

# Unpacking picture books

## *Space for complexity?*

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**As an adult, I love reading picture books. As an early childhood teacher, I love reading picture books with children. As a teacher educator, I am dismayed when I see teachers skimming through picture books. It appears that books 'at mat time' are often used to fill up time rather than to engage with children and with the picture books.**

This article is about three of my favourite picture books which I've used extensively with children and now as a postgraduate student, I have the chance to look at them closely and to come up with some theories about why they intrigue me. The authors of these books have deliberately made the books complex and provocative. These picture books can be described as 'postmodern' because they disrupt 'normal' storytelling by introducing multiple perspectives and challenging the reader to make meaning rather than telling the reader what to think or to understand (see Anstey, 2002).

Through my studies, I also realised that there is a large body of research building up about how digital technologies are changing how we humans and especially young children are engaging with print and especially images, including how children engage with picture books. One particular framework that I found helpful is called 'Radical Change Theory' (RCT) and was developed by Eliza Dresang (2008). Originally Dresang looked at high school students' use of libraries, especially how students were negotiating and physically reading textbooks. Aspects of students' digital experiences were recognised and using the framework of RCT, Dresang (2008) identified three broad areas:

**Interactivity** - Digital technologies are responsive technologies. The computer user, the Internet inquirer is facilitated in interacting with, and making meaning across, a myriad of contexts. Interactivity is evident in the reading of picture books when the reader (adult or child) is encouraged to take control, to get involved, to interact, to make meaning. In the context of picture books, this is most likely to happen when text and illustration invite questions, and when whoever is controlling the book (usually the adult/teacher) makes time for interactivity between the text, the illustration and the reader/s. An example is where the text and images offer opportunities for multiple non-sequential and complex readings, or where differing styles or layouts demand the reader's active participation as they explore multiple possibilities for each image, word, page and book (Pantaleo, 2004).

**Connectivity** refers to the non-sequential lines of inquiry that

are exemplified by the hyperlink in digital technologies and which can exist as links that are "hypertext-like" (Dresang, 2008, p. 295) in books. These are possible interpretations in the text that lead to connections to other worlds, books, and/or communities, thus also leading readers to make personal connections to their own knowledge. This increases engagement with images and supports readers to develop a personal, individual understanding and connection with them (Bull & Anstey, 2002; Dresang & Koh, 2009; Pantaleo, 2004).

Within RCT, *Access* refers to the way digital technologies have broken down information barriers, enabling access to a diversity of opinions and insights. When considered in the context of early childhood, and of early childhood settings, *Access* tends to be mediated by adults, requiring thoughtful decision making. With so much information on the Internet, what are children encouraged (allowed?) to access? What are they denied? Similar questions can be asked of children's picture books: What is made easily accessible? What is purposefully left out?

This article provides an introduction to three of my favourite postmodern picture books, as well as how teachers in ec settings can expand beyond their 'normal' ways of reading books with children.

The next three sections demonstrate how the postmodern pictures can stimulate conversations and how the RCT framework can guide teachers to engage more in-depth, especially with the illustrations.

### Picture Book #1:

*The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!* by A. Wolf

By John Scieszka (1989)

Illustrations by Lane Smith

This picture book tells the traditional fairy tale of the *Three Little Pigs* from the wolf's point of view. Starting with the front cover in a newspaper published as the 'Daily Wolf', there is a front page article written by A. Wolf. On closer inspection, it becomes evident that there is a pig's hoof holding the newspaper. Look at the way the hoof is scrunching up the corner, ripping the





**Figure 1**

page. What can be interpreted here? What connections with other stories could this suggest? Could it demonstrate annoyance with the story or disagreement between the pigs and the wolf? Could this pig be a family member of those in the original story? That hoof provokes many questions, including for whom the book (or newspaper article) is written. It also invites readers to question their own role in reading this text, whether they are reading from their own or an unknown pig's perspective. The reader's experience with the traditional story of the *Three Little Pigs* will influence possible connections and interactions as the story progresses (Dresang, 2008).

For teachers, there is a reminder that book covers can be worthwhile exploring in detail along with the children. What skills and strategies can teachers employ to encourage children to make connections between these images and their prior knowledge?

As regards this particular cover, it shows a newspaper front page. What do children know about newspapers? For adults, there may be an assumption that something presented in a newspaper has the appearance being truthful. In addition, the wolf himself is presented (in caricature) as wearing glasses and a suit. Again – does that make the wolf look more honest? Do we believe this story because of the associations we have with newspapers and credible people? The presentation of the text implies a secondary possible perspective because the structure and images of a newspaper article focused on a court hearing again imply an underlying attitude that it represents the truth. This is evident through the interactivity between images

and text, leading to possible connections to concepts like Honesty – and preconceptions such as whether the 'media' are usually accurate and trustworthy.

These are complex questions worthy of adult discussion. Older children in early childhood settings can engage with such ideas, for example, as when something is 'true' and when it isn't.

Figure 1 invites the reader to make connections between the images and the words, to challenge their own ideas of what is moral and ethical. In particular, what it means to be 'big and bad'. This image attempts to influence the reader to feel sorry for the wolf; however, a huge American cheeseburger warrants closer inspection in order to reveal bunny ears and a mouse-tail, and the wolf is looking very 'sheepish' peering up over his glasses at the burger. Why is eating the meat in a cheeseburger acceptable? but a rabbit and mouse is not?

The wolf then starts to push the blame away from himself and on to the reader:

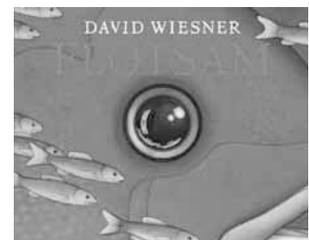
"It's not my fault wolves eat cute little animals ... If cheeseburgers were cute, folks would probably think you were Big and Bad, too".

In many traditional children's tales, wolves are stereotyped as 'bad' (Evans, 2015). This is questioned here and the reader, (who is assumed to eat cheeseburgers that contain meat) is challenged to consider themselves as also 'bad'.

## Picture book #2

*Flotsam* by David Wiesner (2006)

This book is wordless, so in *Flotsam* the illustrations do the speaking. The book consists of a series of images depicting a young boy exploring a beach. He finds an underwater camera, has the pictures developed and through them explores the wonders of



**Figure 2**

undersea worlds.

The meaning of the story is however not made explicit in the illustrations. The storyline is inherently interactive, inviting conversation. Multiple readings and close scrutiny of the puzzling illustrations offer multiple layers of meaning and a range of possible storylines. Multiple storylines are especially evident in the sixth photo which depicts three starfish dancing. But... are they starfish? We see they have trees on their backs, whales swimming beneath their feet and birds circling above. The starfish in the background looks more like an island, with its spreading foundations beneath the sea and trees and mountains above. The starfish in the foreground is balancing on three legs with one out to the side.

The more one analyses this image, the more possibilities and questions arise. Thus there are many opportunities for readers to create their own connections, use their own knowledge and develop their own layers of making meaning.

Sipe and Panteleo (2008) use Dresang's concept of connectivity to refer to the "sense of community or construction of social worlds that emerge from changing perspectives" (p.41). Consider the photo of the turtles swimming with entire towns or villages on their backs or the traditional home setting of the octopus with the parents reading a story to the baby octopi that raises questions about whether they live in family groups. Can we question some of the aspects of our own living spaces from this image? Does this make connections with the reader's experience, knowledge and opportunities? These connections with our world, showing a fish as a pet invite us to question the difference between families under the sea and in our own community. Is there an entire story line in this scene?

The layout of *Flotsam* is a series of different sized images that invite inferences based on their size and detail. The full double page of the boy finding the camera has an image of the beach over two pages. Over the page, there are eight bordered images and one un-bordered full-page one of the camera (see Figure 2). Readers can interpret the borders in many ways, such as depicting action or determining how much time should be allocated to them. Not only does the size of the images create multiple possibilities, but so does their order. There are two options for a focus here: the close up of the camera, or the image of the boy. Alternatively, the page could be read left to right, looking at the boy first and then the close-up of the camera.

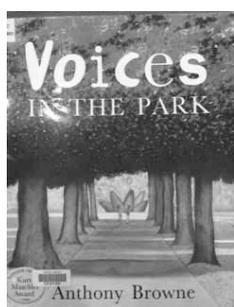
On a number of occasions, I have introduced *Flotsam* to toddlers and found that with time and effort, the book is a great resource to encourage storytelling even with children who have limited vocabulary. Very young children in Aotearoa New Zealand generally have had experience with sand and water, and can connect to the images. Sometimes I heard toddlers share a few words, but more often the images themselves are so intriguing that the children sit enraptured. I know that something important is happening, and sometimes I find out what it is, but often the experience is the child's own and I'm left wondering.

### Picture book #3

*Voices in the Park*

By Anthony Browne (1998)

*Voices in the Park* is about two children playing in park. The front cover shows them facing each other under a row of



autumn trees and there are two dogs playing in the background. As we move through the text, there are many different ideas, concepts and readings about relationships, happiness, unhappiness and 'fun'.

Interestingly the words are often at odds with the images. This immediately creates a tension? What is the 'real' story? Or are there multiple stories here? And several layers of meaning including the possibility of a powerful psychological storyline.

Using RCT concepts, I have found new possibilities and opportunities to interpret, to make connections, and to create storylines. For instance, in one illustration we see Victoria chasing Albert, implying they are having a great time. In contrast, the body language of Charles and his mother suggests social discomfort. They are facing away from each other, arms folded, faces closed with drooping mouths. There is clearly a tension between these two characters, and although tension between family members is unusual in children's books, in *Voices in the Park*, there are opportunities to make connections to readers' own experiences at home.

Intriguingly, this book offers not only interactivity between these images and texts, but to other stories too. *Voices in the park* invites readers to make connections between images within images to create their own plot. RCT describes these elements as hypertext-like because (as happens with online hypertext links) they are immediate connections to other ideas, stories, concepts and visuals (Dresang & Koh, 2009). Every image has visuals that offer opportunities for children to make connections with their wider world and knowledge (Panteleo, 2004). A great example is in the image where Smudge's father is letting their dog, Albert, off his lead. In the background is a clear image of the classical storybook character, Mary Poppins, flying through the sky under her umbrella. Another example is the image of Charles leaving the park with his mother. Leaves represent their footsteps, and in the background one of trees is in flames. There are no explanation given, so the reader is left to puzzle over the significance of the illustrations.

### Implications

In 10 years of working with the youngest children in early childhood settings, I found that books work best when I was taking time to fully engage both with the books themselves, but also with the children and their responses.

I have also found that children's experiences increasingly include engagement with digital technologies, and it is important for early childhood teachers to recognise this. As such, RCT is likely to become more relevant as digital-savvy children become increasingly present in ece settings; the child who swipes at the page, expecting it to transform to whatever comes next, is no longer a novelty. So digital technology is changing how children engage with print - and with story reading and storytelling.

In the three postmodern books considered in this paper, RCT's concept of Interactivity is strongly evident in all three books as each invites the reader/s to connect into the story through the visuals and to collaborate in meaning making.

RCT's concept of Connectivity is especially evident in the nonlinear storylines of *Flotsam*, and to a lesser extent in *Voices in*

*the Park*. It is also evident in *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, by A. Wolf when A. Wolf directly and challenges the reader to consider what they eat, and the nature of who is 'good' and who is 'bad'.

However, RCT's concept of 'Access' is not immediately evident in these three picture books when considered in the abstract; in other words, when the books are removed from authentic settings where choices are made about what very young children can or cannot access. However, consideration of RCT's concept of Access brings into focus how adults tend to mediate what is available to young children. Who decides (and on what basis) the stories, images and books that young children can engage with? In an early childhood setting, these decisions indicate a political and negotiated space in which there are decisions made about 'what is suitable for children?'. Similarly in the process of reading picture books, teachers make decisions about when to move quickly, what to skip, and what to take time over. There are also political and pragmatic decisions about how long a teacher can spend with a child, sitting and interacting with a picture.

As you can I see, I find the topic stimulating! And I want to challenge early childhood teachers (and their centre managers) to slow down the busy-ness, so that both the author's intent and the child's response can become part of the reading experience.

Reading with children should not be seen as a luxury, but rather a vital time for engaging children's minds and encouraging them to focus, to interpret, to connect and to share.

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# Sa'afiafiga mo Iolesina Tagoilelagi

(7 December 1945 - 4 March 2017)

Irene Paleai-Foroti and Fa'atamali'i Kesi

*Aue! Ua maliu le toa  
A'o ana auupega o lenei ua o  
tatou oaoa  
Le tamaoaiga o le tofa sa ia  
sasaa ma faasoa  
O lenei ua malu ai Aoga  
Amata i Aotearoa.*



*Talofa e, Iolesina  
E lē tautogafau lou auau ia ta measina  
Sa e sailimalo e pei o le eleele e lē faamalieina  
Le gagana, aganuu ma le faakeriano ia  
faatumauina.*

*E manatua pea ou uiga malie ma le tausaaafia  
Sa fai ma toomaga o le musuā ma le lē fiafia  
O lau tuualalo sa aveva ma faiva e patipatia  
Lou naunautaiga ina ia folau i manū pea lau  
SAASIA.*

*Talofa e, SAASIA  
Ua tagi le fatu ma loimata le utufia.  
Sa'afi mo le nofoa o Tavita ua lē nofoia,  
E faigata o le finagalo o le Silisili Ese e le siligia.*

*SAASIA e, o lena ou faivamālō  
O la tatou taupati ia manomanō  
O le Atua lava lo tatou ala i mālō  
O fatu na, na saili ai e Iolesina Tagoilelagi mālō.*

In March 2017, the Sosaiete o Aoga Amata Samoa I Aotearoa (SAASIA) community lost one of its most prominent, influential, honoured and admired founders.

The present article is not only meant as an obituary but as a contribution in the spirit of Iolesina and of her work – in praise of the person, but even more with the focus on what she has strongly advocate to achieve for the field of Aoga Amata in New Zealand (Samoan early childhood education in New Zealand) to which so much of her life and energy was devoted.

She was a woman of high character and great promise, as, apart from her commendable personal qualities, she was remarkably talented, intelligent and reliable.

Her wisdom and huge, essential contribution to the development of Aoga Amata in New Zealand left a significant mark in Aoga Amata history in Aotearoa New Zealand.