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## **Picture Books As Literature**

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

## **Picture Books As Literature**

*Sonia Landes (bio)*

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One role of pictures in a picture book is to enhance the meaning of a story by illustrating the words. But good picture book artists go well beyond that by inventing and developing additional story material.

In this regard, a study of picture books should begin with Randolph Caldecott, the illustrator for whom the medal was wisely named. Aside from his robust style and freedom of line, Caldecott's greatest contribution to illustration lay in his ability to enlarge the dimensions of the text and enhance its meaning. He did this in two ways: one, by inventing characters; two, by additions to the plot.

Let us take the well-known nonsense rhyme, "Hey Diddle Diddle." The words are a sequence of *non sequiturs*. They tell us about a cat and a fiddle, about a cow jumping over the moon, about a dog that laughs, and a dish running off with a spoon. Caldecott manages to extract meaning from these words by joining the *non sequiturs* together. Giving the fiddle to the cat starts a merry round of strange happenings, the last and most interesting of which is a love story. Caldecott first hints at the romance by having the dish and the spoon sit out a dance; then they elope. "The dish ran away with the spoon" may be the last words of the song, but not of the story. An additional page, with no words at all, shows the irate parents, the knife and fork, dragging their errant daughter, the spoon, away from her love, who lies shattered upon the floor.

"Sing a Song of Sixpence" is a mix of nonsense and plot, in spots almost unintelligible. Once again Caldecott invents meaning. He changes the "of" of the title to "for," making "Sing a Song for Sixpence," and begins to put the puzzle pieces together. A little rich girl, ever so kindly, gives a poor man sixpence for his song. He runs to buy a pocket full of rye, which he scatters around a trap to catch the blackbirds to bake in a pie. As the ragged family, sitting eagerly around the table, cuts open the pie, the birds begin to sing. (As early as 1549, an Italian cookbook speaks of a pie of live birds. The birds are placed in a ten-inch-high, very thick pastry, which is then covered with a lattice crust so the birds can breathe. The pie is then rushed to the table.) "Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king." Dainty meaning delicious? Dainty meaning worthy? Matter for etymologists.

And who are the king and queen? They are the children Caldecott wrote for. He fills their world with their fairy tale characters. The proper

decor for this queen's parlor is Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, and Little Bo-Peep. In the king's room are heroes for boys: Jack, the Giant Killer (the Victorian two-headed variety of giant) and Robinson Crusoe. There is something for the grown-ups, too. The maid has a handsome and affectionate soldier ready to console her—after the loss and return of her nose.

Other additions to the rhymes: A cat in "The Queen of Hearts" tattles on the knave of hearts who stole those tarts. What's more, this all-knowing cat points, with a paw, in the direction of the thief. The daddy "gone a hunting," has a bad day and buys the rabbit skin at a store. Later, a bunch of rabbits stare in utter amazement at the little girl, wrapped in kin skins.

That was a hundred years ago. Today's illustrators are still following in Caldecott's footsteps, inventing characters and stories, while substantially increasing the art and devices of the picture book.

In *Charlie Needs a Cloak*, the text is actually a "how to" book, with instructions from a narrator who pretends to be as blind as Charlie is himself. But the reader isn't. The pictures reveal two dramatic and parallel stories. One: the sheep eats Charlie's cloak, and Charlie shears the same sheep's wool to *make* his cloak. Two: the mouse, who is...

## Picture Books As Literature

By Seth Lerer

One role of pictures in a picture book is to enrich the meaning of a story by illustrating the words. But good picture book artists go well beyond that by inserting and developing additional, story material.

In this regard, a study of picture books should begin with Randolph Caldecott, the illustrator for whom the medal was wisely named. Aside from his robust style and freedom of line, Caldecott's greatest contribution to illustration lay in his ability to expand the dimensions of the text and enhance its meaning. He did this in two ways: one, by inserting characters; two, by adding to the plot.

Let us take the well-known nonsense rhyme, "Hey Diddle Diddle." The words are a sequence of six actions: They ran, he sat, about a dog and a fiddle, about a cow jumping over the moon, about a dish that bounced, and a spoon that ran away with a bone. Caldecott manages to extract meaning from these words by joining the six separate images. Giving the fiddle to the cat starts a merry round of strange happenings, the last and most intriguing of which is a love story. Caldecott first hunts at the entrance by having the dish and the spoon sit out a dance; then theyelope. "The dish ran away with the spoon" may be the last words of the song, but not of the story. An additional year, with no words at all, shows the true parents, the knife and fork, dragging their crusty shoulders, the spoon away from his love, who lies shattered upon the floor.

"Sing a Song of Stewpot" is a sort of nonsense and plot, its spots almost unaccountable. Once again Caldecott invents meaning. He changes the "of" of the title to "for," making "Sing a Song for Stewpot," and begins to put the puzzle pieces together. A little red girl, ever so kindly, gives a poor man stewpot for his song. He runs to her a pucker in his eye, which he notices and sets a trap to catch the blackbirds to make a stew. As the roggod family, coming eagerly around the table, turn upon the pie, the birds begin to sing. (As early as 1549, an Italian cookbook speaks of a pie of live birds. The birds are placed in a stew-pot, very thick, warty, with it then covered with a lattice crust so the birds can breathe. The pie is then raised to the table. "Wasn't that a deary dish to eat, secure the kens?" Dainty men be delishous? Dainty women worthy! Matter for etymologists.)

And who are the king and queen? They are the children Caldecott wrote for. He fills their world with the more tale characters. The proper dress for this queen's garden is "the Red Riding Hood, Hansel, and Gretel, and Little Bo-Peep. In the king's room are heroes for boys: Jack, the Giant Killer (the Victorian man-of-the-day variety of giant) and Robin Hood. There is something for the grown-ups, too. The man has a headache and attentiveness so clear nearly to console her after the sad return of her nose.

Other additions to the rhyme: A cat in "The Queen of Hearts" writes on the knife of hearts who can't throw darts. Who's more, that all-knowing cat points, with a paw, in the direction of the thief. The rabbit "gives a hearing," and a red dog and bear the rabbit skin at a stove. Later, a nation of rabbits stare in utter amazement at the little girl, wrapped in kin skins.

That was a hundred years ago. Today's illustrators are still following in Caldecott's footsteps, inventing characters and stories, while substantially increasing the art and devices of the picture book.

In *Charlie Needs a Cloak*, the text is actually a "nose off" book, with connections from a narrator who pretends to be as blind as Charlie is himself. But the reader isn't. The pictures reveal two disparate and parallel stories. One: the sheep sees Charlie's cloak, and Charlie shows the same sheep's wool to make his

cloak. Two: the mouse, who is never cited in the text, brazenly eats everything Charlie needs and uses. The mouse eats steals the scene. Once the children spot the mouse their eyes go immediately to the bottom of the page (this is literally a sub-plot) to find what awful evildoer object it is carrying off now.

Or take *The Story of Ferdinand* on one level, this is the story of a peaceful bull, but there is a supporting cast revealed in Robert Lawson's pictures. An ominous warbler, a wulture, whom Munro Leaf never introduces to the reader, sits patiently in wait for Ferdinand. Ferdinand is, of course, as unaware of this wulture as Charlie is of his diminishing cloak. (The mouse hero sails children's stories very well, for unconscious symbolizes innocence and purity.) The robin in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is a different kind of "other." It is Beatrix Potter's signature bird—a solitary warbler, a teller of tales. Its role, like him, is that of the sympathetic, character-over presence, but outside the story and never referred to.

One last modern example: Rosemary Wells, following Caldecott's dish and spoon, takes the story of Benjamin and Tolip past the end of the world. After physical attacks by Tolip on Benjamin, Benjamin finally wins out and in the text has the last word, "There!" But the story doesn't end there. Turn the page to see another fight between them... a watermelon-seed-spitting fight, where the watermelon seeds are shells and the shells (seeds) fall safely between them. (Pig? No words needed.)

One area where today's illustrators have clearly gone far beyond Caldecott is the cover: Caldecott's covers are announcements of the contents, a montage of pieces of the

*"Caldecott's covers are announcements of the contents, a montage of pieces of the stories to come. Today's illustrators often want the cover to do more—to develop character, to set a mood, to anticipate a theme."*

stories to come. Today's illustrators often want the cover to do more—to develop character, to set a mood, to anticipate a theme.

Dr. DeSoto, frozen between the tire and the door of Strep's Dr. DeSoto, poses for a picture, surrounded by a 1. He explains a few procedures and a dozen of great importance. He so is the drill to clear in him, so terrifying to his patients, and leave comfortably on the case so discussed to them. His professional stance tells us he is ready for all comers. The flame is burning, the water drops, the girl is in his hand, the chair is waiting. All the equipment, including those vital arms, is bright red. The reader is ready for a parade of patients, but the surprise visitor, a white fox, is posed for what lies between the covers.

The cover of *When the Wind Blows* Art is a true wrapping around the book, which is cleverly symbolically captured in a dream. It is that the fine double spread of the book, anticipating the dramatic triple double spread of the chapters. The stage is set. The trees stand clear and tall in the light of the moon; the boat is decked in the swirling water. Although the wind blows hard, the fox's white face waits for the story to begin—for Max's meditation to dream him awake, for Max to journey in this boat to this land where the wild tales are.

In contrast, the double spread cover of *Arno's Journey* is almost a medieval anticipation of aerial photography, showing from above the cross-axis of his path, with its farms and fields, the people and their artifacts—the universe of his little world. Arno's is a journey we see and recognize. Max's journey is the night journey of his mind.



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