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 ***Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the
Postmodernesque by Cherie Allan (review)***

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The Lion and the Unicorn

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Nathalie op de Beeck (bio)

Picturebook, a compound word indicating a fusion of written and pictorial content, denotes the combination of literature and visual narrative. Picture-books themselves, shared with young audiences, provide both inscribed and potentially performative material. Not only are they written and illustrated, designed and packaged; they are meant to be read aloud, repeatedly, to emergent readers, and hearken back to oral tradition. Although they often involve narrative, a great many are nonlinear or constitute experimental literature, provided critics recognize the complexity of picturebook play. In *Playing with Picturebooks*, Queensland University of Technology Lecturer Cherie Allan considers how picturebooks engage with postmodernism and postmodernity, mirror shifts in “adult postmodern fiction” (141), and constitute genres of postmodern or, in her coinage, *postmodernesque* literature.

Through close readings of picturebooks in English, Allan argues that picturebooks are *postmodernesque*, a term she coins to evoke the carnivalesque and Bakhtin’s dialogic theories (24). Picturebooks often deal in carnivalesque material and invert power structures among children and adults, humans and nonhumans. The suffix *-esque*, a functional tool rather than a descriptor, doesn’t mean much on its own, however. Instead, *postmodernesque* suggests the picturebook’s resemblance to a postmodern text, without being fully postmodern itself. Indeed, Allan calls postmodernesque texts “not so much postmodern picturebooks as picturebooks *about* postmodernity” (141, emphasis in original). Do picturebooks, because they are associated with children’s enculturation and literacy, defy the stone-cold postmodern label? Are picturebooks too close to domesticity, family, and elementary learning, to aspire to a place in masculinist postmodernity? Allan briefly acknowledges the ways feminist critics “have been excluded from the critical canon because they do not *explicitly* address the questions of postmodernism nor write within the theoretical parameters set by male

theorists” (13–14, emphasis in original), and this observation—unexplored further—implies why Allan might feel the need to cast about for a term like *postmodernesque* when dealing with pictorial literature.

Prior studies, most recently Lawrence Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo’s *Post-modern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality* (2008), have taken up picturebooks’ place in post modern literary and cultural criticism. Similar conversations around periodization and definition have gone on around picturebooks and modernism/modernity, with picturebooks more or less accepted as modern in print content and in the conditions of their material fabrication. What, then, might be at stake in interpreting picturebooks as post modern, especially since picturebooks interpellate and inform the **[End Page 220]** very youngest subjects? When does picturebook post modernity begin? (Allan frequently cites Maurice Sendak’s 1963 *Where the Wild Things Are*, for example, as presenting the unstable post modern chronotope [36], even though others read it as a midcentury psychoanalytic riff or as an imperial tale of homeland and antipodes.) Why does it matter that we refer to, or hesitate to refer to, certain contemporary picturebooks as post modern? “A particular paradox of children’s literature is that while the field is often marginalised as an area of creative endeavor and academic study, it is also often regarded as a ‘sacred’ site,” Allan writes. “[C]hildren’s texts have a tradition of being both compliant and resistant” (171–72). Allan’s conclusion gestures at these concerns of children’s literature, yet too much of her study is given over to recapitulating post modern literary theory.

In an overlong introduction, Allan reviews formal and jargon-heavy definitions of post modernism—concentrating on critical speculation published between 1988 and 2001—and largely leaves out the historical span of post-modernity. “My position is that post modernism rejects totalisations and resists being labelled yet another metanarrative,” she asserts (14–15), and leaves it at that. Picturebook and comics theories of the same period get short shrift; for all the ink spent here on post modern rules and regulations, little ink is spilled as regards the term

picturebook. Although Allan comments that “trends [e.g., critical awareness of globalization and consumerism] are reflected in a range of postmodern picturebooks published in the first decade of the twenty-first century” (23), she casts the picturebook as a reactive rather than generative mode. While she gestures to picturebooks’ paratextual...

Allan, Cherie. *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

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