewing skills' and refer directly and explicitly to images, it is possible that other items implicitly test respondents' understandings of images and image-text relations" (p. 47).

Probably the greatest idea that is relevant here is that while standardized testing worldwide continues to grow and become more prevalent, the tests themselves are also including elements of visual literacy and visualization. Because of this, it must be emphasized that the visuals in children's literature continue to deserve focus and attention globally. Unsworth et al. (2004) also suggest that the increase in visual images in the standardized tests they looked at over a 3 year period suggests, "perhaps this is a deliberate aspect of the design of the tests, reflecting both the demands of contemporary texts and the need to monitor children's developing knowledge and understanding of visual literacy in large scale literacy assessment in school systems" (p. 54). The arguments are compelling ones and show further attention to the issue is needed.

2 Illustrations

Historically, illustrations in children's literature began with chapbooks. Chapbooks were crudely printed books or even pamphlets that had woodcut illustrations in them. They were quite popular with both children and adults and were sold by peddlers or "chapmen". Kiefer (2010) describes them as the forerunner to comics. The early illustrations in chapbooks provided the reader with assistance when reading and also were one of the precursors to trying to extend the text. Brice Heath (2011) describes this idea, "Chapbooks of the 18th century continued the pesky trend of working text and illustration into intimate partnerships that sometimes quarrelled with one another and other times joined peacefully" (p. 42). The main idea for including the illustration was to provide young readers with more than simply the text that might become overwhelming. It is interesting to note that because these books were crudely constructed, the illustrations and text did not always go well together as Brice Heath points out. This had a major impact in children's literature however as illustrations became more a part of books and manuscripts. The flood in the market of chapbooks also led to John Newbery's publishing books specifically marketed for children, which in turn led to the idea of illuminated manuscripts.

Historically, an illuminated manuscript (a handwritten document accompanied by decoration) was a highly prized object, generally owned only by the church or a wealthy individual (http://www.abebooks.com/books/hours-gold-vellum-decorated-parchment/illuminated-manuscripts.shtml).

Illuminated manuscripts developed through time and changed to a different format within children's literature to include novels with illustrations and the well known and loved genre of picture books. Picture books emerged with Randolph Caldecott

leading the way in creating books with more illustrations specifically designed for young children. Illustrations in children's literature continued through the years and entered into novels for children as well.

The idea of illuminating novels was carried over for years with illustrations found within the novels. This could be seen in Roald Dahl's books (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, BFG*) and Sid Fleischman's (*Chancy and the Grand Rascal, Mr. Mysterious and Company*). The main reason for the illustration may have been to provide a visual for young readers to assist in their comprehension. Their purpose could also have been to serve as a transition from picture books to the novels they would be reading as adults which would not have any illustrations in them. This is especially found in Dahl's books for younger readers. Titles such as *Esio Trot* are shorter books and contain more illustrations in them throughout. These types of novels with illustrations were a staple in children's literature and could be found around the world in the novels that were being published. Then, in the 1990s, there was less emphasis on this visual and more on the text. While there were still some novels with illustrations in them, the focus became much more on the readers to create their own visuals in their mind.

Now, in the past decade the emphasis is back on the visual and it is back with a vengeance! When once there was a huge emphasis on illustrations in picture books, there has been a progression to more varied formats. Visuals have become more significant in picture books, especially wordless picture books, early readers, illuminated novels, traditional novels, and now the acceptance of graphic novels and comics. This progression has serious implications for educators. As Walsh (2006) questions, "How does 'reading' occur when images are part of the text? Is the reading process as described for the novel, a print-based text, applicable to the reading of images in a picture book?" (p. 28). Walsh's questions are very good ones and ideas that are maintained by Serafini (2011): "Images and texts mean things because readers bring experiences and understanding of images, language, and the world to them when reading" (p. 89).

It is crucial then that the books they read reflect the combination of written text and images in a complex manner. This can be seen in illustrated novels and they are becoming more prevalent throughout the world. An example of an illustrated novel from the United States is *Platypus Police Squad: The Frog Who Croaked* by Jarrett Krosoczka (2013a). In this novel there are numerous illustrations throughout. However, these illustrations are ones that support what is being read about in the text. Thus, the illustrations and text are working hand in hand to help tell the story. One example of this is found on page 94 as the two detectives are walking into the school and hear someone call to them from behind a bush.

What the illustration does then is provide comprehension support by showing what is happening in the text. Another example of this, found in England, are the books by Guy Bass. His Stitch Head series is quite popular and has illustrations throughout the book that correspond with what is happening in the story. While in Krosoczka's book the illustrations are found in every chapter, in Bass' books the illustrations are found on nearly every page. Illustrations in novels are becoming more common these days in children's literature. The question and idea,

which Walsh (2006) raises, is a very critical one when considering how novels have changed either to become "illuminated" or more blended with the inclusion of different forms of visual elements.

In this more modern usage, the term "illuminated novel" captures the shared nature of visual and text and allows us to more broadly conceptualize the role that each plays in contributing to the narrative whole. Krosoczka (2013b) commented on just this idea:

> I live by one golden rule. Words and pictures are teammates, and each must bring their own special skill to the field to get the job done. If the words and pictures communicated the same information, it would be like hearing the same story twice, and that would lead to a very dull experience for the reader. (personal communication)

This is becoming clear as a worldwide trend developing to engage readers and encourage them to be focused more on the visual than ever before. This is especially apparent in what Zbaracki and Geringer (2014) describe as "blended narratives", defined as "texts that combine the features found in picture books, comics, and graphic novels. A key component of blended narratives is that they contain narratives that are told through two aspects on equal footing: the text and the visuals (illustrations)", (forthcoming) in which the illustrations and the text both bear the burden of telling the story and they do so by using differing formats such as graphic novel components, comics, or picture book formats, with the traditional novel genre. Walsh (2006) discusses how complex this is and how readers must be able to break different visual codes and that, "This involves a different coding system" (p. 29). Because there are many challenges that readers are being exposed to in order to break these new "codes", it is vital that we examine the new formats or codes that young readers are being exposed to.

When children read blended narratives, they need to take their past experiences (or schema) of different text types (picture books, comics, graphic novels, and the traditional novel) and use all the reading strategies they have been taught in order to read and comprehend the new blended narrative. This new genre requires a complex system of codes that need to be used and decoded in order for the books to be read, engaged with, and comprehended. Several examples of this genre will be explored from Australia, the United States, and England.

3 Blended Narratives Globally

In Australia one of the most popular and engaging examples of both illustrated novels and blended narratives are found within Andy Griffiths' and Terry Denton's books, specifically the "Just" series (*Just Tricking, Just Disgusting,* etc.). In these books the illustrations are found throughout the book on each page. While sometimes they assist in telling the story throughout the book, there are also numerous times in which they extend the text and sometimes provide their own story or humour. The illustrations might be found in the margins and are recurring characters.

They might also take up a more predominant part of the page and take over telling the story itself. Their newest series, *The 13 Story Treehouse*, is another prime example of this.

In their most recent book *The 39 Story Treehouse* (2013), Griffiths and Denton have the illustrations supporting what is happening in the story. There are, however, several times in which they become blended narratives with the illustrations taking on graphic novel formats with the illustrations in frames telling the story. This is especially true in the conclusion of the story in which the illustrations are in the graphic novel frames and they tell the story with no text, until the last page in which the text reappears and concludes the book. The use of illustrations in this mixed format plays a crucial role in reading these more groundbreaking novels in which the visual plays such a primary role.

Another example from Australia is the *Eric Vail* series by Michael Gerard Bauer. In this novel the author's son has created the illustrations and they are found in various places on every page throughout the book, similar to what is found in Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton's work. The illustrations assist to help provide support for the reader, as with Krosoczka's and Bass' books. However, there are also places where Bauer's son Joe has included comics in the middle margins or "gutter" of the book. In the gutter the comic format is used to both correspond with the written text and provide its own story. There are single frame comic panels and in some places there are elements of graphic novel formats in which double panel frames are used to show what is happening in the text. This unique format may not be a blended narrative in the sense that the comic is telling the story in its own right, but the use of comics is still present and goes beyond the traditional novel.

It is also important to note what appears to be an early "entry" into the genre of blended narratives from Australia as well. The Vidz series by Ian Bone and Jobi Murphy seemed to be very much ahead of their time in the blended approach to writing the story. Their second book in the series *Time Trap* (2004) helps show this. The novel is presented using a "storyboard" approach. The chapters are "scenes" in the book. However, the unique feature is that they contain storyboard illustrations throughout the book. These storyboards continue to tell the story in their own way and use the creative approach of a movie medium as well. The new approach with the illustrations is fascinating even though the illustrations do seem a bit clumsy in their presentation. One point to pull from this early example is that using this new blended approach may have been in existence previous to the current influx in children's literature.

A new example of blended narratives from the United States can be seen in the book *The Odd Squad: Bully Bait* by Michael Fry (2013). In this novel a boy is trying to find his place in middle school. The illustrations assist in telling the story throughout the book. Some illustrations take up an entire page, while some might be just a brief sketch which continues what the text is saying. A chief example of this is found on page 175, in which the illustration of Nick helps the reader understand what happens where the text stopped. When the text continues after the illustration, it starts telling the story again using the illustration's "text" of what happened. There are also other examples of a blended narrative in which a comic format is

woven into the text to help tell the story as well. On page 195 in the book, the use of the comics is seen when the main character Nick and the school bully discuss whether or not they are scared to go into the heating duct in the school. The traditional novel format sets the comic up, and then the comic provides both the visual and dialogue between the characters.

Another blended narrative from the United States is found within *Arnie the Doughnut: Bowling Alley Bandit* by Laurie Keller (2013). This novel is actually a sequel to Keller's picture book, *Arnie the Doughnut.* What Keller did so well with the picture book was provide what she calls humorous "asides" where there are a plethora of illustrations that provide humour that are not directly related to the story. This is brought to life even further in the newer title. The new novel has examples similar to Fry's book discussed above in which the novel tells the story in the traditional format and then the illustrations take over and continue to tell the story. What is occurring here however is that the blended narrative is integrating not only graphic novel sequences but also picture book elements. For readers who are comfortable with the first adventure of Arnie, this newer title will build upon their previous knowledge and skills and further them by blending the formats together. This title is an excellent example of how the visual in children's literature is playing such a crucial role.

A final example from the United States would be the *Dragonbreath* series by Ursula Vernon. Described as a combination of text and graphic novel, this series is a true example of blended narratives. In the first book in the series *Dragonbreath* (2009), Vernon begins the story with graphic novel frames and illustrations introducing the story. Then chapter one is presented in the traditional written format that one would expect to find in a novel. These formats are used interchangeably throughout the book. This series is one that would entice and engage readers and have them coming back to read more about the main character Danny Dragonbreath. It is important to point out that the use of visuals in this series is truly what make the books unique as well as engaging. It becomes more and more clear that the visuals in children's literature are not only complex, but they play a crucial role throughout a reader's development.

The examples discussed are not limited to just Australia and America however. Emily Gravett, an English author and illustrator, is another example of a children's author who is able to incorporate such a strong emphasis on the visual in her work, specifically in the picture book format. Whether it be one of her first books, *Wolves*, (2005) or another one of her books, *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* (2007), the emphasis on the visual is quite obvious. In *Wolves* it is sometimes very subtle, when the reader/viewer is looking at a few trees; upon second glance, however, they see the trees create the shape of a wolf, thus connecting to the overall theme of the book. In *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears,* the visual plays a crucial role throughout the book as the mouse "writes" his own book. Children's literature journal, *The Horn Book* (2007), discussed the visual elements in their review of the book stating, "The visual and textual layers woven by Gravett's meticulous mixed-media illustrations blur the lines between the book and mouse and his creations, and contain enough detail that multiple reads still won't reveal everything" (p. 79).

Gravett's ability to "blur the lines" again shows how complicated the visual elements in children's literature have become. As the review states, repeated readings still won't answer all the questions readers could have. Thus, it is vital that the skills of visual literacy be taught to children to avoid angst and frustration from the different formats of children's literature they are being exposed to.

Another example from the United Kingdom is *Slog's Dad* by David Almond (2010). Originally a short story by Almond, Dave McKean later constructed the illustrations which add to the story with no text to accompany them. The use of various colours, both bright and dark, set the mood for the story early on and then the text appears. The illustration sections are interspersed throughout the book eight times and add to the overall text to create a complex and challenging book that will leave readers and "viewers" deep in reflection as to what happened in the book. This is an excellent example of a blended narrative as the illustrations do tell the story with the text appearing in the traditional novel format. The complex ideas addressed in the story are addressed even further through the illustrations. The power of the story is overwhelming, and the inclusion of illustrations into this new version of the short story helps highlight what Walsh (2006) mentioned earlier in the chapter about the various codes needed to read when illustrations are included in a novel.

A final example of the role of visuals in children's literature found in the United Kingdom is in the Tom Gates series by Liz Pichon. This series focuses around Tom and his life and adventures in and out of school. This has many features of an illustrated novel and it also experiments with font sizes and writing. The text also includes illustrations in the sentences. The main character, Tom, loves to draw and doodle on his school workbooks and this is reflected throughout the series. A prime example of this is found early in the book on page five when Tom discusses what scared him and that he "wasn't expecting to see this," and then the reader turns the page and sees a full illustration of Tom's older sister. What works so well here is that the text sets up the illustration, but when the image is shown, it is able to tell the story alone, without support from the written word other than the set up. While this may not be an example of a blended narrative as the other books discussed have been, it does have a very strong focus on the visual and reinforces how visual literacy and the visuals in children's literature are included and how crucial they are in books for young children.

Children enjoy reading a variety of genres and formats. Because of this it is important that they are exposed to, and taught, how to read such engaging texts. This is especially true with books that contain strong visual components. As discussed in the previous section, "blended narratives" are becoming more prevalent in the field of children's literature. With the discussion of authors, picture books, illustrated novels, and blended narratives from three different countries, it becomes more and more clear that this is a global phenomenon. It is also one that must be taught and emphasized in classrooms around the world. As Serafini (2011) contends, "the challenges facing readers and teachers alike demand that we expand the analytical tools we bring to bear in the process of interpreting visual images and multimodal texts" (p. 101) Similar to what Walsh introduced earlier with the codes that are necessary to read images in novels, Serafini's ideas of tools are also important.

No matter what the reference point, codes, or tools, this is an educational capital that children from any culture need.

However, while this might be a preferred format for young readers, finding such texts can prove challenging. When searching library catalogues or even online booksellers, the entries for the book will simply state the number of pages (e.g. *The Odd Squad: Bully Bait* has 215 pages) and the word *ill.* to show that there are illustrations. Nowhere does it inform the interested reader the total number of illustrations, format of the illustrations, or their purpose. If the entries provided more detailed information about the book, young readers worldwide would be able to more easily find and access the books that appeal to them the most.

4 Conclusion

When focussing on the world, it is important to include a global view that shows the importance and dependency on the visual. Words, images, signs, and "text" are all around us no matter where we are. Unsworth et al. (2004) recommend, "Explicit teaching of the role of images in constructing meaning in texts needs to be integrated into classroom practice in literacy education not only to prepare children for the reading experience of tests, but also to optimise their critical negotiation with contemporary multimodal texts in broader social contexts" (p. 57) Again, they stress the important role that visual images and visual literacy play in the classroom for anyone in the world in the various social contexts faced. Piro (2002) notes the changing definition of literacy and how we, as educators, must change with this definition, "We are all in the midst of a new century of literacy education, and the definition of literacy continues to undergo a metamorphosis as society's contact with more and more symbol systems increases" (p. 133). Because this definition is changing and expanding educators, worldwide must adapt as well. It is crucial that we, as educators, capitalize on the currency children's literature has to offer in teaching visual literacy skills. It is this currency that will afford children the opportunity to read, engage, and open doors both locally and globally.

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