

## Child Readers and the Worlds of the Picture Book

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**Abstract** Children as readers of picture books and the ways they respond to, and make meaning from, such texts are the focus of this article, which reports on a small-scale study undertaken in Norway and Wales, UK. The theoretical framing of the research draws on concepts of the multimodal ensemble in picture books and of the reading event as part of a social practice. The research design was developed

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from the team's analysis of two texts, *Pappa* by Svein Nyhus (1998) and *What does Daddy Do?* by Rachel Bright (2009). Twenty-four children, who were 7 and 8 years old, took part in the study. This was built around two reading events for each book, staged as an immediate response and as a guided response. The data subsequently collected were analysed according to three overarching organisational principles, as *book world*, *real world* and *play world*. For both *Daddy* and *Pappa*, the first reading event showed the children's responses were mainly directed towards exploring the *book world*. On the second reading event, references to the *real world* predominated for *Daddy*, while for *Pappa* the *book world* was again dominant. Across both reading events and for both books, the *play world* revealed those occasions when the children expanded the meaning of the story, demonstrating an inventive ability to play with the text. Overall, the children's responses moved fluidly across the three worlds, showing them to be energetically making connections between the reading, their experience of books and their own lives.

**Keywords** Children as readers · Picture books · *Book world* · *Real world* · *Play world* · Reading events

## Introduction

Research into how child readers make meaning in response to picture books has often examined the “complex aesthetic and cognitive processes” involved (Colomer et al., 2010, p. 1). The elliptic character of modern picture books invites “elaborated gap-filling activities on behalf of the reader/viewer” according to Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2014, p. 5). The active role of the reader of multimodal narratives is also underlined by Margaret Mackey (2011, p. 1), when she claims that meaning is something readers perform. Contemporary picture books exemplify multimodal narratives as they encourage active reading, where the child enters the rich ensemble of the book.

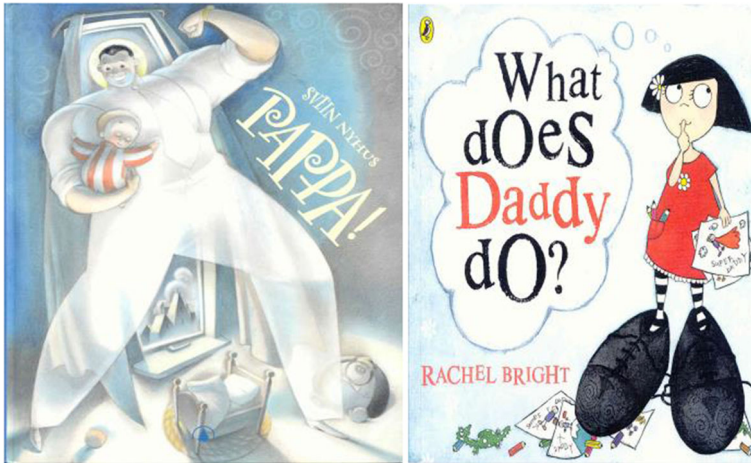
Maria Nikolajeva (2010, p. 27) suggests that “we know too little about how picturebooks are perceived by and make impact on young readers”. She discusses how the concept of the implied reader (Wolfgang Iser, 1974) can be developed for analysis of picture books. Her approach directs attention to how the text invites responses from its readers. She does not, however, discuss how actual children understand multimodal texts. This article contributes knowledge about how such children make meaning as readers of picture books.

Meaning-making may also be influenced by the readers' experience and the social dynamics of the reading event. Drawing on David Barton's idea of “literacy events” (2009, p. 35), we regard each instance of reading as a unique reading event.

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**Fig. 1** *Pappa* and *What does Daddy do* book covers

Our analysis explores the sources of meaning in these situations and discusses what this can tell us about contemporary literacy practice and, more particularly, about how children develop as readers of literature, including its verbal and visual aspects.

When children experience picture books being read aloud to them, they hear the words of the book while they study the pictures, simultaneously taking in words and images as semiotic resources of very different organization and affordances (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006). This experience can take the form of a close, socially-situated encounter between texts, adults and child readers. In order to understand this dynamic more fully, we used two contemporary picture books and staged two reading events with each book.

The books were chosen to provide a rich, multimodal interplay between words and images and were open to a variety of strategies for making meaning. They were thematically related and represented experiences that would be familiar to children. Both dealt with a father-and-child relationship. However, they exemplified different styles in approaching that topic. The first book was *Pappa* (1998) by Svein Nyhus, originally published in Norway.<sup>1</sup> This book has a dream-like atmosphere and ends ambiguously, leaving the reader with unanswered questions. The second book was *What does Daddy do?* (2009) by Rachel Bright, published in the UK. Although this book is also about a father-child relationship, the multimodal ensemble is quite different. The images have a cartoon-like quality, with strong, bright colours. While the nursery classroom setting is realistic, the central part of the action explodes metaphorically into fantasy and humour before returning the reader to reality and a clearly defined ending (Fig. 1).

In *Pappa* the readers meet the young boy, Tommy, sitting in his room at night while he is thinking of his father. In the image for each spread, the father is shown doing the most amazing things, that only this father can do: eat a whole cake; open a

<sup>1</sup> It was necessary to provide a translation for the two books: *Pappa* into English and *Daddy* into Norwegian. The author Sven Nyhus provided the translation of *Pappa* and the researchers that for *Daddy*.

lock without a key; and dive to the bottom of the sea. The verbal text shows Tommy's thoughts about his father's skills and all the things he and the father could have done together, if the father had been there. In the last spread of the book, Tommy is looking out of his window, while a big dark shadow can be seen on the floor behind him. Tommy thinks: "Maybe my daddy watches the moon right now. Then we look at the same spot, my daddy and I. That's nice." This makes an open ending: does the father come back to Tommy or not?

In *What does Daddy do?* (referred to as *Daddy* from this point on), a father and a daughter are at the centre of the story, although the reader never fully sees the father. He takes Daisy to nursery, where she meets her three friends, Dexter, Bob and Evie. They talk about their fathers' work: Dexter's father is a fireman; Bob's is a teacher; and Evie's is a doctor. Daisy suggests that her father might be an explorer because he works with mountains of paper every day; or a knight, because his boss is a dragon. The story ends when Daisy is collected from nursery by her father while her friends are waving goodbye to her. She understands finally what her father does: he is her daddy.

These two books with their two differing perspectives on fathers and their contrasting styles offered us rich opportunities for exploring multimodal texts with child readers.

### Child Readers and Picture Books

Nikolajeva (2010, p. 27) suggests there is a need to study how children develop their understanding of "the complex synergy of word and image". She takes as her point of departure Iser's (1974) concept of the implied reader, and also draws on what Perry Nodelman (2000, p. 21) has called the "implied viewer". She aims to contribute to a more systematic theory about what kinds of meaning-making modern picture books invite their readers to activate. A particular emphasis in her work is on the inclusion of images in the theoretical construction of implied picture book readers. Working with real readers and their responses to two picture books, we found Nikolajeva's theoretical perspective helpful in describing the textual aspects of a dynamic dialogue between the response-inviting structures of the text and the expectations and experiences the readers bring to the reading event.

The concept of implied readers finds its parallel in Umberto Eco's (1981) model reader. Eco distinguishes between what the reader brings to the text from previous experiences and what is provided by the text itself:

Thus it seems that a well-organized text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from the outside of the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence. (Eco, 1981, p.8)

According to Evelyn Arizpe (2014, p. 100), children apply similar strategies when reading picture books. Summing up previous research, she points to how children respond to the signs of the text, and also connect them to intertexts; they supply their own perspective, and they respond playfully, both bodily and verbally. Agnes-Margrethe Bjorvand (2010), too, has discussed the model reader of picture

books. She points out the many possibilities for positioning the reader in relation to a multimodal ensemble. The images may fill in gaps in the written text, or vice versa, but new spaces may also appear in the interplay between words and images. Multimodal theory provides concepts to analyse and describe this interplay. Additionally, Carey Jewitt and others (2014) explore the connections between multimodality, textual analysis and the socially-situated context. This approach was helpful in our analysis, as we considered readers in real-life situations, in school and playgroup settings. Reading is a social practice and each reading event is a unique experience, in which the multimodal text, the participants' background and experience and their social interplay may influence the process of making meaning.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, our primary objective in this article was to explore how child readers engaged with two picture books. This objective led to an open, explorative approach, which, in the first instance, was guided by two research questions. How do the children comment on the words and images of the two selected books and how do they connect these with their real life experiences? Since we staged two reading events with each book, we were also interested in examining the patterns of response for each event.

## Method

The research was designed as a small-scale, qualitative project, with data collected in Norway and Wales. The planning, implementation and analysis were undertaken collaboratively by four researchers, two from each country, each working with six children. The children were 7 and 8 years old. The research was designed so that there were two encounters with each book, staged in different ways: as an immediate response and as a guided response. We recorded the children's verbal and visual responses.<sup>2</sup> This approach allowed a deep examination of each reading event, finding out more about how the children engaged with the complexity of multimodal texts.

The reading events were planned to be relatively informal, with data collected outside the classroom. They did not depend on the children's ability to read, nor were they connected directly to ongoing curriculum work. The children were selected by the schools as engaged and interested readers.

In the first reading event, each researcher read the whole book and the group of children were invited to make comments during the reading. The children were then asked to select something that they found interesting or exciting from the book to draw. They were also asked to give their reasons for this choice. During the second reading event, the children were interviewed in pairs about three spreads, which had been selected by the researchers. A set of questions was devised to accompany each spread. One of these spreads was also chosen for a text-marking activity, where the children selected three items from the spread to circle. They then talked about their choices. This process was repeated for the second book. The children's responses

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<sup>2</sup> This article does not compare the reading events in terms of any cultural and social variations between Norway and Wales. These aspects will form the basis of a later analysis.

**Table 1** Overview of data collection

Reading event 1— immediate response	Reading event 2—guided response	Data collected
Children's responses to first reading of text		Audio recording of children's verbal responses to the text
Children's drawings and reasons for choice		Individual drawings and audio recording of reasons for choice
	Children work in pairs with researchers on selected spreads	Audio recordings of children's responses to questions on selected spreads
	Text-marking activity/choices for text-marking	Individual text-marking of spreads and audio recording of reasons for choice

were recorded and transcribed and their drawings and text-marked spreads were collected for later analysis. Table 1 shows a summary of the data collection procedure.

As Table 1 illustrates, the children's responses included pictorial and written forms, as well as their spoken comments. Representing children's responses to a picture book in words only would have missed the complexity of how children might engage with such multimodal texts. The main focus of this article, however, is an analysis of the children's spoken responses.

### The Worlds of the Book

Our analysis of the data has emerged through several stages of sifting and is informed by the theoretical perspectives discussed above. We engaged in a close reading of both texts and, as a research team, discussed our individual interpretations. We then undertook a step-by-step analysis examining the children's responses to identify any salient and emerging patterns. We drew on all these sources to establish a conceptual framework with three overarching organising principles. These are presented below.

- (a) The children's responses contained many references to the images and words in the picture books, theoretically anchored in what Eco (1981, p. 8) refers to as a competence built by merely textual means. Their comments demonstrated them making links with other texts and showing their understanding of how books work, based on previous experiences with literary texts. These we termed *book world* dimensions.
- (b) The children also commented on the texts, using their personal experiences and factual knowledge of the world. They often drew on their own lives to make sense of the texts or offer personal information. At other times, they interpreted the text by using their factual knowledge of the world. We termed these *real world* dimensions, theoretically related to what Eco (1981, p. 8) describes as coming "from the outside of the text".
- (c) There were other instances where the children's response could be termed inventive, where they added to the text. These responses started from the *book*

*world*, the *real world*, or the social context of the reading event and demonstrated how the child engaged creatively with the reading event. We termed these inventive elaborations *play world* dimensions. Other researchers, such as Arizpe (2014, p. 100) and Nikolajeva (2010, p. 27) have commented on how children bring their own imagination and interpretation to the book in this playful way and how this response can be a marker of literary understanding about how books work.

## Book World

The following section considers *Pappa* and *Daddy* in relation to the *book world* dimension. In the first encounter with *Pappa*, the children's comments were directed at visual and verbal elements of the book. They were enthusiastic about all the fascinating things this father could do and most of the immediate comments were about him. For example, they said:

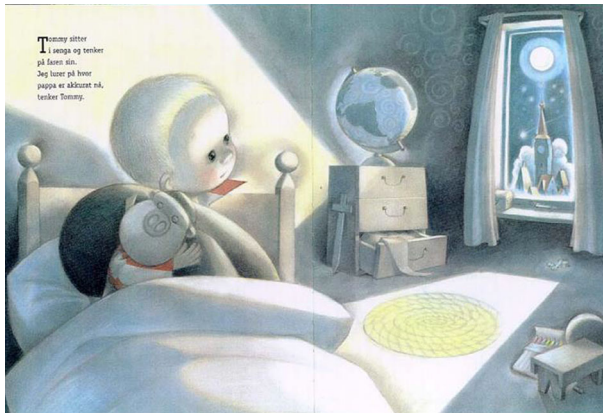
Check out the big feet;  
 He's VERY, VERY tall;  
 He's even taller than the window;  
 Look, he has a big bum;  
 The head is gone!

In examining the images the children displayed a keen interest in size, perspective and scale. They commented on Tommy's head being too big for his body and on the mix of realistic and fantastic elements in the images. They noticed the images of the father were transparent and that it was possible to see things through him. There was immediate discussion about whether he was a ghost or not. One of the children said: "I think he's a ghost 'cos the bed shows up by here." Several others came to the same conclusion: "That daddy is a ghost! I'm sure!" One reason given was: "He enters even through the window."

Some children also made inter-textual connections when they referred to other books and when they made comparisons between *Pappa* and *Daddy*. They also referred to media products, such as Superman and Batman. The children eagerly studied the details of the images, paying particular attention to the motifs that were repeated from spread to spread, such as Tommy's monkey companion, a chest, a key, an apple core and a plaster left on the floor in Tommy's room. They wanted to see what was repeated and what had changed from one spread to the next.

In the second encounter with *Pappa*, where the children were involved in a close reading of three spreads, they largely remained in the *book world*. One boy made quite an extensive reading of Tommy's character in the first spread of the book:

Finn: I think he is actually looking like a ghost  
 Researcher: You think he looks like a ghost?  
 Finn: Yes, look how light he is, compared to me.  
 Researcher: Yes, he is very light. Is there anything else you think is ghostly about him? Something that is not quite like you?



**Fig. 2** *Pappa*, Spread 1

Finn: Yes, his eyes are all black. And then he has a teddy that is rather fat, and looks a bit dangerous. And then there is a meteor flying over there.

Researcher: Yes, there is, in that picture too.

Finn: And then the moon has a face. And there is a sword there.

It was not only ghostly colours that led the boy to his interpretation, but also Tommy's black eyes, the dangerous-looking "teddy", the moon's face and the sword; thus he combined elements from the images to support his interpretation (Fig. 2).

There are many examples in the data of how the children focused on details in the images and were closely engaged in the *book world*. One reason may be that they searched the spread for clues that supported their interpretation, such as when Cecilie claimed that *Pappa* looked funny in his tiger costume. She pointed to the zip, a very small detail in the image, as a proof that this was just a costume.

Researcher: What is funny about him?

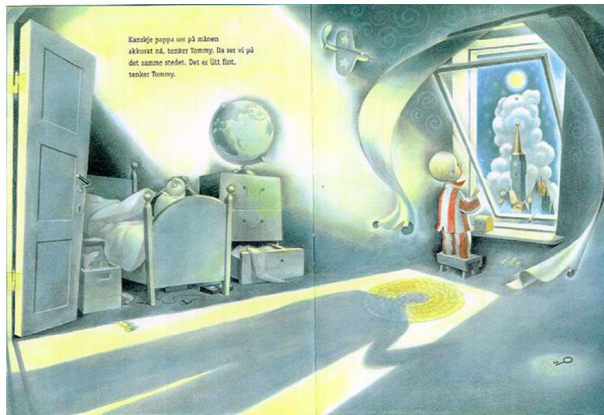
Cecilie: Because here it looks like he is just a boy who has dressed up like a big Pappa.

Researcher: You think his face looks like a boy?

Cecilie: Yes. And there is a zip [pointing to the tiger costume]. ... I think that looks like a baby face.

In this second reading event, one important reason for the children's immersion in the *book world* might be that *Pappa* invites speculation about the father. The children discussed questions like: can a father really be like Tommy's father, or is it just imagination? Is the father real or is he a ghost? Does he come home at the end or not? And where has he been? The book does not give answers to these questions. The children also considered whether the father came home at the end of the story. A shadow on the floor in the last spread was an important visual clue (Fig. 3). Many of the children saw this as proof that the father had come home. This would make a happy ending to the story. Nils said: "The shadow hasn't been there before. The daddy is





**Fig. 3** *Pappa*, Spread 12

standing right behind Tommy.” Odd added: “Tommy has been sad. But he’s happy now when the daddy comes home.” Both boys had clear ideas about where the father had been before he came home. Nils said: “In the church” (referring to the church tower outside the window in Spread 12); while Odd commented: “Just in the town, and now he has come home with a present for Tommy.”

Joseph A. Appleyard (1991, p. 63) points out that children of this age often prefer a clear, story structure with a final resolution. Such structures end in a restored world, where there is nothing more to be afraid of. Having such expectations met seemed important in the interpretations discussed by many of our *Pappa* readers. This may be related to previous reading experiences and expectations of genre they might have begun to develop. Still, some of the children expressed doubt whether the father really did come home in the end and thought of alternative conclusions. If the father is a ghost, how can he then come home? A possibility was raised by David: “Or he’s a ghost or he’s just invisible... or it could be a dream or he could be dead and he was just imagining what, how he could have fun with his dad?” This unresolved interpretation is close to the one we, as adult readers, had. We regard the book as an open text (Eco, 1981 p. 9) and particularly open to interpretation about the return of the father. Such texts enable a variety of readings and we see that child readings differ one from another; and also that children and adults might have similar readings.

Comments on the first encounter with *Daddy* were not so much occupied with the father, presumably because he is never fully seen in the pictures. The children commented more on what they found interesting in each spread and the visual connections between them. Typical objects of attention were the big clock in Daisy’s house and Daisy’s dinosaur (Spread 1), Daisy’s three friends in the kindergarten (Spreads 3 and 4) and the big sandpit (Spread 4). The children also paid special attention to depictions of drama, such as the kittens (Spread 5), or the unusual scale of the pencils relative to the children (Spread 6).

Cecilie picked up on a spy theme, which she also commented on in the *Pappa* book, when she claimed that Daisy’s father must be a spy, seeing his striped suit and

special case in one of the spreads. The children also made predictions across spreads, for example Laura summed up the overall theme of the book:

I know why it's called *What does Daddy do?* They are all going to say... Yes, they are all going to say what their dad does, and then she can say... "My daddy is best."

In the second encounter with *Daddy*, there were fewer responses related to the *book world*, as the nature of the reading event mainly provoked comments about the children's real lives. In one example, however, two children discussed the repeated motifs of the toys and noticed how these could be found in each spread.

Wayne: Yeh. Dexter has a little teddy and Evie has something too and Bob I don't think he has one but he has a little ruler which says I love [...] on it and Daisy has the little dinosaur in every picture of Daisy ... only Dexter and Daisy...

Sandra: You could play spot the dinosaur...

Wayne: Dexter and Daisy always have their toys but the other two don't.

## Real World

The following section considers *Pappa* and *Daddy* in relation to the *real world* dimension.

In *Pappa*, there were fewer responses on the first reading event to the *real world*. In the main the children focused on the *book world*, as discussed in the previous section. However, there were a few examples which showed children making sense of their first encounter with the story by drawing on their own experiences. Saul said, in relation to Spread 4:

When my dada is away we have this rule 'cos he usually comes back at teatime and we usually have vegetables and something else for tea and me and my brother usually leave our vegetables till last. He's not allowed to give us our presents until we've eaten all our vegetables.

Even though *Pappa* is coming through a window and looks transparent like a ghost, this child made a connection with his own life and experience of fathers coming home with presents after being away. In contrast to the surreal quality of the spread, this child rooted his response in the tangible business of teatime and the eating of vegetables.

In the next spread there is a large red car in Tommy's bedroom with a metal bird of prey on its bonnet and headlights on full beam in what appears to be a swirling mist, while in the text there is reference to Tommy being allowed to eat in this car. The topic of being allowed to eat in a car evoked several responses:

I'm allowed to eat in my dad's car. I'm not allowed to eat in my mum's car...

We only have one car...

I'm not allowed yet because my dad's new car ...

My grampie's got an old one.

These examples show how the children were continually refining their understanding of what they were seeing and hearing by actively making connections with their own lives.

In the second reading encounter with *Pappa*, we saw the children using their knowledge of the world around them, rather than their immediate life experience. Eco refers to this as ‘encyclopedic competence’ (Eco, 1981, p. 7) and it is typically brought to the fore by elements the children may be only partly familiar with, such as the snake in one of the spreads. Two girls talked about snakes and why they are dangerous:

Jane: They can bite, and then they can...

Cecilie: Some of them have poison.

Jane: Then they have poison in the tongue.

Cecilie: No, it is in their teeth.

Jane: No, the tongue too.

Here we see an example of how the second reading event offered these child readers the opportunity to reflect on their knowledge of the world. Encountering the whole book the previous day gave them an overview of the story, leaving the second encounter open to more in-depth reading. In addition, the focus on three selected spreads, followed up by interested questions from the adult co-reader, encouraged reflections on detail.

As discussed above, most children focused on the *book world* in the first reading event of *Daddy*. However, there are some interesting examples where children took the opportunity to bring personal experiences to this first encounter with the text. One boy, Odd, was very eager to speak about himself and his family; he wanted to appear to be better or bigger than anything mentioned in the book. For example, he was not impressed by the car Daisy’s father drove: “But *my* dad has a much bigger one! He has one car with six seats and one car with seven seats.” For this boy, the story partly functioned as a way of making himself visible and important in the group of children. Other children also spoke about their families. When the children saw Spread 1, which shows Daddy taking Daisy to nursery, one boy was eager to talk about his grandfather:

Can I tell you something about my granddad instead? My granddad was nearly killed by a water bomb. It happened in the old time. He was at the Castle Hill. Then a lot of water bombs came down there. And he didn’t notice them, so he was taken by a water bomb. And then one person shot him, and he knew that he died.

The discussion of fathers taking children to nursery seemed to inspire this boy to relate a story about his family history.

In the second reading encounter with *Daddy*, the children continued to make connections between the story and their own lives. As the setting of this story is close to children’s everyday lives, this might have encouraged them to relate it to their own experiences. Some of their comments were about their own skills and how they could do something that the other children could not. Sandra, in response to Spread 7, about Bob’s father being a teacher, said that she could speak “a bit of

French” because her mother was a teacher of French. This triggered her companion, Wayne, to outdo her: “I can also speak a bit of Japanese and a lot of Welsh and I can speak a little bit of... oh, I forgot.” Wayne also stated: “I can say every single dinosaur in alphabetic order in five minutes.”

Sometimes the children showed their general knowledge. One boy, for example, when talking about the volcanoes shown in Spread 7 (Fig. 4), said: “There is lots of gas in them. And then there are towns that can be all covered.” He corrected gas to lava and spoke about a volcano in Norway: “The whole shore is covered with lava.” Another also displayed his knowledge of volcanoes:

If a person stands on a volcano, he can turn into a stone. And if you fall into it, and an explosion comes! Then you will be shot out like a water bomb. And it also looks like a mountain with a hole in it, and it's brown, and there is a lot of lava inside.

Such topics seemed particularly apt to provide opportunities for the children to show understanding of the story and their knowledge of the real world.

### Play world

The following section considers readings of *Pappa* and *Daddy* in relation to a third dimension of the children's responses, which we term *play world*, or playing with the text. These were instances of responses that could not be defined as references to either the *book world* or *real world*. Such occurrences took place across both reading events and with both books when the children elaborated their response to the texts into their own imaginary or invented worlds. This dimension could take its departure point from an experience in the real world, or the world of the book, or from the immediate social interaction of the reading event.

These imaginative responses were often triggered by points of fascination, particularly with the images, such as the snake, the flames, the stars and the moon in *Pappa*. In *Daddy*, the spread on volcanoes (Fig. 4) evoked many forms of



**Fig. 4** *What does Daddy do?* Spread 7

imaginative response. In one example, Alex invented an intertextual connection with a nursery rhyme:

Humpaty-Dumpaty,  
He fell off the wall,  
He fell off a leaf,  
And landed in the lava.  
He looks like a ladybird.  
Hello ladybird.

In doing this, he focused on one of the images in the text, which looked like a ladybird, falling from one corner of the page. This led to the playful creation quoted here, which he rendered in a singsong, nursery-rhyme voice.

The same spread evoked a further and different *play world* response. It shows ten books about volcanoes. One of these, *Volcanoes for Girls*, was interpreted by one girl as being a story about volcanoes that *are* girls, and her companion enthusiastically agreed. She made up a story about a girl and a boy volcano:

Cecilie: Then they can be sweethearts, 'cos they splash lava at each other! And they become like stiffened rainbows.

Another girl was also fascinated by the book title, *Volcanoes for Girls*:

Anna: Um there could be like pink um pink like wind coming out of it because it's kind of like a pink book.

One boy responded to these feminine dreams by entering into a girl's role:

Or they could be, like, little pretty dinosaurs. Little *pretty dinosaurs* [speaking in high voice as if a girl], like so they see the volcanoes there's *the pretty dinosaurs*.

Playing around with ideas of volcanoes carrying feminine values could seem inappropriate when reading a factual text, but as a response to fiction it reveals an understanding of how stories work and how they can be re-formed.

In some instances the children filled in gaps or indeterminacies in the picture-book text and elaborated on specific points of fascination. Gina created a whole story about what happened to the father:

Gina: He's looking out of the window and that looks like a rocket and he might think that he's in the rocket.

Researcher: In the rocket going to space?

Gina: Yes... he like jumps out of the rocket with a parachute on into the bedroom... And like does funny things because he doesn't usually get to see his little boy.

In other cases the children expanded the text by entering into role-play. In *Daddy*, two of the boys tried out roles as teacher, nurse and fireman.

Lars: Then we can play nurses, and we can say: "Next one to the nurses!"

Bjørn: It's just cool to drive [the fire engine]. If there is a fire somewhere, here I come. If you catch fire, I'll be there. Shhhhh! Now you are completely black [to the researcher].

These responses can be interpreted as a mode of reading which bears witness to the children's understanding of the text's "fictionality", a concept presented by Maria Nikolajeva as an expansion of Barthes' semic code involved in interpreting picture books. It entails the understanding of a literary text as "a constructed set of *selected* events and characters" (2010, p. 34). Here our data show the children's playfulness, where they take the text and add new dimensions to the story.

### Overview of the Reading Events

During the first reading event, the children mainly concentrated on entering the *book world*, investigating and interrogating the text, both its visual and verbal features. They searched for clues in each spread and enjoyed the process of making meaning. They were curious and engaged readers, eager to find out what each book had to offer and impatient to enter the world of the picture book. Every turn of the page brought new surprises, and the children revealed their engagement with exclamations like: "Look!", "Check it out!" and "Wow!" The enthusiastic comments on phenomena the children found surprising, unexpected and funny bore witness to their personal engagement in this process. This pattern of focus on the *book world* during the first reading event revealed the moment of the children's reception, where their focus was on the immediate encounter with the text.

The second reading event was more structured in nature; it focused on three specific spreads for each story. This gave the children a further opportunity to engage with the reading process, in a situation where they already knew what happened next in the story. Although this reading event might appear to be more static and pictorially-focused than the previous, more dynamic reading of the story, this was not the case. The children continued to be fully engaged with the narrative, whilst focusing on the spreads. The nature of their comments confirmed this, demonstrating their active response.

In the main, during the second reading event references to the *real world* predominated for *Daddy*, while, for *Pappa*, the pattern was reversed and most comments were about the *book world*.

In both reading events, the children made connections, or intertextual references, between the two books. For instance, Cecilie claimed that Dexter, a boy in the nursery in *Daddy*, looked like Tommy's father in *Pappa* might have done as a child:

Cecilie: You know the boy in the *Pappa* book, the first one. Then I said it looked like a baby face.

Researcher: Yes.

Cecilie: I think maybe he [pointing at Dexter] is like Pappa when he was small.

The children also made intertextual references to texts or characters from popular culture. The father in *Pappa* was compared to superhero characters like Spiderman

and Superman; and, in *Daddy*, the children commented that Bob looked like Mr. Bean and that Daisy's big shoes reminded them of Pippi Longstocking. The spy as fictional character appears in the reading of both books: where Tommy is wearing "spy" sunglasses in *Pappa*, and, in *Daddy*, where the father's striped suit and special suitcase appear.

## Conclusion

The objective of this research was to understand better how children respond to and interpret picture books in terms of the *book world*, *real world* and *play world*. In the *book world*, the children related closely to the images and words of the picture books. This challenged their literary and textual competence and engaged their curiosity about what the books had to offer. They paid particular attention to the multimodal ensemble. We found examples of the children commenting on verbal features, such as tone and rhythm, and paying attention to visual and verbal puns. For example, in one of the spreads in *Daddy*, which showed Daisy and her friends climbing a mountain of papers, Sandra enjoyed the joke:

He [Daddy] is not an Explorer. He just has mountains of paperwork to do...  
because they are exploring on paper.

The images in these picture books are also eye-catching and original, attracting immediate attention. We have already seen that the children were occupied with exciting and surprising elements in the pictures, often concentrating on tiny details. Examples of this from *Pappa* are: the tattoo on the father's arm, the plaster, the apple core, and the key; and examples from *Daddy* include: Daisy's dinosaur, the number plate on Daddy's car, and the flag on top of the sand castle. Agnes-Margrethe Bjorvand (2012, p. 151) states that young children often concentrate on small elements in a picture before they take in the whole image. In the books we worked with, these details formed repeated motifs, creating visual cohesion in a way that specifically reflected this pattern of child perception. In addition, the dialogue between the children seemed to reinforce their focus on certain details. Our data contributes evidence of how children enter the book world and relish opportunities to seize on meaning from apparently insignificant details.

In the *real world* dimension, the children used their personal experiences to help them understand the text. They also drew on their store of general knowledge to make meaning. Their responses were shaped by the immediate social context, too, where our questions, as well as the other children's responses, came into play. For example, in *Pappa*, where the text often challenged their understanding, the children used their knowledge of the real world to help them interpret the text's possible meanings as well, in some cases, as testing out their knowledge of information and facts. In *Daddy*, the nursery setting illustrated familiar routines. This, together with our questions, encouraged the children to relate the text to their everyday experiences of school, friends and family.

The third dimension, the *play world*, revealed those occasions when the children expanded the meaning of the story. In doing this, they showed an inventive ability to

engage with the text and make it their own. As noted above in the *play world* section, this relates to Nikolajeva's concept of "fictionality", which she suggests is one of the semiotic codes involved in interpreting picture books and understanding how the fictional text combines and reshapes real-life experiences. Nikolajeva (2010, p. 34) believes that "Understanding fictionality is the key element of literary competence." There are many examples in our data that demonstrate how child readers can interpret picture books and appreciate fictionality. However, the children also surprised and delighted us by creating their own elaborations, in making the texts their own. This could be considered a further aspect of fictionality, demonstrated when child readers enter the play world of the text.

Of significance in each of the three worlds was the nature of the reading events. These took place outside the classroom context, with the children sitting informally in small groups and pairs. This gave the children space to think and the opportunity to interact with their peers and us as enabling adults. Active engagement with the text was our main priority. When they were in these socially situated reading events, our data show a rich and cumulative dialogue being built both between the children and with ourselves.

In their quest for interpreting and understanding the stories, the children listened to and built on each others' ideas. This enabled them to support each other and understand the texts better. Thus, where there are opportunities and space for children to enjoy, share and be at ease with picture books, they often surprise with fresh and creative insights. An analogy to this is where Iser (1989, p. 329) and later Lawrence Sipe (2002, p. 479) suggest that the text can provide a playground for the reader. We believe our study demonstrates that approaches which permit children to explore texts in multilayered ways during socially situated reading events offer scope and opportunity for them to enter new and exciting reading worlds.

It is important to note that these patterns of children's responses, related to the three dimensions of *book world*, *real world* and *play world* as sources for meaning-making, are not separate in real-life readings. The children moved between them in a fluid way, shifting quickly between perspectives and often combining them. This effect derived not only from the three different worlds of the text, but also from the nature of the interactions and context of the reading. A contribution of our approach is that we examined the children's responses according to an organisational principle of the three worlds as separate dimensions. This allowed greater analytical insight into each one. We suggest this might be a useful strategy for other researchers examining children's responses to literature.

The children's imaginations created a close interplay between textual, experiential and play meaning. This interplay may be seen as a defining aspect of relating to fictional works of literature. The social context of the reading events was also an important part of the children's interpretation. The following example is a small vignette to remind us that real-life conversations often take unexpected turns:

Laura: While we've been talking she's been fiddling about with pens.  
Researcher: Sometimes—I don't know about you, but when you fiddle it helps you think...  
Gina: Yeh...



Researcher: As long as you don't overdo it...

Daniel: In both of the stories they're thinking about their dad – the little baby's thinking where's my dad now and the girl's thinking what does my daddy do.

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