

**More Words about Pictures: Current Research on Picture Books  
and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People ed. by Perry  
Nodelman, Naomi Hamer, and Mavis Reimer (review)**

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*More Words about Pictures: Current Research on Picture Books and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People* ed. by Perry Nodelman, Naomi Hamer, and Mavis Reimer (review)

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the consequence of erasing certain narratives, as its focus reinforces scholarly attention onto the more dominant white narratives about girlhood. This focus does not detract from the validity of Marshall's individual argument per se; rather, it speaks to a larger trend in the fields of children's literature and girlhood studies in which research on North American texts and white girlhood narratives still tend to be overrepresented. This leaves plenty of space for future studies of how girlhood is constructed in graphic narratives outside of North America, for which Marshall's work will certainly provide a useful starting point, as her emphasis on subversions of cultural pedagogies successfully initiates a fundamental restructuring of girlhood.

*More Words about Pictures: Current Research on Picture Books and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People*, edited by Perry Nodelman, Naomi Hamer, and Mavis Reimer. Routledge, 2017.

Reviewed by Sarah F. Sahn

In his 1988 *Words about Pictures*, Perry Nodelman took a semiotic approach to studying picture books, exploring the complex dynamics of image and text in works that until then had primarily been assessed on their educational merit, when they were studied seriously at all. Thirty years later, *More Words about Pictures* takes account of the changes to the field—of scholarship and children's literature—since the publication of Nodelman's foundational study. "The essential quality of the picture-book form is its apparent simplicity," Nodelman writes in his introductory reflection to this follow-up volume. "But," he continues, "writers and illustrators who understand this form can use it to create marvels of intellectually and aesthetically rich storytelling" (10). In theoretically sophisticated essays drawn from papers presented at the Visual/Verbal Texts symposium in June 2013 at the University of Winnipeg for the 1988 book's twenty-fifth anniversary, the contributors bring Nodelman's approaches to bear—complicating, building on, and responding to them—on a variety of visual/verbal texts for young people, from graphic novels to apps and games and, of course, picture books.

Coeditors Naomi Hamer and Mavis Reimer identify three major thematic and methodological strands of the volume's essays: semiotic and

structural approaches, new media studies, and material/performative analyses. Rather than grouping the essays along these lines, though, the book's organization seeks to draw out "less obvious intersections between arguments from various perspectives and approaches" (xv). The essays themselves blend approaches, moving through material and imaginative experiences of reading and interacting with visual and verbal texts for young people, from infant mastication in Lian Beveridge's "Chewing on Baby Books as a Form of Infant Literacy" (chapter 1) to the imaginative transport of reading a poetry imagetext in Andrea Schwenke Wyle's "Narrative Space in Sheree Fitch's *Merry-Go-Day* and *Night Sky Wheel Ride*" (chapter 10). This arrangement rewards the reader who moves through the book sequentially, but some readers may prefer to follow the thematic groupings laid out in the preface.

There are several standout essays in this strong volume. Among these is Beveridge's "Chewing on Baby Books," which engages Nodelman's broad definition of infant reading practices. Given that everyone knows that babies chew on books, Beveridge writes, "it is curious that publishers do not seem to have produced books which use chewing as a good way to read them. The oversight, it seems to me, is a waste of a common and pleasurable infant reading experience" (21). The premise and tone of the essay are lighthearted, but Beveridge uses this amusing question as an entry into a serious exploration of what it means to read, what it means to read as or with an infant, and how pleasure, even the pleasure of infancy, gets positioned as shameful. "We simultaneously accept and disavow chewing," Beveridge writes, producing books that tolerate it and planning for the replacement of heavily-chewed books in public libraries; "We are positioned in a queer place of both knowing and not-knowing, acknowledging and not-acknowledging" (23). Book-biting is a queer practice, the pleasure of which makes adults uncomfortable but should be recognized "as a form of reading, or even as a form of literary appreciation" (25). Beveridge raises thought-provoking questions about the intersections of reading, pleasure, and its disavowal in childhood and beyond that readers interested in queer theory will be particularly keen to pursue.

Chapters 2 and 3 take up art historical approaches to picture books. In "Six Degrees of Closeness in the Picture Book Experience," William Moebius explores the ways that the experience of art in museums and galleries, and art in picture books, converge and diverge. Both convey narratives, both invite closeness and create distance through physical space, and both take the reader/viewer through an experience to "the

other side” after coming close to an object or experience (39). While illuminating, though, this essay is less accessible than the others in the collection. Erica Hateley’s “Art, Adaptation, and the Antipodean in Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing*” examines Tan’s engagement with the Antipodeans, a group of Australian figurative artists. Hateley shows how Tan’s reimaginings and juxtapositions of well-known works can refresh and reinvigorate the ability of familiar works “to startle the viewer into reconsideration of their own public subjectivity” (58–59). Both essays productively explore how engagement with the art of picture books can shed light on the experience of seeing art in a gallery or museum, although readers without art history backgrounds are likely to find Hateley’s close reading the more accessible of the two.

A second pair of essays near the end of the collection also focuses attention on the visual aspects of picture books: Nina Christensen’s “Between Picture Book and Graphic Novel” (chapter 9) and Wyle’s aforementioned “Narrative Space in Sheree Fitch’s *Merry-Go-Day* and *Night Sky Wheel Ride*” (chapter 10). The two essays continue to tease out complexities in the relationship between words, images, narrative, and form in texts for young people, and offer useful conceptual apparatus to do so, particularly Wyle’s analogue to the narratological *fabula* for poetry imagetexts, *pictura*. She explains, “If the term *fabula* focuses on events and characters, *pictura* speaks to the form of poetry and the reading the form entails” (175). This concept could be extended to forms beyond the picture book to a variety of visual/verbal texts for all audiences.

Chapters 3 and 4 move into the digital realm with two illuminating explorations of picture book apps. In “The Design and Development of the Picture Book for Mobile and Interactive Platforms” (chapter 3), Naomi Hamer mobilizes the media studies concepts of transmedia, multimodality, and remediation to argue for the “need to expand picture book theory and practices of critical analysis to address the changing conceptualizations of the picture book within contemporary media cultures” (77). In close readings of picture book apps produced by three different companies, Hamer explores both the limitations and potential of the form for innovative engagement with children’s texts. She finds that while some apps remain mired in nostalgia for their source texts or add gamified elements to no clear purpose, others, such as Nosy Crow Studios’ fairy tale storytelling apps, offer more robust affordances for user-driven storytelling that allow for a variety of choices, outcomes, and nonlinear paths through the narrative. With “Towards a

Connective Ethnography of Children's Literature and Digital Media," Helene Høystrup similarly draws on new media studies to argue for a common "genealogy of mediated experience" in children's literature and new media, which share a "focus on the materiality, semiotics, and 'affordances' of languages and media; on 'systems' or the grammar of knowledge; on play, design and rhetoric; and . . . on social literature" (82). Høystrup takes a step back from Hamer's close reading approach, proposing three models for approaching digital children's literature that explore multimodality, gaming and digital literacy, and the social and participatory aspects of digital literatures. Together, these two essays offer a broad sense of possibility for digital literature itself and concrete approaches for creative and multidisciplinary approaches to it that will leave readers eager to explore further on their own. They would be particularly useful in an upper-division undergraduate or graduate seminar on new media and children's literature.

Bringing the notion of a participatory and social literature out of the digital realm, in "Performing Picture Books as Co-Authorship" (chapter 6), Kari-Lynn Winters, Candace Figg, Kimberly Lenters, and Dave Potts show how students and authors collaborate during author visits to disrupt a conception of authorship as singular and the listener as a passive consumer of texts. The authors define "performance" and "authorship" broadly, drawing on Barthes and reader response theory to define "authorship" as an "assemblage of semiotic resources," which "involves the ways in which people congregate around the picture book and contribute social and critical meanings to unique situated contexts" (102). Their observational case study gives concrete grounding to the theoretical approaches of the rest of the volume. Education and Library Sciences students will be interested in this study's argument that performance is an underexamined aspect of picture book studies, and its call for educators to do more to integrate performance "in order to reconnect students to books and their creators" (112).

Nathalie op de Beeck and Torsten Janson also engage the educational intent and impact of texts on young readers in chapters 7 and 8 with analyses of the implicit and explicit messages that picture books communicate. In "Environmental Picture Books" (chapter 7), op de Beeck explores how picture books represent humans' relationship to nature and instruct children to become conservationists. While most work "envisions adults (naturalists, scientists, authors, parents, K-8 teachers) guiding children in a process of coming to appreciate nature," she shows how depictions of the natural world in children's

literature “introduce readers to specific ways of imagining animals and the outdoors,” whether or not they have explicit environmentalist agendas (119). She argues for increased attention to picture books in ecocriticism, gesturing to the power of picture books both to reflect and to influence how humans see and engage with the natural world.

In another one of the collection’s standout essays, Janson’s “Visual Staging of Virtue in Islamic Children’s Literature” engages a more explicitly didactic body of work, English Islamic children’s literature, which emerged in the 1970s and “is directed to Muslim children as a conscious strategy of religious socialization” in a European context where they are the minority (128). Janson argues that Islamic children’s literature seeks to discipline the “multicultural, British-Muslim child” to “[safeguard] religious survival in a culturally threatening context” (129). Focusing on picture books published by the Islamic Foundation, one of the major publishers of Islamic children’s literature, Janson explores the tensions between Western picture book conventions, Islamic principles of representational art, and the challenges of maintaining cultural identity in the face of prejudice and Islamophobia. This wide-ranging analysis not only is fascinating in itself, but also models a productive fusion of Nodelman’s semiotic approach with cultural criticism.

In his introduction, Nodelman reflects on his motivations for writing *Words about Pictures* in order to fill the gap he found in the scholarship when he began to prepare to teach a children’s literature course, and observes that “there continues to be less work about picture books than about texts for older young readers” (14). He speculates on the barriers to such work, ranging from the insecurity of literature scholars about working with visual art to the expense and difficulty of dealing with copyright and reproduction of images. In the final essay, “Be Kind or Stupid,” Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. reflects on the material challenges of doing picture book criticism that he encountered in his own career, when Shel Silverstein’s estate denied him permission to reproduce any of Silverstein’s drawings or poems for his book. Thomas argues that the significance of the work of criticism warrants some strategic stupidity, in order to prevent copyright holders from making the remixing activities of art and scholarship impossible. His discussion of his experiences raises questions about the relationships among art, scholarship, and copyright that are pertinent to readers well beyond the discipline of picture book studies or children’s literature, and will be particularly valuable to graduate students preparing to publish for the first time.

In the three decades since *Words about Pictures* was published, the landscape of picture books has altered radically, and *More Words about Pictures* ably addresses these changes by addressing a range of media with approaches from art history and criticism, new media studies, and the social sciences in addition to literary theory. However, this landscape has shifted in ways that go beyond form; a central concern of children's literature studies in recent years has been with representation. While Nodelman discusses the blind spots of *Words about Pictures* in his introduction, noting, "it is embarrassingly obvious to me how very conventional, and how very middle-class, my cultural assumptions were" (7), the only essay in the collection that meaningfully and explicitly addresses books for and about children of color is Janson's "Visual Staging of Virtue in Islamic Children's Literature." The volume's failure to address diversity and intersectional representation is a missed opportunity to explore how the theoretical approaches to picture books Nodelman pioneered in *Words about Pictures* can be opened up by paying attention to representation—or lack thereof—of adults and children of diverse race, class, gender, and ability. Given that, in 2017, only about a quarter of children's books had multicultural content, and only about fifteen percent were by authors of color (Cooperative Children's Book Center), representation deserves more than a passing nod.

Despite this oversight, however, *More Words about Pictures* is an important reflection on and addition to studies of visual/verbal texts for young people, especially as the media of those texts expand beyond (but remain connected to) print. Researchers will find valuable perspectives on the technological and representational shifts in the landscape of children's literature, and several of the essays would fit well into advanced undergraduate or graduate seminars in children's literature and multimedia texts.

#### *Works Cited*

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