



Readers matter: seven transactions with the visual, linguistic and material elements in a picture book

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Abstract

In this paper, we draw upon Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading to frame six readings of a picture book. The picture book, *There’s a Ghost in This House* by Oliver Jeffers, was selected for a children’s literature reading group which brought together literacy researchers and teacher educators to share their encounters with the text. The question “How did you read the book?” provoked us to examine how we had transacted with the text to generate interpretations. This work was presented at the “Stories that Matter” seminar alongside the other papers appearing in this special edition of the Australian Journal of Language and Literacy. In this paper, we highlight our own roles as readers encountering Jeffer’s book and reflect on our own responses as a way of explaining the multiple readings we present. We emphasise the place of intertextuality and intratextuality in reader response and argue that Rosenblatt’s transactional theory continues to be an important way of understanding what it means to read, including the reading of multimodal texts which combine linguistic, visual and material modes.

Keywords Reading · Children’s literature · Reader response theory · Multimodality · Intertextuality

1 Introduction

“The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader”

(Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 20).

A theory of ‘reading as transaction’ proposes that when individuals interpret texts, they bring their own knowledge, assumptions and repertoires to make meaning. The reader interacts with the text, and this is an interpretive event that is situated culturally and also in relation to the possibilities and constraints of the text. Drawing on the work of Louise Rosenblatt, this way of understanding what it means ‘to read’ has had a powerful influence on the way we teach and research reading (Damico et al., 2009). It is timely, given current debates about what reading is and how it should be taught, to revisit Rosenblatt’s theory

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(Pike, 2003), and further, to consider it in relation to a more expanded view of reading as interaction between reader and multimodal text. In the interaction between reader and text, both the reader and the text play a role (Wilson, 2021). The reader actively creates the literary work ‘under the guidance of the text’ (Rosenblatt, 1938/1994). They bring their past experience as well as their present preoccupations to the transaction, while the text guides the reader with signs, symbols, sounds — the semiotic elements of the text (Mills, 2015). It is the ‘special meaning...the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader (that) largely determine what the work communicates to him (sic)’ (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 30–31). The way that the reader approaches the text may come from their past experiences, but also their present needs and preoccupations, or even their mood at the time. The reader is placed at the centre of the meaning-making process; this does not deny the power of the semiotic elements of the text, but acknowledges the role of the reader in ‘moulding the experience’ (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.7; Serafini, 2022).

This paper brings together seven readings of the book *There’s a Ghost in this House* by Oliver Jeffers (2021), generated by members of a children’s literature reading group at the University of South Australia. The group of HDR students and academics met with visiting (name of fellowship) Fellow, (name of fellow), who set us the provocation: *How did you read the book?* Each of the following responses, generated by an individual within the group, illustrate the multiple ways that we read in individual and social contexts. This work has significance in the current climate of debate and contestation around reading and how reading should be taught in schools (Barnes, 2022). It draws on the work of Louise Rosenblatt to highlight the active role of the reader in the act of reading and exemplifies the notion of multiple readings through the telling of our interactions with the text. In addition, it goes beyond Rosenblatt’s focus on written text to explore the reading of the visual images, spatial features and material elements of the text.

2 Reading as ‘transaction’ and ‘evocation’

Rosenblatt’s theory of transactional reading highlights the creative role of the reader while also recognising the guiding role of the text. It is in the interactions of the reader and the text that the literary work is made. This view of the reading process proposes that ‘the relationship between reader and text is not linear’ (1978, p 16). Unpacking what this looks like in practice challenges the notion that readers interpret the text, or that the text produces a response in the reader. Rather, reading is an ‘event’ that occurs in a particular time and place, and this provides a somewhat dynamic and momentary image of ‘reading’. Recent scholarship has further developed Rosenblatt’s theory to explore the way that multiple meanings are made as readers and texts work on each other in a particular time and place (Damico et al., 2009). More recently, Dressman considered the multiple purposes and stances taken by readers in the making of meanings with texts which go beyond the ‘single continuum’ (Dressman, 2019 p. 482). These perspectives of reader response disrupt notions of singularity and allow for the experience of the reader to be counted as a key part of what it means ‘to read’.

As indicated in the titles of her seminal works, *The Reader*, *The Text*, *The Poem* and *The Poem as Event*, Rosenblatt frames her theory around the reading of ‘the poem’. Her comments focus on the written word and on poetry in particular.

As the reader’s attention plays over the sequence of words, he seeks, then, more or less consciously, for cues that will enable him to organize the elements of thought

and feeling – the images, feelings, ideas, aroused by the text – into some kind of structure or meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 125).

However, the underlying concept of ‘transaction’ can also be applied to reading visual and multimodal texts (Arizpe et al., 2023). The semiotic elements in a book such as *There’s a Ghost in this House* include words, but also visual images and material features that can cue thoughts and feelings into a coherent pattern of meaning. ‘Reading’ a multimodal text such as a picture book might be more accurately described as ‘viewing’ and ‘touching’ as readers bring their experience and knowledge to interpret the visual and material elements of the text. This way of considering reading takes into account the different modes with which readers interact, as theorised extensively by the New London Group (1996/2000). There is also a growing interest in the way that readers make meaning with the materiality of the text (Bremer, 2020; Alaca, 2018) and through embodied encounters with texts (Mills, 2015) which may be considered as transactional.

Rosenblatt proposes that as readers respond to the text, they actively draw on their past experiences. They select from the connections they make to make sense with the parts within and across the whole text. Rosenblatt explains that this is a process of ‘selecting referents that occur to him (sic) in response to the verbal symbols’ (p. 125) and ‘finding some context within which these referents can be related’. Responding to visual, spatial and material elements in a picture book can also be seen as an intertextual process where readers ‘select referents’ and ‘find some context’ as they generate meaning. The meaning-making process is described by Rosenblatt as a ‘kind of shuffling back and forth as one or another synthesizing element – a context, a persona, a level of meaning – suggests itself to him (sic)’ (1978, p. 10). This intertextual and *intratextual* work of shuttling back and forth to reinterpret earlier parts of the story ‘in the light of later parts’ is, as we will illustrate in the sections below, a key part of the evocation of *There’s a Ghost in This House*.

3 Evocations of *There’s a Ghost in This House*

The text chosen for the reading group to read and discuss was *There’s a Ghost in This House* written and illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. As they interact with this text, readers enter into a multi-roomed house seemingly inhabited by a single girl who is looking for the ghost that she has heard lives in the house. Many of the pages in this book are made of a semi-transparent material through which we can see the underlying page. As the reader turns the semi-transparent page, playful ghosts appear in and around the furniture of the house, interacting with objects — drinking tea from the tea cups, swinging on the chandelier — but not with the girl. She is searching each room, looking for the ghost who she has heard lives in the house, but these mischievous apparitions always seem to be out of her sight. Indeed, it seems that there are ghosts in this house, but where they are only emerges as the reader turns the semi-transparent pages.

The reading group met on two different occasions 2 weeks apart. At the first meeting, individuals spoke in turn about how they had read the book. Following the meeting, individuals were asked to write about how they read the book and to share it at the second meeting. At the next meeting, individuals read out what they had written, and this was followed by a discussion. Some of the group shared their responses at the ‘Stories that Matter’ seminar and then were invited to submit their response to be included in this article. In the responses that follow, the iterative and collaborative nature of the reading experience is evident, alongside the individual interpretations and perspectives. The individually authored responses are followed by an analysis of the interpretations as transaction between reader and text.

3.1 Reading as Noticing (Therese)

With eager anticipation, we look to (Visiting Fellow); waiting for him to start. ‘So how did you read this book?’ he asks. I glanced around the room and noticed similar reactions to me. How did we read a book? The quizzical expressions on mine and my colleagues’ faces must have spoken loudly to (Visiting Fellow), because he repeated his verbal question, but this time flicked through the book and offered further elaboration. ‘Did you read it from beginning to end? Did you look at the pictures first? Did you read the paratexts?’ As if a light had been switched on, we got what he was asking? Among the eight of us, (Visiting Fellow) included, we shared our behaviours when attending to the book. As varied as the people in the room were the reading behaviours. As a result of (Visiting Fellow) question, what was apparent was the approach of viewing before reading the book in its entirety.

The purpose of viewing to make sense of information in a multimodal text was a strategy all of us in the conversation employed. We noticed images; the changing of colour in those images; the gaze of the protagonist; the positioning of the ghosts; the type of ghosts evident; the era of the house (including artefacts in the rooms); the narrative of the endpapers, etc. It was evident that we all noticed many aspects of the book, and through the joint discussion, many other aspects revealed themselves to us through noticing. While the noticing of the visual was more overt, the written text afforded and enhanced meaning-making. Interestingly, it was through noticing that gaps emerged between what was noticed and the group’s prior knowledge of not only books but ghosts, haunted houses, types of houses that warrant hauntings, the era of the house being haunted and other tiny signs/signals covertly hidden among the pages requiring closer and slower exploration. It was through these gaps that generated further questions for pondering.

Fortunately, as proficient readers, the group’s collective experiences regarding working with this particular type of text afforded many avenues of delightful noticing. Attending to a uniquely designed text such as *There’s a Ghost in this House* highlights the significance of slow noticing. Giving time for noticing to comprehend the visual and design elements of this unique book afforded us an ability to reorganise the information into useful and relevant mental modes. For example, when noticing the end papers (front and back), there is a mini narrative happening before the written text has been attended to. In this book, the front endpapers have simplistically drawn ghosts (i.e. ghosts that look like a bed sheet has been thrown over a child’s body), leaning slightly (as if gliding towards something) and looking towards the right edge of the endpaper. However, when you turn to the back endpaper, you notice a faint image of the protagonist drawn among the gliding ghosts; yet, if you flip over the book flap, you notice a ghost, who is clearly frightened, as their mouth is opened, their arms are up in the air, and they have dropped a cup of tea (causing the saucer to break).

3.2 Reading the objects (Jill)

On page 8, there is an image of the hallway of a house. The hallway has chequered floor and a large ornate staircase. The caption beneath the image tells me that ‘the central hall plan, which provided ample circulation, probably reached the peak of achievement in the superb hallways of this remarkable house built in 1760.’ The way that the room is described in the caption makes me think that this house is located in a place and time when to be human was to be able to build (wealth as well as buildings) — to be a ‘king of creation’ (Hardt &

Negri, 2001, p 215). Noticing the objects in the lounge room I saw what I interpret as signifiers of the capitalist and colonialist power over nature and over humanity — the trading ship, the teapot and cup, the gas lamps, the framed painting the knight in armour. Flipping over to the page with the fireplace, I note that the caption reads: this fireplace achieves dignity with a total absence of carving ornamentation... This excellence in design of the basket grate is particularly noteworthy. Even though this room could be of another time, this room and accompanying caption speak to me of human domination over materials that comes through science, order and the rational mind. I suppose that these things are placed here in order to enable the ghosts to disrupt the order.

How did I read this book? I paid attention to the objects. By objects I mean the materials and things that are represented visually and/or in words in this book; the physical objects that are present in the house. I started to categorise what was represented in the text as ‘object’ or ‘human’. This became tricky because the ghosts did not fit into either category — neither object or ghost — and this made me ask what the narrator was. Human... or ghost?

I considered how the book de-centred the human — or more precisely a certain human subject — which is the rational, powerful and thought-centred individual produced by scientific rationalism (and not a ghost by the way). I wondered if I could argue that *There’s a Ghost in This House* could be described as a post humanist text. Maybe when Jeffers designed this text he had no intention of representing a humanist background on which to overlay playful ghosts. But it works for me. Perhaps the ghosts are there to disrupt the rationalist paradigm? Ghosts could be one of the best examples of anti-rationalist, anti-reason that he could invoke. Ghosts are impossible to know scientifically — they are not objects that are physically present in the world — and ghosts are impossible to control or ‘know’ except through imagination and feeling and intuition (although you might be able to dispute that). They are not ‘real’ at all — are they? What about the narrator in this book who seems after all to be a real ghost? This is where again a theory of post-humanism might be invoked — if the human is not at the centre, then what spaces are created for other entities to play?

My reading was tempered by my current musings about post-humanist philosophy but it also came from my imagination. I say imagination because I noticed myself imagining these meanings, and the more I looked across the text, the more I found evidence that supported my view.

3.3 Reading time (Anne-Marie)

At first glance, *There’s a ghost in the house* is a substantial picture book; its unusual size and weight and the fact that it sat on the book shop shelf in a sealed pack were invitations to open it, beyond the expectations that my prior experience with Oliver Jeffers as an author illustrator held.

On my first read, I tried to put aside the book as ‘work’ and read it with a child’s perspective. This led me to tracking the progress of the intriguingly green girl through the halls of the old gothic house. I noticed the juxtaposition of the real and the surreal with the photographs and the illustrations. I turned the transparent pages with anticipation and soon discovered the obvious, ghost overlays as well as the effect that the overlay’s material had on the page. From here, the first reading raced through with me hunting for ghosts and predicting where they might appear. In the hunt, and my focus on the visual and material modes of this text, on this first reading, I missed important detail which on subsequent

readings held greater meaning. The written text bookend notions of time with the words from the unusually green girl, ‘I haven’t had visitors for quite a while’ at the beginning of the book, and the ‘I’ve lived here a long time and I’ve never seen a ghost’ at the end of the book. This text gets me as a reader wondering, for such a young girl, what is the meaning of ‘quite a while’ and ‘a long time’.

With the concept of time in my mind, I turn back to the illustrations, looking for the signs of time. The photographs are black and white, depicting a home as annotated on the mysterious page 55, built in 1760. Close inspection of the architectural details in the photo/illustrations reveals the passing of time, from the gas lamps in the sitting room, through traces of electricity in the hallways, to the relatively modern fittings and furnishings in the bathroom. Paintings, mostly portraits, on the walls represent styles of art and fashion from different times. Jeffers spends a lot of illustrative time on doorways, passages and staircases in between spaces in the home. The features of these spaces show different styles of architectural treatments, some ornate and some austere. Some of the greyed passage-way illustrations hint at movement between eras using the frames of doorways to show glimpses of rooms decorated according to past trends. A trip to the attic brings the reader to an assortment of discarded furniture from days gone by. Cumulatively, these visual features suggest that the story is set at a time past 1760; however, the specific time is not discernible adding to the mystery that one would expect in a ghost story. There is no sign of the digital.

Beyond time, working back to the phrase ‘I’ve lived here a long time ...’ I examined the photo/illustrations for signs of life. The white-sheeted ghost characters bring life and movement to the pages; in contrast, the green-skinned girl appears captured in frozen moments rather than moving. I perceived that although the white-sheeted ghosts are clearly materially ‘overlaid’ on the photo/illustrations, the green-skinned girl also appears as if overlaid into a static scene. There are few signs of life in the things within the rooms; the flowers are dead, the clocks frozen at different times, the bed has not been slept in, neither the table, nor the fire is set. The dining table with swinging chandelier and the floating cup and saucer in the final illustration represent exceptions to this; in both of these instances, it is the white-sheeted ghosts who have been the impetus for the movement.

The last illustration in the book sees our green-skinned protagonist with striped dress, positioned directly under a portrait of a young woman with green striped dress, signalling to us that this ghost hunter is herself a ghost, rendering the white-sheeted ghosts as comic.

I am not an expert in ghosts; however, I am left with puzzlement in the age of the young woman in the portrait and the age of the green-skinned ghost protagonist. I had believed that ghosts were caught to haunt the world from the time of their demise — but maybe I am mistaken.

3.4 Feeling the book (Sarah)

One thing I found interesting from our discussion was the ‘felt’ experiences many of us had when we first read it. In terms of touch, we discussed the tactile elements of the book. I remember feeling frustrated when I first picked up my public library copy of the book as it was covered with plastic that is stuck down and I was not able to play around with the dust jacket. Thankfully, I could have a quick go with Jenni’s copy, and I noticed how much the front and back covers change when we add or remove this layer. The dust jacket also has finger holes that you can touch and play with, and that zoom your attention into the figures of the ghost and the little girl.

Similarly, the opaque pages inside *feel* different to the other pages and to other picture books we have touched, and we lingered on them because of this. Just as the book cover becomes different as we lift and overlay the dust jacket, the tactile opaque pages also impact what we *see* on the pages inside and how — I quite like the feel and sound of pressing the opaque pages down and then lifting my hand to spot the ghost!

And so, I noticed how our senses are engaged as we read this book. There is touch and the sound of the pages; somebody mentioned that they could *smell* the rooms, some of them feel cold and empty and might send a shiver down your spine, and on some pages, there are other *sounds*: the creak of a door, the rattle of chains, the tinkling of a swinging chandelier. Our previous experiences — of being in old houses, of watching horror movies, of hearing ghost stories — help us realise these *sensory perceptions*. Through this use of the senses, we become more bodily immersed in the text, and we might *feel* (in an *affective* way) scared, sad, sympathetic, excited. And, as a result, we might enact our understanding of the text, or our affective response, in an embodied way, like our colleague's daughter who realised there was a ghost in the house and hurriedly closed the book and shoved it away, shivering.

And so, the picture book becomes highly multimodal in that it is words and pictures, but also touch and sound and smell. As we read, we perceived all these things, and I wonder: do we have the metalanguage to discuss with children how texts work on this sensory and affective level? Do we always acknowledge and value the semiotic resources at play here?

3.5 Reading with children (Julie)

I told the grandchildren before dinner I had a book for them to read. Close to the end of our time together, I said what about the book? Elsa (pseudonym) took the book and she and Kim (pseudonym) went up the steps to the couch and sat down, side by side, and before I was aware, organised that the 9-year-old Elsa would read one page, the 8-year-old Kim would read the next, and they took turns to read pages through the book. There was no time for an introduction by me! I hurriedly sat down on one side of them, quite the outsider, and observed their reading, trying not to hover. With typical 9-year-old literary expression, off they went. 'Hello, ... as they turned each page. When they first saw the white shapes, they knew they were ghosts because they read the title — when they first saw the shapes, there was a delighted oh! A few giggles emanated. And then they started to look for them as the pages were turned and read, one after the other. They were engrossed, and all noise from other family members ceased. Eloise said, 'Look at her face—it's like Frankenstein'. They carefully looked through the opaque pages then turned each over and looked for white shapes. Near the end of the book, I drew my finger down the page where the woman in the painting on the wall and the girl underneath have corresponding stripey clothing. Aah... they quietly considered. It's her?

As they were hugging me goodbye, I was thinking, I haven't asked them what I'd usually ask children:

What do they know about ghosts? Have you heard stories about ghosts? What are ghosts?

Is it a true story?

What do you notice about colour in this book? What makes you think she has a Frankenstein face? Why would the author paint her like that?

What do you think of the old house?

Who is speaking in this book — who is telling the story?

What do you notice here — (the chandelier is swung to one side).

3.6 Reading as a teacher (Kerry)

Using this book with a group of children could provoke interesting discussions and range widely from the literal to the critical. The book provides many layers. The interesting production, the different stories that can be followed, the architectural comments, the word play and the provocative end papers are a few of the features that draw a reader's attention.

Some of the questions that this book provokes for me are as follows:

- What did you notice about the book?
- Whose story is this?
- How many stories do you notice?
- Is the girl in the stripy dress real? What makes you think that?
- If you were to retell the story from one of the points of view, which would you choose? What would you include in your retelling?
- Twice in this reading the girl speaks to the reader from a hallway. Make a comparison, is the same hallway on each page? What makes you reach that conclusion?
- I am particularly fascinated by the use of sepia and the dark tones in the house, the white of the ghosts and the bright colour of the girl, what part do you think these play in the story?

The book could provide a rich base for discussion with a group of children. From the interesting tactile presentation and little finger holes to the strange layering of characters and the historical comparisons that could be made, this is a book to be enjoyed and savoured over many sittings and in many settings.

3.7 Reading ghosts (Jenni)

The notion of the ghosts in houses fascinates me. I remember the empty old stone house on the other side of the street in the small rural town I grew up in. The children in the town were certain the old house had a ghost, waiting to leap out and tell us off when we snuck inside to explore and play. There is a ghost in an old building on the university campus, where I work, or so some people say. It must be true as several years ago, a group of media students made a documentary that concluded there could be a ghost, a little girl in a colonial white dress standing on the landing, leaving scraps of paper on the stairs, the child of the family who built the house many decades before. As Derrida tells us, we live with ghosts, we inherit ghosts, the stories we tell begin with apparitions of those that have gone before, and we engage with ghosts as we make sense of the world (Derrida, 1994).

My first reading of this book focussed on the humour of the ghosts. Being there, peeking out as the little girl moves through the house, engaging the reader as they are discovered on the translucent interleaves of the book. As a past junior primary teacher, I also thought about the fragility of the book, what would happen to the beauty of the translucent leaves as little hands turned the pages with excitement and anticipation — looking to where the ghosts could be hiding next; the haunting of material practices of the classroom, the 'yes but' moments that stifle and limit possibilities.

The images in the book are on two page spreads, photos of the interior of an old house. It is not the kind of old house we had where I grew up. It is a two-storey house reminding

me of the settings of Jane Austen stories, colonial architecture in Australia. The images show the change in the décor and objects of the house over time. I wondered who the ghosts were? Had they lived in this house or maybe they had been visitors trapped in time? As I turned through the pages, I wondered, were they the same ghosts? Were some of them new ghost as the story proceeds over time? What were their stories? Who is the child exploring the house? Why does the image of the child become more ghost-like through the book?

The ghost is often represented in picture books, movies and cartoons as an image — a non-linguistic representation. Jeffers uses the traditional representation of a ghost — a white simple form that has no discernible identity and inferred as invisible. Ghosts are not necessarily immediately referent to what they are the ghost ‘of’. They may be a menacing presence or maybe a moment of joy that sits in our memories and imaginations. The little girl who explores the house is initially visible, and we accompany her on what initially appears to be an exploration of the house to search for the ghosts. However, we know they are there, and the little girl begins to disappear as the book proceeds, establishing a juxtaposition between what is seen and that which is ‘present’ and unseen.

Jeffers reminds us to read carefully, to look, to wonder. All stories are haunted by the experiences, knowledge and values of the author, by other stories, by the social, cultural and political contexts across time and place. As educators, it matters how we share stories with children and young people, the stories we choose to share and the ways we ask them to read.

4 How we read the book

In the first reading, Therese describes what she and others in the group noticed within the text and relates how they made sense of what they noticed with reference to prior experience and to the visual and material elements. This response indicates the significance of the multimodal textual elements in the transactional process of reader and text. The reader illustrates how she generated meaning from the various parts of the text by putting signs and signals together. She describes this as making sense across ‘gaps’ — a process that Iser proposed was basic to reader response (Iser, 1978), and which Pike (2003) develops by considering how the individual readers enter (and shape) gaps differently in accordance with their individual reading stance. In this response, the reader’s knowledge of ghosts and types of houses can be seen as an intertextual ‘filling of gaps’, while the *intratextual* connections she makes within the text — such as the changing colours and details on the endpapers — also fill gaps. *Noticing* in this case relates to ‘making sense’ as an intertextual and *intratextual* process where reader and text work on each other.

In the second reading, Jill muses on the way that she paid attention to the objects in the text and made intertextual and *intratextual* connections that provided evidence for her to test her meaning making. She draws on her prior knowledge to interpret the objects that are represented in the visual images in the text in relation to time, place and cultural/historical significance. The material objects that appear in the book are ascribed with cultural significance by the reader, as artefacts which carry histories (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). She can be seen to be relating to the objects (as represented in photographic images and line drawings) as social and cultural referents with which she generates meaning (Robertson, 2020). The reader connects these objects to other elements such as characters (the girl who is looking for the ghost) and notions of time (ambivalence about how long she has been in the house). These *intratextual*

connections appear to be filtered through the readers' own pre-occupations and current interests as she shapes her own reading of the book.

In Anne-Marie's reading, she settles on the concept of 'time' as a way of making sense of the book, considering the textual evidence in some detail. In this response, the author describes her interactions with the visual and material elements of the text. She considers how she has read the visual images by paying attention to the design elements — colour, juxtaposition, illustrative detail, framing. She makes further *intratextual* links between the way that the linguistic text and the visual images are composed into the overall book design. She finds evidence of time-related signs and symbols to create a temporal sense across the book with which she builds her interpretation.

Sarah departs to some extent from the previous readings as she focuses on the sensory and embodied interactions with the texts. The reader explains how the tactile elements of the book impacted her reading and comments on the sensory perceptions that might be evoked by the reader through their prior felt experiences and haptic engagement with the book. This response challenges us to consider the sensoriality of literacy practice and how the sensory and embodied nature of meaning making can be included in a theory of reading as transaction (Mills, 2015). Sarah's response shows how sense was made through her interactions with the material elements of the book which involved her sense of touch — she comments on the feel of the different types of paper and how she 'lingered' over the turning of the page. She comments on the affective responses that were evoked as she engaged with the words and pictures. In this response, it appears that meaning making is not only cognitive and also emotional and affective, especially as it is a multimodal text (Kress, 2003).

Julie narrates the experience of her grandchildren reading the book after dinner and contrasts this personal evocation with the teacherly type questions she would usually ask children before, during and after reading. This account shows intertextual connections with the visual images in the book ('It's like Frankenstein'), *intratextual* transactions also with the visual images (Aah...they quietly considered. It's her?) and affective responses with the material and designed elements (a delighted 'oh!'). In the second part of Julie's response, she shows how personal responses can be evoked through interaction with the teacher as meaning is re-made through personal and shared responses to text. Similarly, Kerry provides a reading of the book from the perspective of a teacher, illustrating how our responses are shaped by the stances we adopt and group memberships we inhabit (Damico, et al., 2009).

The final 'reading' presented here is by Jenni, who was provoked to contemplate the notion of ghosts from experiential, representational and philosophical perspectives. This response reveals the intertextual work that the author applies to make sense of the ghost(s) and to interpret the house. Her intertextual work draws iteratively on her experiences of ghosts and old houses gained through stories and other representations. This response shows how the book is being continually evoked by the reader beyond a 'single unattainable ideal conception of it' (Rosenblatt, 1964, p. 123) in iterations of 'a doing, a making, a combustion fed by both a particular personality and a particular text' (p. 124). This reader has a relationship with the notion of ghosts in houses which she brings to her meaning making with the text. She plays with her ideas of ghosts and haunting as part of her meaning making with the materiality of the translucent pages and visual semiotics of the images created by Jeffers.

5 Readers matter

In this paper, we have explicated ‘reading’ as interacting with the text — as Rosenblatt theorises — in which individual and collective perspectives, knowledge and pre-occupations are activated to make meaning and in which ‘the text’ — the designed combination of semiotic elements — guides that meaning making. The seven readings of *There’s a Ghost in This House* are presented here to illustrate the multiple ways in which the book can be read. Each time, the reader creates the book as they bring their interests, experiences and stances to inform their noticing of words, images and material elements. Each time, the reader creates a structure with which to make sense with the elements that they notice and connect. These readings, which were generated by the question of ‘how did you read the book’ and then shared and written, represent *There’s a Ghost in This House* as an event in time — as we read the book again, we noticed more and connected differently, recreating meanings.

What we have illustrated here is that reading ‘the book’ is both an individual and collective process. We found that the ‘punctuated semiosis’ (Kress, 2010) of our current interpretations were momentary meaningful responses that were changed by our experiences in dialogue with other readers. Our thinking moved forward as our words hung in the air for consideration. We responded to others’ responses and reformulated our own ideas as we extended our thinking of the picture book at hand. Our evocations (Rosenblatt, 1978) of the book were shared, and those things we noticed and attended to were the same or different from the things other readers attended to. This is where multiple interpretations were possible. Although the book in our hands was the same, our evocations (attentions and noticings) were different, and we drew from different experiential and linguistic reservoirs of experience during our interpretive moves. The text on the page did not change, but as readers, we evoked different texts, and it was this evoked text that we interpreted. As we shared our noticings and interpretations with other readers, we extended and expanded our own performances, our own processes of interpretation. We found that our interpretations were in constant flux. These are the theoretical or literary gaps that Iser (1978) refers to in his literary theories — the missing elements that are not part of the author’s creation or, in other words, the intertextual and intervisual references we bring to the text and use to understand the text. The text is not complete, nor can any text be complete, for if it were, our role as readers would be more passive, more absent.

There comes a point when the interpretive and ideological moves we offer take away from the discussion of the book, and the book becomes a Rorschach inkblot for the past associations of our experiences, troubles and areas of interest. The book, like Elvis, has left the building. This may happen sooner with children. Our discussion can add to and enhance our experiences of reading the book as we negotiate shared meanings and test our interpretations against the evidence of the text. There may be times when we need to pull back and consider our readings and interpretations with new eyes and purposes. Unfortunately, the meanings we construct, the things we attend to are not innocent, objective nor universal. They are performances of reading, temporary meanings we offer to the discussion that help us connect, to interpret and to question what we think and mean.

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Declarations

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