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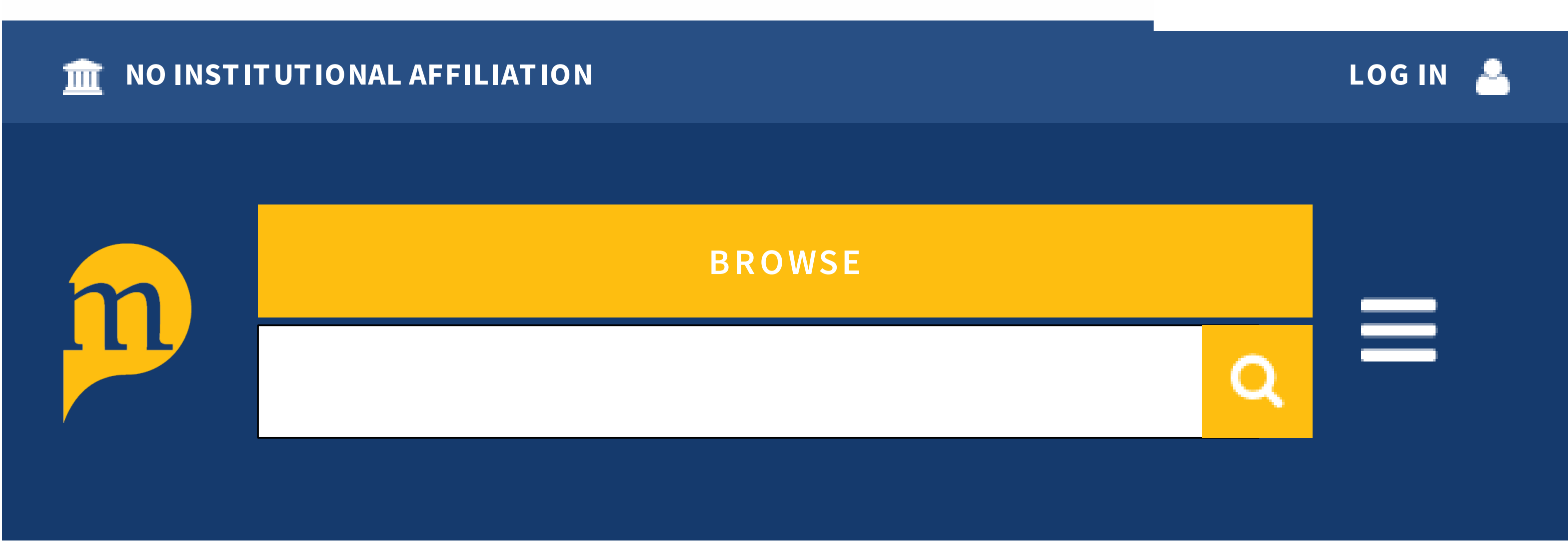

Picture Books As Literature

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

Picture Books As Literature

Sonia Landes (bio)

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...

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> "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."

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