

The eye and the I: Identification and first-person narratives in picture books.

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The Eye and the I: Identification and First-Person Narratives in Picture Books

Perry Nodelman

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

The Eye and the I: Identification and First-Person Narratives in Picture Books

Perry Nodelman (bio)

There is an essential doubleness about stories told in books containing sequences both of words and of pictures. They are unlike movies or television narratives, which provide us with simultaneous access to both visual and verbal information, for we cannot simultaneously read the words and observe the pictures in a picture book and must alternate our attention between them. Even when children hear a picture-book text read to them by someone else as they look at the pictures, they experience the words and the pictures as two separate and distinct streams of information. Moreover, as listening children look at the book, they have no choice but to see not just the pictures but also the visual signs of the words they are hearing. Even those children who can't read must separate these two sources of visual information—discard the visual signs for the words in order to make proper sense of the pictures.

Furthermore, the basic differences in the nature of the two media mean that pictures inevitably convey a different kind of information from words, and do it in different ways. These differences stem from the fact that pictures, which occupy space rather than time, lack an easy means of expressing the temporal relationships of cause and effect, dominance and subordination, and possibility and actuality that the grammar of language so readily expresses. Our knowledge of grammar allows us to understand immediately how the words in a sentence relate to each other, to words in previous sentences, and to the real objects and ideas they represent; a picture can't tell us directly how the objects in it relate to each other, to objects in previous pictures, or to the real objects or ideas they represent.

Pictures communicate this sort of information by other, less specific means—through conventions of the meanings of particular visual objects and of the implications of their spatial relationships to each other, through references to a repertoire of conventional **[End Page 1]** assumptions about the meanings of shapes, colors, and styles, and, most significantly, through verbal information—through titles, captions, and verbal descriptions that focus our attention on specific details of pictures in specific ways (see my *Words about Pictures*). Words cannot

easily communicate the detail and depth of information about the overall appearance of physical objects that pictures so readily convey; even the most complete verbal description of a face or a setting is far more focused on the implications of specific details than the most simple caricature, which readily conveys the sense of a visual whole.

Because words and pictures communicate different kinds of relationships in different ways, the doubleness of picture books is not simply the repetition of the same information in a different form. The pictures inevitably convey a different story from the words. As a result, any given picture book contains at least three stories: the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures, and the one that results from the combination of the first two. This last story tends to emerge from ironies created by differences between the first two. In a discussion of the different ways in which different media communicate, Susanne Langer says, "There are no happy marriages in art—only successful rape" (86). Picture books represent this sort of rape.

The doubleness of picture books is nowhere more apparent than in books containing texts with first-person narrators. In most such stories in picture books, the first-person narrators tell of events they themselves are centrally involved in; these are examples of the kind of narrative text that Gérard Genette calls "autodiegetic" (245). In verbal narratives of this sort the distinctness of the speaker's perceptions of what happens to himself or herself is always a matter of interest, a focus of a reader's attention; but a picture, even one in a narrative picture book that contains an autodiegetic verbal narrative, cannot so directly and so obviously focus a viewer's attention on the distinctness of its narrator's perceptions of the same events.

This does not mean that pictures cannot be...

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