

# Talking Beyond the Page

Reading and responding to picturebooks

*Edited by*  
**Janet Evans**



# Talking Beyond the Page

*Talking Beyond the Page* shows how different kinds of picturebooks can be used with children of all ages and highlights the positive educational gains to be made from reading, sharing, talking and writing about picturebooks.

With contributions from some of the world's leading experts, chapters in this book consider how:

- children think about and respond to visual images and other aspects of picturebooks
- children's responses can be qualitatively improved by encouraging them to think and talk about picturebooks before, during and after reading them
- the non-text features of picturebooks, when considered in their own right, can help readers to make more sense out of the book
- different kinds of picturebooks, such as wordless, postmodern, multi-modal and graphic novels, are structured
- children can respond creatively to picturebooks as art forms
- picturebooks can help children deal with complex issues in their lives

*Talking Beyond the Page* also includes an exclusive interview with Anthony Browne who shares thoughts about his work as an author illustrator.

This inspiring and thought-provoking book is essential reading for teachers, student teachers, literacy consultants, academics interested in picturebook research and those organising and teaching on teacher education courses in children's literature and literacy.

**Janet Evans** is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University.



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Edited by Janet Evans

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Cover illustration by 11-year-old Matthew Dempsey, for a written description see page xxvii.

To Les, my husband

Les has supported me unconditionally through all of the stages of writing this book, from the early tentative steps right through to the frenetic, rushed end. He has given me moral support, urging me on when things were difficult, as well as physical support in the form of technological expertise, which is essential if one is a technophobe!

He is a star and I could not have written this book without him.  
Thank you Les.



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A specific mention goes to David Lewis, who has been kind enough to come out of retirement to write the foreword for this book. Many thanks for this David; your thoughts and opinions are much appreciated.

Finally I would particularly like to thank the children and staff at Gilded Hollins County Primary School, Leigh, Lancashire who were, as always, willing to talk with me and share their ideas when asked. In particular I think 11-year-old Matthew Dempsey deserves a special thanks as it is his illustration that forms the cover for this book – thank you Matthew.

Janet Evans  
January 2009

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# Foreword

*David Lewis*

Most adults who become interested in picturebooks first become hooked when they start to read them with young children. Whether this is done at home with one's own offspring or in school or nursery with the children of others, there is something both pleasurable and fascinating about this act of sharing – the adults get to enjoy the enormous privilege of 'lending consciousness' to the youngsters, who in turn get to experience some of the magic of reading. Sooner or later, if the adults are curious enough, they begin to wonder how it is that such young minds manage to conjure meaning from these odd, twin-barrelled texts. The words tell you something and the pictures show you something; the two somethings may be more or less related, but they may not. Back and forth you must go, wielding two kinds of looking that you must learn to fuse into understanding. How does the alchemy work? Where does it begin? Not content with sharing, some adults take the books away with them so that they can read them in private. These are the people who want to know what role the texts play in bringing about the transformations inside the heads of the children. So another set of questions begins to take shape: Why are they constructed as they are? What does the way these pictures are framed tell us? How do the illustrations guide our looking?

It is now very clear that picturebooks for children are far from the simple nursery texts they were often supposed to be. It is true that there are many poor examples lined up on the shelves of bookshops, but that has always been true and is true of books produced for adult readers as well. Here we are concerned only with the best, and the best examples of even the simplest picturebooks have a sophistication born of an art that disguises art.

In the first place there is what might be termed a 'first order' complexity that arises simply from the text being shared between two different forms of communication – words and pictures. This has nothing to do with artistry, it is simply in the nature of things; most picturebooks (though not all) are in fact 'picture-and-word-books'. This first-order level of complexity can be found in even the briefest of board books for babies, and suggests to me that such books do not receive the attention that they should.

Next, there is what might be considered a second-order level. Pictures are not all the same: for example, there are issues of modality, or lifelikeness, to be considered, and whether images are framed or not, and how they are framed when they are. Recent studies in the semiotics of visual imagery can be helpful here in sorting out the multifarious ways in which the illustrators of picturebooks manipulate what is to be looked at and interpreted. The words too can

vary enormously. They may be plain and unadorned, perhaps no more than a single word on each page or a simple sentence extending through an entire book; they might be elaborated into several voices woven together or a single voice telling a story that happened long ago. There may be no story at all, the words being arranged into the pattern of a song, a poem or a well-known chant. The words may do whatever they please, or rather whatever the writer pleases.

A third-order level of sophistication arises when the pictures and words, however they are formed, begin to drift apart from one another, sometimes to the point where they seem to be referring to entirely different events or circumstances. Again, a degree of such variance can be found in the simplest of books, but now the reader begins to experience a certain amount of cognitive stretch. You have to work a bit harder to get the point, to see where the author and illustrator are leading you. You might have to suspend comprehension for a while until the penny drops or your more experienced co-reader guides you towards understanding. Irony? Well, yes; you can never begin too soon.

At a fourth and higher level still are the books where the things you might expect to happen are turned around or disappear entirely: books that lead you to a topsy-turvy world where characters from one story pop up in another or step outside the story altogether to look the reader in the eye and tell him or her how it really is. These last are books that fascinate adults as well as children, and it is not difficult to see why. They are almost always ingenious; cunning contraptions that can trip up the unwary and the unprepared. They frequently resemble games and possess a playfulness that recruits the child reader's wide experience of play. If they work for children it is because their audience has already played many a game of peek-a-boo, laughed at many a nonsense rhyme, built towers with bricks or dominoes and then knocked them down, pretended to be an astronaut, a princess or a racing driver, and held many an absorbing conversation with dolls and teddy bears.

If picturebooks are really as sophisticated as this then they are well worth examining closely. Those of us who have tried to do this usually end up being utterly captivated by their charm, their wit and often their sheer beauty. Delving into the question of what children make of them is a tougher business altogether. Even quite young children have the ability to guess what it is they are expected to say. Asked a question they will provide an answer and will probably have worked out what will best satisfy the questioner. This can make research into reader response very difficult indeed; sometimes it feels like tickling for trout – holding back and angling gently, letting the reader run on so that he or she reveals something of what is going on inside. The authors whose work is gathered together here in *Talking Beyond the Page* are experienced researchers who have addressed these problems and sought ways of finding solutions. Some are primarily interested in the talk, the interchange between adult and child; some are more preoccupied with the books themselves, at least insofar as this collection is concerned. Quite rightly, the final word goes to a master of the art itself. *Talking Beyond the Page* is a stimulating read that provides many insights, provokes thought and, time and again, turns us back to the picturebooks themselves.

## Notes on contributors

**Michèle Anstey and Geoff Bull** run ABC: Anstey and Bull Consultants in Education ([www.ansteybull.com.au](http://www.ansteybull.com.au)). They were formerly Associate Professors at the University of Southern Queensland, where they taught literacy and children's literature at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Michèle was Director and Principal Adviser to the Literate Futures Project for Education Queensland, and a teacher in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Geoff was national President of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association and founding member of the Australian Literacy Federation (ALF) as well as a teacher and teacher-librarian. Michèle and Geoff are interested in literacy teaching practices, multiliteracies and children's literature: particularly visual literacy, speculative fiction and postmodern trends in children's literature. Together they have published *Teaching and Learning Multiliteracies: Changing Times, Changing Literacies* (International Reading Association, 2006), *The Literacy Landscape* (Pearson, 2005), *The Literacy Labyrinth* (Pearson, 2004), *The Literacy Lexicon* (Prentice Hall, 2003), *Reading the Visual: Written and Illustrated Children's Literature* (Harcourt/Nelson, 2000), and *Crossing the Boundaries* (Pearson, 2002).

**Evelyn Arizpe** is a Lecturer in Children's Literature at the Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow. She has taught and published widely in the areas of literacies, reader response to picturebooks and children's literature. She is co-author, with Morag Styles, of *Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts* (Routledge, 2003) and *Reading Lessons from the Eighteenth Century: Mothers, Children and Texts* (Pied Piper Press, 2006). She has a particular interest in Mexican children's books and her current research involves immigrant children, picturebooks, literacy and culture. Also with Morag Styles, she has co-edited *Acts of Reading: Teachers, Texts and Childhood*, to be published by Trentham Books in 2009.

**Janet Evans** is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University and part-time freelance Literacy and Educational Consultant. Formerly an Early Years and primary school teacher, she has written eight books on language, literacy and maths education, along with articles on primary education and mathematics curricula, and chapters in edited books. Janet has

taught in India, Nigeria, Australia, America, Canada and Spain and was awarded two research scholarships that enabled her to work and study in the USA. She has presented papers at many international conferences and has organized and taught on numerous in-service conferences. Janet ensures that she has time to work in schools, doing action-based research with young children and their educators. Her books include *What's in the Picture: Responding to Illustrations in Picture Books* (Paul Chapman Publishing, 1998), *The Writing Classroom: Aspects of Writing and the Primary Child 3–11 years* (David Fulton, 2001) and *Literacy Moves On: Using Popular Culture, New Technologies and Critical Literacy in the Primary Classroom* (Heinemann, 2005). Her ongoing research interests include reader response to picturebooks, critical literacy and interactive writing linked with children's bookmaking.

**Prue Goodwin** is a freelance lecturer in literacy and children's literature and works part time at the University of Reading, where she runs an MA course in Children's Books in Education and works with trainee teachers. She has edited several books, her most recent being *Understanding Children's Books* (SAGE, 2008). Others books include *The Literate Classroom* (David Fulton, 2005), *The Articulate Classroom* (David Fulton, 2001) and *Literacy through Creativity* (David Fulton, 2004). Prue regularly returns to the classroom to introduce children to a range of literature and to encourage wide, voracious reading.

**David Lewis** has been a teacher in primary and secondary schools, an Educational Researcher for the Inner London Education Authority, and Lecturer in Education at London University Goldsmiths College and Exeter University. He has published a number of articles on children's picturebooks, mainly in the journals *Signal* and *Children's Literature in Education*, and has recently stepped down from his position on the editorial committee of *Children's Literature in Education*. In 2001 he published *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text* (RoutledgeFalmer). He now works as a freelance writer and is currently finishing a book on an entirely different subject – a history of the Italian city state of Ferrara during the Renaissance.

**Caroline McGuire** is a PhD candidate in the Reading/Writing/Literacy programme at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Formerly a coordinator of out-of-school literacy programs, Caroline now teaches children's literature classes to undergraduate and graduate students at Pennsylvania. She is completing her PhD dissertation on the oral responses of a small group of nine-year-old children to postmodern picturebooks and the children's use of postmodern characteristics in their own written and illustrated work.

**Kate Noble** is Assistant Education Officer at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Whilst working as an Early Years teacher specializing in Art she was one of the researchers on *Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts*

(RoutledgeFalmer, 2000) with Morag Styles and Evelyn Arizpe. Her doctoral study (2007) investigated the development of visual literacy in young children by analysing their drawing and communication in response to multimodal picture books. Her research interests include the relationship between visual and verbal literacy and the creative and cognitive possibilities afforded through the use of images in teaching and learning.

**Sylvia Pantaleo** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, Canada. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in language and literacy, and courses in literature for children and adolescents. Her programme of research has focused on exploring elementary students' understanding, interpretations and responses to contemporary picturebooks, specifically literature with Radical Change characteristics and metafictional devices. She has also examined how students use their knowledge of these characteristics and devices to create their own print texts. She is author of *Exploring Student Response to Contemporary Picturebooks* (University of Toronto Press, 2008), co-editor of *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality* (Routledge, 2008), and co-author of *Learning with Literature in the Canadian Elementary Classroom* (University of Alberta, 1999).

**Frank Serafini** is currently an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Arizona State University, where he teaches courses in children's literature, reading pedagogy, and literacy assessment. Frank spent nine years as an elementary school teacher, three years as a literacy specialist and six years as Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In addition to numerous journal articles, Frank has authored six professional development books, the two most recent entitled *More (Advanced) Lessons in Comprehension* (Heinemann, 2008) and *Talking Comprehension* (Scholastic, 1997). Frank has also authored and illustrated a series of picturebooks with Kids Can Press, focusing on nature and the art of close observation.

**Lawrence Sipe** is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, where he teaches courses in children's and adolescent literature. His research focuses on the responses of young children (five- to eight-year-olds) to picture storybooks. He is the author of *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom* (Teachers College Press, 2008), and co-editor (with Dr Sylvia Pantaleo) of *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality* (Routledge, 2008). He has published extensively in handbooks of research, journals of literacy and children's literature, and edited volumes.

**Vivienne Smith** was a primary teacher for many years before moving into higher education. She is now a Lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, where she teaches in the Department of Childhood and Primary Studies. Her

research interests include children's literature, critical literacy and the development of children as readers. For some time she has been interested in how the best picturebooks and flap books work and how they orientate children towards becoming engaged and active readers. She has published a number of articles, including, most recently, a chapter in Prue Goodwin's *Understanding Children's Books* (SAGE, 2008).

**Morag Styles** is a Reader in Children's Literature and Education at the University of Cambridge. She writes, lectures and organizes conferences internationally on children's literature, poetry, visual literacy and the history of reading. She is the author of *From the Garden to the Street: 300 Years of Poetry for Children* (Cassell, 1998), Advisory Editor for *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and co-editor, with Evelyn Arizpe, of *Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2003) and *Reading Lessons from the Eighteenth Century: Mothers, Children and Texts* (Pied Piper Publishing, 2006). She has organized exhibitions at the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and the British Library.

**Anthony Browne – personal notes.** I was born in Sheffield and moved to a pub near Bradford when I was one. As I got older I apparently used to stand on a table in the bar and tell stories to customers about a character called Big Dumb Tackle (whoever he was). I spent much of my childhood playing sport, fighting and drawing with my older brother. I went to a grammar school in Cleckheaton, then studied graphic design at art college in Leeds. My father died suddenly and horrifically in front of me while I was there and this had a huge effect on me. I went through a rather dark period, which didn't sit very happily with the world of graphic design. After leaving college I heard about a job as a medical artist and thought that it sounded interesting – it was. I worked at Manchester Royal Infirmary for three years painting delicate watercolours of grotesque operations. It taught me a lot more about drawing than I ever learned at art college, and I believe it taught me how to tell stories in pictures. I thought that it was probably time to move on when strange little figures started appearing in these paintings, and so I began a career designing greetings cards. I continued to do this for many years, working for the Gordon Fraser Gallery.

Gordon Fraser became a close friend and taught me a lot about card design, which was to prove very useful when I came to do children's books. I experimented with many styles and many subjects, from snowmen to dogs with big eyes to gorillas. I sent some of my designs to various children's book publishers and it was through one of these that I met Julia MacRae, who was to become my editor for the next 20 years. She taught me much of what I know about writing and illustrating children's books.

In 1976 I produced *Through the Magic Mirror* (Hamish Hamilton), a strange kind of book in which I painted many of the pictures before I wrote the story. I followed this with *A Walk in the Park* (Hamish Hamilton, 1977), a story I

was to revisit 20 years later with *Voices in the Park* (Doubleday). Probably my most successful book is *Gorilla* (Walker Books), published in 1983, and it was during this period that I was badly bitten by a gorilla whilst being filmed for television at my local zoo.

I have published 40 books, and among the awards that my books have won are the Kate Greenaway medal twice, and the Kurt Maschler 'Emil' three times. In 2000 I was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, an international award given to an illustrator for their body of work. This prize is the highest honour a children's writer or illustrator can win, and I was the first British illustrator to receive it. My books are translated into 26 languages and my illustrations have been exhibited in many countries – the USA, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, France, Germany, Holland, Japan and Taiwan – and I've had the pleasure of visiting these places and working with local children and meeting other illustrators.

I am currently working on my latest book, which involves Goldilocks and a family of bears.

# Children's thoughts about picturebooks

You can never be too old for picturebooks. I used to have a picturebook called *Giraffes Can't Dance* and I loved it but my mum gave it away because she said I was too old for it, but I think you can never be too old for picturebooks.

Matthew, aged 11

In an attempt to find out what children's thoughts were about reading and responding to picturebooks, I talked with some 11-year-old children with whom I had been working. They came from a class of 23 boys and 7 girls, which made for interesting class dynamics and class discussions. Picturebooks had been read to these children on a regular basis throughout their seven years in school, and they were used to verbalising and visualising their thoughts in relation to quite unusual polysemic, postmodern picturebooks – some of which seemed to contain quite abstruse messages.

A variety of questions were considered:

- What are picturebooks?
- What do you think about picturebooks?
- Who are they for and why are they written?
- When you look at and read picturebooks, what happens in your head and how do you feel inside?
- How can we respond to them?
- What makes picturebooks different from other kinds of books?
- What is special/different about picturebooks?

## Where I read, who with and how

The children talked about, then drew pictures of, where they read, whom they read with, and how. The individual children's personalities showed in their work, often along with their preferred genre of books.



Figure 1 Adam: I've drawn myself in Jamaica, reading whilst playing football

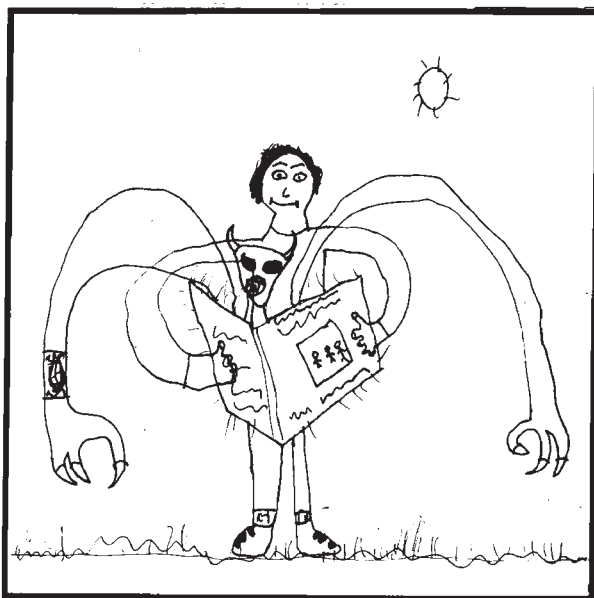


Figure 2 Sam: I have drawn myself reading in the garden with a character from the book. I am reading a book called *Nightmare Academy*

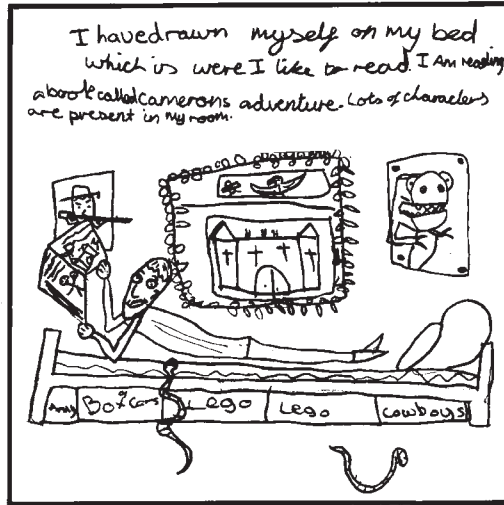


Figure 3 Cam: I've drawn myself on my bed, which is where I like to read. I am reading a book called *Cameron's Adventure*. Lots of characters are present in my room; some of the characters out of my book have appeared out of posters

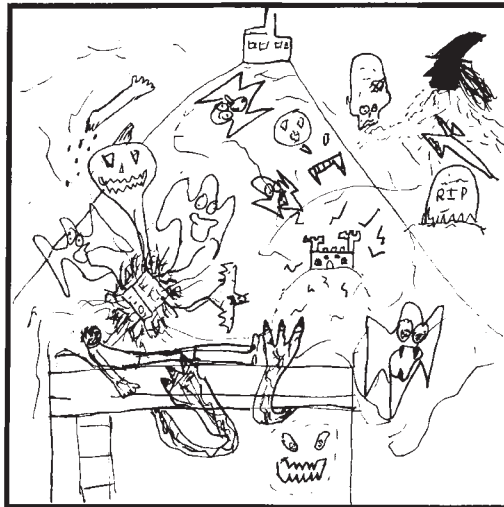


Figure 4 Matt: I have an overwhelming imagination and as you can see I read a heck of a lot of HORROR. I've drawn arms coming out of under the bed. There is a face hiding under the bed, 'Teeth ground sharp and eyes glowing red.' There are ghosts skulking around in the dark and bats flying around. There are images of places I've seen in films and in books. Limbs of victims hanging around. It all happens in bed. When I close the book the images vanish, locked in the book but when it opens ... they're back. The nightmares are back!



*Figure 5* Matthew: I have drawn myself reading in no particular place, but immersed in thought from the millions of tales and stories I've read in years gone by. It doesn't matter where I read, it could be absolutely anywhere in the world because I love reading.

### My personal views about what makes picturebooks special /different

The children thought about what makes picturebooks special/different, before giving their responses in illustrative and written format.