

Children's Picture Books. An Overview

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Abstract: This article aims at presenting a series of famous, beautiful picture books for children, considered of great literary value worldwide today. Moreover, the article will analyze the suggested titles in great detail, starting from the covers, format and illustrations up to the text itself, its meta-language and connotations. The authors wished, in doing so, to stir up the interest of readers of all ages in getting to know these books while offering a complete presentation of the titles, beyond the blurb of the book. It is hoped that this would prove useful to adults looking for good-quality literature for children, to EFL teachers looking for good texts to use in class, to publishers and most importantly, to the children that these books are intended for.

In Romania the children's book market is still developing and the textbooks for young learners may still include old, unappealing texts; when one thinks about children's literature available on the Romanian market, one often thinks about some important 19th and 20th century writers and less about modern, recent children's books, simply because these are unavailable or very little known. The younger the students, the less interesting the literary excerpts typically used in class. However, children's literature is nowadays a huge, ever-expanding market and children's books are more and more attractive and beautifully illustrated, close to becoming little pieces of art; therefore, TEFL teachers may encounter a totally different problem today: the difficulty to choose from the plethora of available books, e-books, illustrated books, audio-books, internet complementary sites and so on.

Taking this into account, the authors of this article, great lovers of children's literature, have compiled a list of famous, beautiful picture books for children, considered of great literary value. Not only have they come up with a list aiming to be interesting and appealing to children and adults alike, but they have analyzed these titles in great detail, starting from the covers, format and illustrations, to the text itself, its meta-language and connotations. The authors' hope is that this might be of help to both teachers of English as a Foreign Language and, most importantly, to children in search of a good book to read, but also to publishers or adults searching for an interesting reading. Each of the selected books will begin with a very short 'bio', followed by a

long and exhaustive presentation. The authors intend to make this article clear, practical and helpful for anyone still looking for that perfect children's book.

Book Title: *A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever*, by Marla Frazee

Brief Plot summary: While James and his friend, Eamon, spend a week at in a nature camp, they stay with Eamon's grandparents, Bill and Pam, and have an indulgent time.

Analysis: This text is a 2009 Caldecott Honor winner. It is a narrative realistic fiction picture book. It has a large trim size and its layout is in portrait format, suitable to the many close-up illustrations of people (Galda, Liang, & Cullunan, 2017). The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CDLC) identifies this text appropriate for children aged 5-7. The front cover reveals the title written in colorful block letters on a banner across the top of the page. On the front cover and on the title page, multiple fonts appear in the title, author's name, and text within speech bubbles, creating a playful and comic mood. While the title is right for the story, the outdoorsy vacation portrayed on the front cover is quite deceiving to the plot (Friedman, 2008). One may assume based on the cover illustration that the main story line revolves around the boys' time at the camp. However, the only glimpse we get into their camp day is in the illustrations in the style of a scrapbook of photographs depicted in the last pages and the illustration on the recto of the 11th opening. The text within the yellow speech bubbles on the front cover alludes to the humorous tone carried throughout the story. The back cover introduces characters, showing a glimpse into their traits through the text within the speech bubbles. While the boys are playful and carefree, Bill tries to impart his knowledge of penguins, while Pat nurtures the boys with her cooking. The front matter explains that the illustrations were created using black prismacolor and gouache on Stonehenge paper. The loose, cartoon-like illustrations with soft edges, bold color choices, dramatic shapes, and varied text placement add to the humor and energy. The volume of the text is not overwhelming, but the satire is sophisticated (Bernard, 2016). Illustrations and speech bubbles portray James and Eamon as playful, busy children as they make silly faces, indulge in ice cream and banana waffles with maple syrup, jump on the mattress, wrestle and play. Bill attempts to share his passion and excitement for penguins with the boys, but they are only interested in playing and watching television. The font of the narrative text resembles handwriting, almost as if we were reading a journal. The speech bubble

dialog and illustrations often directly contradict the narrative. For example, on the 2nd opening, while the narrator says, “Eamon thought this chat was fascinating” his body language conveys a sense of unease and expectation as he waits for his friend to arrive. On the third opening, while the text reads “with just a couple of his belongings” the illustration shows James surrounded by boxes, bags, and baskets full of his things. On the same page, the narrative reads, “He had never been away from home for an entire week, so he was very sad when his mother drove away” while the illustration shows a smiling boy with a speech bubble with large lettering (yelling) “Bye!” In the 3rd opening we see a two-page spread with the lines of roads and those coming from cars depicting motion. The car stops in the gutter. When the boys create their own penguin habitat, it is clear from their facial expressions and body language that Bill and Pam are pleased and moved. Despite being seemingly unaffected by Bill’s attempts to inspire them, it seems that his efforts made an impression after all. The dedication page and back jacket flap confirm that Marla Frazee loosely based this fictional text on a true event. Some themes presented include friendship, imagination, and family.

Book title: *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak

Brief plot summary: When young Max is sent to his room for misbehavior, he gradually enters a fantastical world filled with unusual creatures, of which he becomes king. Eventually, his loneliness leads him to return home to the place where he is loved the most.

Analysis: This text has won multiple awards, including the Caldecott Medal, New York Times Best Illustrated Children’s Book of the Year, Redbook Children’s Picturebook Award, and International Board on Books for Young People Honor. According to the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database, this book is appropriate for children ages 5-10. The book is of large trim size and the page layout is in the landscape format, appropriate for displaying the expansive sceneries within (Galda, Liang, & Cullunan, 2017). The text follows a narrative trajectory while the illustrations are made of thin lines of black ink overlaying watercolor images (Galda et. al, 2017). Told in the third person, the text and illustration work together to convey the themes of childhood, uncertainty, family, loneliness and unconditional love (Shmoop, 2008). The text contains just 10 sparse but melodic sentences with rhythmic phrases, several spanning over

multiple pages (Shmoop, 2008). Poetic breaks at page breaks create cliffhangers that entice the reader to turn the page (Shmoop, 2008). The continuous illustration on the front and back covers insinuates a fantasy fiction text by portraying a whimsical creature amidst a world of pink trees (Shmoop, 2008). The title, written as a headline in the blank space above the cover illustration, in connection with the illustration of the peacefully sleeping creature, prompts the reader to question, "Could this be a wild thing?" (Moebius, 1986). The end pages showcase full two-page spreads of large, colorful, overlapping foliage on a dark background. The book includes a half title page with stark black words against white space across the bottom half of the page. The full title spread features two wild creatures with fearful expressions moving away from a menacing looking young boy dressed in a wolf suit and wearing a crown. The crown is symbolic of his power in controlling these wild things (Nodelman & Reimer, 2002). The dark, outlined illustrations along with the twilight setting of dimly lit rooms creates a somber tone and sense of mysterious adventure (Shmoop, 2008). Characters' feelings are clearly revealed through their facial expressions throughout the text. In the first two openings, the boy (identified in the text as Max) hammers knotted-up sheets into the walls, strings up his distraught looking teddy bear, and terrorizes his dog (Shmoop, 2008). The knotted sheets, segmented and interrupted lines, and immense use of cross-hatching add a sense of nervous energy and anger (Moebius, 1986). The conflict arises when Max's mother (never literally portrayed) calls him "wild thing" and he responds, "I'll eat you up!" When he is sent to his room, he gradually enters an imaginary world of the wild things. As Max begins to enter the fantastical world, illustrations begin to break the frame, creating a sense of the forbidden or miraculous (Moebius, 1986). As the story progresses, the illustrations gradually enlarge from a cropped, centrally located image to expansive scenes bleeding across multiple two-page spreads. The image recedes as Max leaves the fantasy world, however the image never reduces to its original size, emphasizing that Max has found balance in his emotions. The complicated lines and crosshatching in the backdrop also gradually progress toward more simple, smooth backdrops and sky as Max enters the imaginary world (Moebius, 1986). This progression represents the change in Max's emotions from angry and anxious to calm (Moebius, 1986). When Max becomes lonely and longs to return home, the wild things respond, "Oh please don't go-we'll eat you up-we love you so." The words of the wild things are reminiscent but in direct contrast with the meaning of Max's words to his mother at the beginning of the story (Moebius, 1986). The story ends when Max removes the hood of his wolf

suit and eases back into the realistic world (Shmoop, 2008). The hot food and drink he finds waiting in his room as well as the word “it” in the final phrase (“and it was still hot”) are representative of his mother’s love despite his mischief (Moebius, 1986).

Book title: *Wolf in the Snow*, by Matthew Cordell

Brief plot summary: A young girl concurrently walks home from school through the falling snow while a young wolf pup becomes lost from its pack. After finding and returning the pup to its mother, the girl loses her way in the forest until the wolf pack repays her kindness.

Analysis: A nearly wordless narrative picture book, this text has won awards including the Caldecott Medal (2018), Cybils Award (Nominee), and Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in Children’s Literature (Honor). The Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database (CDLT) suggests this text is appropriate for children ages 6-10. Themes of family, trust, kindness, bravery, loyalty, cooperation, and interspecies goodwill are revealed through a blend of stylized and realistic pen and ink with watercolor artwork (Bender, 2017). While the human characters are stylized and almost cartoonish, the wolves are depicted more realistically. The colors are muted, except for the snowsuits, which illuminates the girl’s separation from the wilderness (Bender, 2017). Illustrations effectively depict a strong female character who is brave, caring and vulnerable. The book has large trim size and its layout is landscape format, appropriate for showcasing vast sceneries (Galda, Liang, & Cullinan, 2017). On the front and back covers, we see pictures of the girl with her family delineated by white space. On the book jacket, we see an illustration of a girl in a red coat reaching toward a wolf pup while the back cover shows a full grown, howling wolf. The red-coated girl and lupine interactions allude to the classic fairy tale character, Little Red Riding Hood. In contrast to the familiar story, in *Wolf in the Snow*, the main character and wolves develop mutual respect and care. The front jacket cover displays a summary of the story accompanied by an illustration of the girl bundled up in her coat and scarf amidst the falling snow. The back jacket cover reveals a short biography of Matthew Cordell. The end pages are a subdued, cool blue, evoking the sense of cold and serenity (Galda et. al, 2017). The first three openings precede the title page. The first opening reveals a full page illustration which bleeds to the edge and preludes the falling snow and the girl leaving home (CDLT). The second opening (a full double page spread) shows the girl waving good-bye to her

dog, and the dog barking. The lines and increasing text size lead the eyes in a left to right diagonal across the two-page spread. The mood is sweet and upbeat, while the scribbly line work conveys a sense of energy. The third opening spread reveals parallel stories; on the recto we see the girl walking towards the right and on the verso we see the wolf pack heading left, implying that their paths may cross. The full title page shows large print on a background of falling snow. As we move through the story, the illustrations of a brown-winter landscape, images of wolves with sharp teeth, and fading daylight bring a sense of peril and urgency that contrasts the earlier scene of her cozy home with fireplace and rug. The limited text (barking, howling, screeching, growling, whining, and labored breathing) only add to the tension. Throughout the story, the illustrations artistically capture the feelings of cold, fear, determination, exhaustion, and relief in a mixture of page spreads and spot images. Footprints in the snow guide our eyes in the direction of character movement. When the girl comes face to face with the mother wolf, we see the terror in her eyes, the wary expression of mother wolf, and the impatience of the pup (Bender, 2017). On the 21st opening, through an overhead perspective our eyes are drawn to the girl curled up within a circle of trees. In the background, we see the cast of light and read the text (“bark! bark!”) to infer that the girl’s family is searching for her. In resolution, the wolves howl to alert the family of her whereabouts and she returns to her cozy home, depicted in warm browns, greens, and yellows.

Both *Wolf in the Snow* and *Where the Wild Things Are* are narrative picture books. Both are in landscape format with large trim and include double page spreads illustrating vast sceneries as well as smaller illustrations framed in white space. Both include ink and watercolor artwork and subdued, muted tones. While *Wolf in the Snow* has mostly simple illustrations (except for the wolves), those in *Where the Wild Things Are* contain intricate details. While *Where the Wild Things Are* is sparse of text, *Wolf in the Snow* is nearly wordless. Both have young characters reflective of their inferred audience and both have overarching themes of love and family.

Book title: *Chloe and the Lion*

Brief plot summary: While Chloe, the main character in this text tries to proceed through her story adventure with a lion, the illustrator and the author have a disagreement over the pictures

matching the text. In this meta-picture book children will get a glimpse of what it takes behind the scenes to create the components of a fictional storybook.

Analysis: This text for primary grades is a postmodern picture book. What appears to begin like a traditional story is overthrown by a disagreement between the illustrator and the author who become actual characters within the text. They alter the story the reader may have normally been expecting and this characteristic, as noted in (Galda et al., 2017, p. 20) which is evident, is “subversion of literary traditions and conventions and undermining the traditional distinctions between the story and the outside “real” world. The interruptions caused by the author and illustrator, who are clay characters, create a “non-sequential format” and “narrative discontinuity” (Panteleo, p. 179). The underlying theme of the story encourages the reader to understand how all the pieces (style, setting, plot, theme, characters) fit together to create a good story. The reader gets a glimpse of the interactions and collaborative efforts needed between team members, such as the author and illustrator, to make the vision of the story come to life (Publishers Weekly Review). The illustrations in the story are humorous and emotional and connect to the multiple messages that occur throughout the story and require the reader to pay close attention to follow along to keep an understanding of the text. As noted in (Galda et al., 2017, p. 20) “Postmodern picture books force readers to read in new ways” and “give children the opportunity to become more critical and more thoughtful readers.”

When comparing another postmodern picture book, *This is Not My Hat*, to this text, there were no other additional characters or side conversations occurring. However, in *Chloe and the Lion*, the nontraditional story line and addition of the author and illustrator characters “popping in” and bringing the reader into their reality, created a disordered feel (module 2.4). Reading texts with this type of interaction where “multiple perspectives or realities” are offered within one story is rather innovative.

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