

W O R D S

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P I C T U R E S



*The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*

P E R R Y N O D E L M A N

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CHAPTER SEVEN

*The Relationships of Pictures and Words*

As we respond to picture books, the words of the texts so permeate our experience of the pictures that the two seem to mirror each other. But they do not in fact do so—as becomes obvious as soon as we separate them from each other. I have asked hundreds of different people—both children and adult students of children's literature—to record the stories that occur to them as they experience only the pictures of picture books that do have texts; they always express frustration and arrive at a surprising variety of different stories. While my audience is less frustrated when I perform the reverse procedure and read the texts of picture-book stories without the accompanying pictures, they do often seriously misunderstand the implications of the words they hear. These experiences reveal much about the different ways in which words and pictures contribute to the total effect of a picture-book narrative.

In *The Art of Art for Children's Books*, Diana Klemin asserts that Celestino Piatti's pictures for *The Happy Owls* "cast a powerful illusion of storytelling" (64). That the narrative effect is indeed illusory is made clear in the stories made up by those who view these pictures without hearing the words. As it happens, *The Happy Owls* is an ideal book for this procedure, for the pictures are not on the same page as the words and can easily be separated from them. To avoid the confusion caused by not knowing where the earlier events of a story are leading, I show all the pictures in sequence once through and then ask people to write stories as they see the

pictures for a second time. The result is a wide variety of stories: descriptions of an ordinary day in the life of two owls, reports on how two owls distributed important information, attempts to solve a food shortage in a barnyard, disputes about which bird is most beautiful—and not surprisingly, stories about owls whose bafflement or frustration seems to have been transferred from their perplexed storytellers.

But the pictures in *The Happy Owls* are unlike each other both in composition and subject: some focus on a pair of owls, others on groups of other birds, others on forest landscapes; one is a close-up of a sunflower with a human face. Since that lack of consistency may make this book an unfair choice for this experiment, I have also followed the same procedure with a more cohesive series of pictures. Maurice Sendak's pictures for *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* also appear on separate pages from the text and are enough like each other in style, in subject, and in mood to imply that they might actually be telling a story. And in fact, while the details vary, people do find a series of events in these pictures that are similar to each other—and similar, too, to Charlotte Zolotow's story about a journey through the woods in search of something.

Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, no one ever guesses the fact that the object of the search is a birthday present: the person the present is intended for is prominent in the text but never appears in the pictures. That apparently small detail makes a large difference: without a specific motive for the search, the actions that most people find in these pictures are not really stories at all; they are more like plotless travelogues, in which the rabbit shows the girl a number of unrelated sights merely because they are interesting or beautiful.

That seems a just response to Sendak's pictures: as Barbara Bader quite rightly suggests, the girl and the rabbit "turn up in this dappled painting and that . . . without there being any sense of their going from here to there, without our having any sense, in fact, of where they are or where they're going" (*American Picturebooks* 498). These pictures make the woods look so attractive and suggest so little in the way of danger or even of action that it is logical to assume that their beauty is a key factor in the story.

Interestingly, however, the stories people find in *The Happy Owls* pictures also often focus on the act of seeing and build plots around the owls' viewing of the birds or the forest. In a sense, the actual stories of both *The Happy Owls* and *Mr. Rabbit* are about seeing things; but the owls describe their forest, and the rabbit and girl inspect theirs, for reasons that relate only peripherally to the interest or beauty of appearances. Apparently, the pictures by themselves convey only the general idea of viewing, of looking at interesting or beautiful sights, as perhaps all pictures do. But they provide no suggestion of a focus, no specific idea about *why* one might be looking. Consequently, people asked to find stories in these pictures tend to transform their own interest in looking at the pictures into the interest of the characters within the pictures. Without a context of accompanying words, the visual impact of pictures as sources of sensuous pleasure is more significant than any specific narrative information they might contain.

The extent to which the meaning in pictures depends on exterior contexts is confirmed by the stories that people do and do not find in these two sets of pictures. The stories people do tell tend most often to be versions of the most conventional kinds of children's narratives, descriptions of journeys which end with the statement that home is best or disputes about beauty or talent which end with the realization that we are all beautiful in our own way. That people complete the meaning of these pictures by making use of their prior knowledge of other texts shows that the pictures themselves can imply narrative information only in relationship to a verbal context; if none is actually provided, we tend to find one in our memories. On the other hand, when I show adults Sendak's first picture of the little girl and the huge rabbit, there is always someone who giggles in a knowing way, yet no one has ever made up a sniggly story about a nymphet and a rabbit on the make; the assumption that this is a children's story narrows the range of acceptable interpretations.

Without a text to complete it, furthermore, people tend even to misinterpret the visual information in these pictures in ways that reveal how fragmentary that information is. Some people read gloom and depression into Sendak's moody pictures, and a number of people have interpreted

Piatti's powerful picture of a red sunset over a snow-covered wood as a depiction of a fire. It is particularly revealing that many people create stories about Sendak's pictures in which a house figures prominently, and stories about Piatti's pictures in which a fox figures prominently. While there is a house in one of Sendak's pictures, the text says only that some roofs are red and does not even mention the house, and while there is a fox in one of Piatti's pictures, the text accompanying that picture not only does not mention the fox but actually suggests that the forest in which he appears is a peaceful place. What was simply background for the artist becomes an important fact in need of explanation for those who do not know the specific focus the words provide.

Nevertheless, when I tell people the original stories after the exercise, they are surprised by what they have missed. With the focus offered by the words, it is hard not to see that Piatti's pictures depict changes in season, something viewers probably do not notice at first because they do not expect the time that is supposed to have passed between one picture and the next to be so long; it is usually a matter of minutes or hours, not months. And with the words, it is hard not to notice that Sendak's pictures centrally focus on differences in color, a fact no one even comments on at first. With the words to guide our perception of them, these two sequences of pictures both do create a powerful illusion of storytelling. Words can make pictures into rich narrative resources—but only because they communicate so differently from pictures that they change the meanings of pictures.

For the same reason, also, pictures can change the narrative thrust of words. I hope that the earlier chapters of this book have revealed the variety and subtlety of narrative information that pictures can provide, but in those chapters, of course, I interpreted visual information in the context of the accompanying texts that I was already familiar with, and in consequence I tended to focus on elements that supported the implications of the texts. That pictures actually *change* the meanings of texts in the process of supporting them becomes particularly clear if we perform the re-

verse experiment of the ones described above and explore the effects on listeners of a story told to them without the accompanying pictures. When I have read the text of Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* to adults who have not previously heard it, without showing them the pictures, many feel it to be a terrifying story, too frightening for young children. Without Sendak's *particular* Wild Things to look at, they conjure up wild things out of their own nightmares, and those they find scary indeed. When I then tell them the story accompanied by the pictures, they always change their minds. Sendak's monsters are relatively reassuring, adorable rather than terrifying, and Sendak's Max is much more arrogant and assertive than they had imagined him. In fact, it is the pictures and not the words that tell us there is nothing to worry about, that despite our assumptions about the weakness of children and the violence of monsters, this particular child can take care of himself with these particular monsters. The illustrations in *Wild Things* communicate information that changes the effect and meaning of the story as a whole, just as the words of *The Happy Owls* and *Mr. Rabbit* communicate information that changes the effect and meaning of the story as a whole.

Those changes can occur because words and pictures communicate in ways so different that commentators tend to exaggerate the differences. It has been fashionable in recent years to suggest, on the basis of research into the activity of the human brain, that the two might even require perception by two different organs. The brain consists of two hemispheres joined only by a bundle of interconnecting fibers; studies of patients with lesions in various areas of one half or the other seem to suggest that the two halves are responsible for different kinds of thinking. In general terms, the left hemisphere seems to handle analytical, sequential thinking and thus to control language functioning; the right seems to manage holistic thinking, simultaneous rather than sequential operations, and thus to control visual and spatial capacities.

In a list he calls "The Two Modes of Consciousness: A Tentative Dichotomy," the psychologist Robert Ornstein identifies the qualities of the two

hemispheres as two quite different visions of reality; among other things, he suggests that left-hemisphere consciousness is lineal, sequential, causal, focal, explicit, and verbal—typical of Western “rational” thought—and that right-hemisphere consciousness is nonlinear, simultaneous, acausal, diffuse, tacit, and spatial—typical of the “intuitionist” thought of so-called primitive societies (83).

In the light of these categories, some commentators have concluded that words communicate in ways that relate to these left-hemisphere activities and that pictures communicate in ways that relate to the right-hemisphere activities. Stories obviously occupy time, pictures space. The stories that words tell are certainly lineal, sequential, causal; a plot is a unified sequence of causes and effects, and it is the order in which events are communicated, and their temporal relationships with each other, that make them into stories. Furthermore, words easily focus our attention. If the shape of a woman's nose is important to the meaning of a story, then the words in the story about her will mention the shape of her nose; looking at a picture of her, we might be so interested by the curtains on the window behind her that we do not even notice the nose. In that way, pictures tend to be diffuse, words explicit. We first experience a picture all at once, a glance taking in the whole image, and theoretically we have no way of determining what in it might have caused what else in it. If we see a woman sitting in front of a window, we do not know if she is smiling because the curtains have been freshly laundered or if she laundered them because she is happy—or if the happy face and the clean curtains have nothing whatsoever to do with each other and that it is actually the nose that we should be paying attention to.

But further consideration reveals that words and pictures are not in fact so totally separable. As the inadequacies of patients with lesions reveal so clearly, the properly working brain requires both its hemispheres. In *The Shattered Mind*, Howard Gardner says, “it is almost unthinkable that our ‘normal’ minds should not utilize both halves of the brain during waking activity” (376). What research into hemispheric activity actually suggests

about picture books is what my experiments in separating words from pictures reveal—not that words and pictures are quite separate from each other but, rather, that placing them into relationship with each other inevitably changes the meaning of both, so that good picture books as a whole are a richer experience than just the simple sum of their parts.

The idea that words are merely lineal and pictures merely spatial is extremely simplistic. We could not read words if we could not interpret the visual symbols that stand for them on paper; reading is itself an act of vision. Furthermore, our understanding of language demands that we find holistic shapes in the sequences of words. In coming to an end, a sentence creates an implication of finality that demands not just our understanding of the words in sequence but also our simultaneous consciousness of everything that has already happened in the sequence so that we can understand the shape of the whole. Stories extend the shaping power of individual sentences. We will not be satisfied with a story until we perceive, consciously or not, that it does indeed contain the organizational patterns that make it a story rather than a “slice of life”: most literary criticism is about such patterns, about how writers weave spatial systems of opposition and variation into the lineal structures of a plot, so that stories can shape time and thus conquer time's open-endedness.

Meanwhile, the pictures in a picture book form a sequence—they can contribute to the act of storytelling because they do imply the cause-and-effect relationships of time. And as I suggested in my earlier discussions of how pictures imply meaning, even one picture on its own can organize space in ways that suggest some of the sequential ordering of time and provide some of its focus.

So perception of language requires activity in both hemispheres, and well-wrought words do in fact impose holistic patterns on the lineal; and perception of the visible world also requires activity in both hemispheres, and well-wrought pictures do in fact demand specific lineal interpretations of the visual whole. Describing how we understand words “by partly reversing the linear progress, remembering *simultaneously* what we have read

consecutively," and how understanding pictures is "a process in time," Joseph Schwarcz rightly concludes, "Following an illustrated text is, then, a complex activity" (*Ways of the Illustrator* 9).

The differences in the activities of the halves of the brain tell us how complex: as we respond to words and pictures which tell us about the same events in different ways, we must integrate two different sorts of information about the same events. We must gather spatial information from both pictures and words; in *Mr. Rabbit*, for instance, the pictures show us the settings, but the words of the text tell us how to see them—the colors that are significant in them. We must also gather temporal information from both words and pictures; in *Mr. Rabbit*, the words imply only the specific time occupied by the words of the conversation—it takes the pictorial depiction of the girl and rabbit in different locations to imply the more extended passage of time in which they move from one part of the forest to another between various parts of the conversation. As in *Mr. Rabbit*, the temporal information in pictures is often different from that offered by words, and the spatial information in words different from that in pictures; we must integrate time and space, and two different versions of time and space, before we can understand the whole.

The whole, then, is more than the sum of its parts. Speaking of cartoons and comic strips, Roland Barthes isolates an effect he calls *relaying*: his description of it could easily apply to picture books also: "Here language . . . and image are in a complementary relation; the words are then fragments of a more general syntagm, as are the images, and the message's unity occurs on a higher level; that of the story" (*Responsibility* 30).

Furthermore, the most successful picture books seem to be those in which the "unity on a higher level" emerges from pictures and texts which are noticeably fragmentary—whose differences from each other are a significant part of the effect and meaning of the whole. In *Problems of Art*, Susanne Langer says that, although the arts are different, "the fact that they are distinct is what enables them to have all sorts of highly specialized, interesting relations to each other" (82). As a highly specialized art form that combines different arts, the picture book is distinguished by

the ways in which it takes advantage of such highly specialized relationships. What follows is a discussion of how the relative strengths and weaknesses of words and pictures affect their relationships in picture books.

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According to William Ivins, it is the "communication of visual information and ideas which, for the last four centuries, has been the primary function of the exactly repeatable pictorial statement" (24). He suggests that, before methods of reproducing pictures were invented, science could not advance, for people could not actually *see* how things worked. In fact, words cannot communicate descriptive information as easily as pictures can. "Common nouns and adjectives, which are the material with which a verbal description is made, are after all only the names of vaguely described classes of things of the most indefinite kind and without precise concrete meanings" (15). A careful artist with words can make them wonderfully evocative, but they merely evoke rather than offer specific visual information, so that a novelist's description of his heroine's face might communicate how we are to respond to her appearance quite exactly, without ever giving us a specific idea of how she looks. And even then, we are forced by the nature of language to follow the writer's logic as he or she guides us through the material; the novelist can make the heroine's nose the most significant aspect of her face by leaving it to the end of the description and thus making it climactic, but that means we "see" the details of her face as a verbal sequence rather than as a visual whole. She has no nose for us at all until we get to the end of the list.

If I try to describe a character's face in words, therefore, I face two problems. First, I have to use words vague in themselves, such as "nose" and "long" and "handsome," in such a way that their relationship to each other can suggest something more or less specific: "handsome long nose"—and I have to assume that those who read my description share my idea about what "long" means and what sort of nose might be considered "handsome." Second, I have to present my information about various fea-



tures in a sequence to guide my readers through the details of the knowledge I wish to share; the readers must suspend understanding of each of the individual details until the whole list of such details is complete, so that they can see the relationship between "long nose" and descriptions of other features, such as "curly hair"—and the relationship of such specific details to overall impressions, such as "beautiful."

Since words are the separable parts of meaningful sentences, we can understand language only by understanding parts first, then building up to a whole that might in fact be an accurate combination of all the parts. But we see pictures all at once first and only then can begin to notice the potential relationships of their various parts. Our understanding of language starts with details and moves toward wholes; our understanding of pictures starts with wholes and breaks down into details. In terms of the halves of the brain, Jeremy Campbell suggests, "the right side tends to use a 'top-down' strategy, processing information as a whole, perceiving its full meaning rather than approaching it 'bottom-up' using the parts to construct the whole, which is often more than the sum of its parts" (239-40). We have to approach words bottom-up—one at a time, in the sequence in which they are given us. Consequently, words are best at describing relationships of details, pictures best at giving a sense of the whole. But each can eventually do both, and they can certainly help each other to do both.

Nevertheless, picture-book artists almost always convey information about the ways things look by means of pictures. While that may seem too obvious to be worth saying, the main difficulty facing neophyte writers of texts for picture books is understanding that they must leave such visual information in the hands of their illustrators. A good picture-book text does not tell us that the girl had brown eyes or that the room was gloomy—yet practitioners of literary art use exactly such visual details to establish character, mood, and atmosphere. Writers of picture books must imply character and mood without recourse to such details—and hope that illustrators sensitive to their stories will invent the right visual details to express the appropriate information.

There are two sorts of information that pictures can convey more readily than words: what *type* of object is implied by words and which particular *one* of that type is being referred to. The pictures in alphabet books and in compendia like Richard Scarry's *The Best Word Book Ever* are meant to represent types; if the words on a page say "C is for cat," then the creature depicted on that page is meant to represent cats in general—to show what the word "cat" refers to each time it is used in reference to many different individual creatures of different colors and shapes and sizes. It is by providing us with such visual types that picture books can be informative about the world we live in; they offer us a sort of dictionary of visual ideas, a set of labeled images by which we can identify the objects we actually see. Furthermore, schematic drawings can allow us to understand the workings of things, such as the interior of the human body or the construction of a medieval cathedral.

In the preface to his book about the construction of a medieval cathedral, David Macaulay says, "the cathedral of Chutreaux is imaginary, but the methods of its construction correspond closely to the actual construction of a Gothic cathedral. . . . Although the people of Chutreaux are imaginary, their single-mindedness, their spirit, and their incredible courage are typical of the people of twelfth-, thirteenth-, and fourteenth-century Europe." In order to provide useful information, Macaulay had to normalize—create a "typical" situation rather than the actually untypical circumstances that surrounded the building of each and every actual medieval cathedral. Exactly because they are nothing but typical, because they possess nothing but the characteristics that a number of things share, usefully typical types do not actually exist in the real world. That may be why the illustrations in dictionaries tend to be drawings rather than photographs of specific objects.

Macaulay's solution to that problem is to depict the building of a "typical" cathedral as if it were an actual one; he names specific names, and invents specific dates. In fact, an artist cannot choose but to identify the typical by depicting it as if it were actual; the word "face" carries with it no image of a specific face, but we can convey the idea "face" in a picture only

by showing a specific face. The cat depicted beside the words "C is for cat" may be meant to represent all cats; but it would be a bad drawing indeed if it did not in fact look like a possible, actual, unique cat—for it is exactly the way a cat does look that such a picture is attempting to convey.

On the other hand, the drawing would still not be serving its purpose if it had enough distinguishing characteristics to stop it from being typical. A cat with one leg and wearing glasses would not successfully illustrate "C is for cat" for those who did not already know enough about the appearance of cats to realize what was unusual about this one. People who assume (probably incorrectly) that Brian Wildsmith really wanted to convey information in his visually exciting but minimally informative *ABC* might rightly be upset by the fact that his horse has no legs and that his unicorn's most notable feature is its rear end.

The balance required in both capturing the typical and making the typical seem actual is the source of much of the difficulty adults have in coming to terms with picture books. Those who believe that the main purpose of pictures is typical information are upset whenever the objects shown in pictures diverge from ideally normalized types—when Wildsmith in his *ABC* uses some green paint in his depiction of a mouse and they are convinced that mice do not have green fur, or when Sendak's children do not look as blond and pink and ingenuous as conventionally typical children do. In assuming that every picture in a picture book must represent a type, however, we inevitably neglect the other sort of information pictures can convey so well—information about the uniqueness of separate objects; for a picture of a cat can and ideally always does show us not just what cats in general are but also what this particular cat looks like. In her fine discussion of the house style developed in the Golden Books series—the emphasis on caricature, the flattening of space, and so on—Barbara Bader makes an important point: "common to all the foregoing is the intent—to put across an idea or a piece of information rather than to call forth real people, a particular moment. . . . [The difference between these two styles is] generally what is meant, justly or not, by the distinction between illustration-as-communication and illustration-as-art" (*American Picturebooks*

288–89). In order to put across ideas, the Golden Book illustrators, and many others like them, sacrifice details in order to focus on the typical; in assuming that the purpose of pictures in all children's books is to put across ideas, we tend to ignore and misunderstand details. In doing so we miss the unique qualities of the pictures we look at, and that is not only what makes them worthy of consideration as works of art but also an important source of information of a quite different sort.

We look at a picture of a young woman. She is sitting at a window and smiling, and we know a great deal about her—most of it difficult to put into words. Her hair is done in a certain way. She wears a hat that appears to be of some woven or perhaps scalelike material and a dress patterned with leaves and branches and with fur at collar and cuff. She sits in a room that appears to be filled with tapestries; we see into the room from outside, and we also see that outside it is snowing and that the building she sits in appears to be some sort of castle. She holds up a finger. This picture is Nancy Ekholm Burkert's illustration for the words "At a window with a frame of ebony a queen sat and sewed," the opening of *Snow White*. It adds at least six different kinds of information to that provided by the words.

The first is that this is indeed the specific queen the words refer to—the basic relationship between illustration and text, in which the picture confirms the message of the words. The second is that this is a queen, a type of person; and that this is what sewing is. After reading the words and perhaps wondering what a "queen" or "sewing" is, we can look at the picture and see what they look like. So far, the picture merely offers a visual equivalent to the words. But beyond these basic aspects of illustration, the picture adds other information.

Third, and perhaps most important, it communicates what words could never convey, no matter how many of them one used. It communicates in a detailed way what this particular woman looks like and what the world around her looks like. We could make up a verbal list of details that the picture shows, and we could supply them with adjectives for a long time before we would have an exhaustive catalog of all the different information

this picture easily provides about how things look. But the length of that catalog would depend on our varying abilities to distinguish specific namable objects, to determine figures by separating them from grounds—it would be a list of separate facts rather than a holistic totality. Even the longest possible such catalog still would not convey all the visual information the picture conveys so effortlessly, and it would have quite a different effect: it would imply visual information rather than specify it.

Fourth, the picture communicates the appearances of objects we do not even have names for—and therefore might not have been able to describe accurately in our catalog. We may not know what a fleur-de-lis is, but we can understand what one looks like simply because there are a number of them on the tapestry behind the woman. We may not know they are called fleurs-de-lis, but that does not prevent us from being able to see them and even admire them. Similarly, we may not know the technical name for the strange hat the woman is wearing, but we can see the hat; and we can guess not just that this woman is wearing a hat but that this is the sort of hat a woman in this situation would be likely to wear. In fact, we might see a similar hat in another picture later on and conclude from the similarity that such hats were once typically worn by a certain sort of woman; we would be able to know that such hats were typical without having a word for them. It would take the technical jargon of a hairdresser to express the exact nature of the woman's upswept locks, and of a seamstress to describe the cut of her dress or the points of her sleeves. But we can understand from the picture what even very exact words could not tell us.

A fifth kind of information: if we bring into play our knowledge of conventions of appearance and gesture, we can guess something about the character of this woman sitting at the window—something that it would take many words to convey. Her clothing and her environment suggest that she is well off. We can guess, from the delicacy of her gesture and the very nature of her activity, that she is a lady. Her gentle features suggest that she is a gentle person, probably a likable one, certainly a quiet one. The picture easily communicates information about personality that writers must work hard at expressing in words.

A more telling example of how pictures readily convey personality can be seen if we compare Burkert's portrait of Snow White, as it appears on the dust jacket of her version of the story, with Snow White as she first appears in Trina Schart Hyman's version. Both girls have a fair complexion and dark hair; a catalog of their features would have to be very specific indeed before it could distinguish between the surprisingly similar shapes of their lips and noses. Yet despite the large degree of similarity, they are clearly two quite different sorts of people. Burkert's Snow White is "pretty," gentle, innocent, well-mannered, like her mother. Hyman's Snow White is a beauty, and something of an ingenuous nymphet; she may not know it herself yet, but she is clearly a sensuous, passionate individual.

But what exactly is it that conveys these important differences? It is hard to say. Part of it is certainly the difference between an attractive girl in front of some precisely drawn leaves and another attractive girl with a malevolent hawk on her wrist in front of trees tossed by tempestuous winds. Part of it is found in the implications of stance and gesture that we usually read without even being conscious that we are aware of them. But it is also something else about the shape of lips and eyes, something literally indefinable, something words could not capture. As Ivin<sup>8</sup> suggests, "When we try to describe a particular object in such a way as to communicate an idea of its personality or unique character to someone who is not actually acquainted with it, all that we can do is to pile up a selected group of . . . class names. . . . But beyond that it is impossible for us to go with words, for the ipseity, the particularity of the object, its this-and-no-other-ness, cannot be communicated by the use of class names" (52–53). Interestingly, Gardner's discussion of brain lesions provides support for this idea; Gardner suggests that "unfamiliar shapes tend to be processed by the right hemisphere, whereas shapes capable of verbalization (as well as other linguistic materials) are processed by the left hemisphere" (381). A possible conclusion is that, since language is a codification of what we already know—we would not have learned words to describe experiences we have not encountered yet—the information in pictures that we cannot yet verbalize is the information that is new to us, the information that transcends



our preexisting categories or class names. Seen in this way pictures can teach us about unfamiliar visual objects, but only if we use the words of an accompanying text as cognitive maps, schemata to apply to them in order to understand exactly what is new, left over beyond the schemata. We can say "hat" in response to an image of the one on Snow White's mother, then become conscious of how the visual details of the hat in question differ from our idea of a typical hat.

In addition to conveying two quite different Snow Whites by means of the way they depict them, Burkert and Hyman also provide two quite different attitudes toward them—a sixth sort of information. Through the devices of symbol and gesture, of pictorial dynamics, of color and mood and atmosphere that I discussed earlier, Hyman makes Snow White the enticing but ingenuous victim of a lurid romantic melodrama; one must feel sympathy for her. Burkert makes her passive, the sort of girl who always does as she ought and is rightfully admired for her lack of rebelliousness; the admiration demanded implies her triumph from the beginning. Similarly, Burkert's picture of Snow White's mother provides a way of thinking about her—an attitude toward her. She depicts her as seen from outside the window as through a frame; the bright, cheerful tapestries behind her contrast strongly with the gray walls of the castle and suggest that her place is a warm and comfortable one. But it has no depth; it merely looks like a series of different intricate patterns, a highly decorated surface that she herself becomes part of. We can enjoy looking at this pretty woman surrounded by beautiful designs, but we cannot feel much involvement with her. The picture requires us to appreciate the beauty but to keep our distance. Meanwhile, Hyman depicts Snow White's mother from inside the room; we look out with her, rather than at her from without. We are asked to empathize, and because we see details of the room—her maid, her religious triptych hanging on the wall, and so on—we know something about the particular interests and lifestyle of the person we are empathizing with.

These artists set out to illustrate the beginning of "Snow White," the idea that a woman sat at a window and sewed. They have each shown one

version of what that might have looked like, but they have also shown much else: what *a* queen might look like, what *this* queen might have looked like, where she might have lived and how she might have dressed, what sort of person she might be, and what sort of attitude we might take toward her. While words can convey information about clothing and setting, personality, and the attitudes we should take toward what is being described, pictures do so more readily. We can enjoy looking at this complex portrait of a queen, and even have some sense of the sort of person she is and how we might feel about her, even if we did not comprehend or enjoy the complex language we would need to know in order to understand the amount and kinds of information the pictures so simply show us.

The first sort of information I learned from Burkert's picture of Snow White's mother merely showed what the words say. The second is a generalization that the picture may or may not actually allow, for perhaps all queens did not look like this. But the other four sorts of information imply exactly that—that this queen looks like herself, that she is different from other queens. That amounts to a statement about the uniqueness of this woman at this moment, the particular thing seen at the moment of seeing. To return to the paradox I suggested earlier, pictures provide both information about the world in being typical and information about the specific objects they depict in being unique. But it is uniqueness—in personality, in atmosphere, in attitude—that makes the pictures in picture books so enjoyable. If we allow ourselves to judge them only in terms of their informative typicality, we misrepresent them, and if we encourage children to look at them for such information, we deprive them not only of much pleasure but also of much significant information—information that words are often silent about.

Many picture books—indeed, possibly all of the best ones—do not just reveal that pictures show us more than words can say; they achieve what Barthes called "unity on a higher level" by making the difference between words and pictures a significant source of pleasure. That pleasure is available even in a very simple book like *Goodnight Moon*. Margaret Wise Brown's spare text is little more than a rhythmic catalog of objects, a list of

details that encourages those who hear it to look for the objects mentioned in Clement Hurd's pictures. In doing so, however, they learn information the text does not mention. The old lady and the child to whom she says goodnight are both rabbits and not people. The old lady is knitting, and the kittens play with her wool. The "little house" is a playhouse, and it has its own lights; knowledgeable viewers will even realize that the picture on the bedroom wall is actually an illustration from Brown and Hurd's *The Runaway Bunny*. The delight viewers feel in discovering these things with their own eyes rather than with their ears reveals how basic and important is the difference between the information available in words and in pictures.

Anno's hiding of animals in the complex foliage of his *Anno's Animals* is another clever instance of how that delight in searching pictures for details can be evoked, but the difference between this wordless book and the similar picture in Nancy Burkert's *Snow White* of Snow White alone in the forest surrounded by animals hidden in foliage shows how illustrators can use differences between words and picture for more than the simple pleasure of puzzle solving. Finding Anno's animals is just a game, for no text accompanies these pictures to tell us that they might represent anything more significant. But once we have found Burkert's animals, we must then deal with the fact that the text does not mention them. In fact, they represent a danger to Snow White that she, in her innocence, does not notice either; our perception of them in relation to the words of the text tells us how blind and unprotected innocence may be when threatened by savagery. In seeing what she does not see, we come to interpret her situation more specifically than we would have had we not found the animals in the foliage.

That a simple game without words becomes a source of complex narrative information when accompanied by them suggests that my analysis of the kinds of information communicated by Burkert's picture of Snow White's mother was incomplete. While pictures can convey these kinds of information, they do so most subtly and most completely in the context of a text that supports and sustains them. A reconsideration makes that clear.

We can learn much about medieval Europe from Burkert's illustrations for *Snow White*—but only if we *know* already that the details in these pictures are characteristic of medieval Europe. And we could learn that only by being told it in words: by another person or by means of a book like this one that discusses the significance of the pictures in picture books. The pictures themselves can indeed *show* us these details in ways that words could not, but without words to explain that they are doing that, we could not know what the details represent. We need to be told what we are being shown.

Similarly, if we share knowledge of gestures and appearances, we can learn that Snow White's mother was gentle and well-mannered from Burkert's pictures and that Burkert wants us to view her from an objective distance. But unless we *know* the picture represents Snow White's mother, we will not know who it is that is so gentle and well-mannered, and we will not, therefore, have any use for the information. Without a name—that is, a word—to attach to it, the picture communicates nothing of particular interest or value to us. Even if the picture were hung in a gallery as *Portrait of a Woman* rather than as an illustration of Snow White's mother, it would be that context, that set of meaningful words, in which we viewed it and understood it: and if it were, indeed, captioned *Portrait of a Woman*, we would then read it as we have learned to read portraits and look for details that might be evocative of character.

In other words, pictures can communicate much to us, and particularly much of visual significance—but only if words focus them, tell us what it is about them that might be worth paying attention to. In a sense, trying to understand the situation a picture depicts is always an act of imposing language upon it—interpreting visual information in verbal terms; it is not accidental that we speak of "visual literacy," of the "grammar" of pictures, of "reading" pictures. Reading a picture for narrative meaning is a matter of applying our understanding of words—words like mine throughout this book; in applying such words to pictures, we are engaged in the act of turning visual information into verbal, even if we do not actually speak the words aloud. Even wordless books demand our previous knowledge of

how stories operate before we can find a story in them, and so do the pictures of *The Happy Owls* and *Mr. Rabbit* divorced from their texts. Walter Ong says, "We have all heard it said that one picture is worth a thousand words. Yet, if this statement is true, why does it have to be a saying? Because a picture is worth a thousand words only under special conditions—which commonly include a context of words in which a picture is set" (7).

That is true for the same reason that pictures can show us more than words can say: in duplicating the surface appearance of objects, a picture inevitably contains more visual information than necessary for the verbal message it accompanies. An artist might want to show us a woman sitting at a window, but in order to do so, the artist *must* show us a particular woman with a particular sort of nose sitting in a particular posture. And the woman must have clothes on, unless the artist is determined to make us respond to her naked body. The characters in novels frequently do not have noses, or elbows, or clothes—or at least, these details are not mentioned—and we are left to assume that they have such features but that those features are simply not important to our understanding of the characters in question. Words can, in this way, focus on what is important, and we can read stories in the faith that, if they are good stories, every detail will be of significance in terms of our understanding of the whole. But because an illustrator has to give every character a nose whether that nose is important or not, or else draw a picture of a person remarkably odd because he has no nose, a picture contains information that might not necessarily be relevant to our understanding of the story as a whole. It takes a context of specific words, or at least a previously established idea of what to look for that was probably first expressed to us in words, to point us toward what is significant and thus lessen the number of words the picture evokes from as many as a thousand down to the few specific words actually found in the text.

In "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't," Seymour Chatman says that "the camera depicts but does not describe" (128). In other words, it shows us objects that ought to interest us, and it might even, by means of

switches in camera angles and such, focus our attention on which of those objects ought to attract our attention. But it cannot tell us what it is about these objects that we ought to notice—*why* we should be interested in them. A novelist can say, "The woman was beautiful, despite her shabby clothing." A film—or a picture in a book—can indeed show us a woman in shabby clothing. But we might not share the casting director's conviction that she is beautiful and so miss the point, and we may be more interested in the pony she sits on than in the woman herself and so miss the point altogether. What Chatman suggests of film is true of the pictures in picture books: "The dominant mode is presentational, not assertive. A film doesn't say, 'this is the state of affairs'; it merely shows you that state of affairs" (128).

But in picture books (as, often, in films), the words can focus our attention on pictures in such a way as to make them assertive. Words can provide a cognitive map, a schema that we can apply to inherently unassertive pictures in order to determine the varying significance we might find in their details. Barthes calls this effect of texts in relation to pictures *anchoring*: "Language helps identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself. . . . the text *directs* the reader among the various signifieds of the image, causes him to avoid some and to accept others; through an often subtle dispatching, it teleguides him toward a meaning selected in advance" (*Responsibility* 28–29). An obvious example of such "teleguiding" is the caption under a picture in an art gallery—in giving us a name or an idea, it provides us with a pattern to apply to the image before our eyes and thus allows us to see that image in a specific way. We see not just a woman but *Portrait of a Woman*; we see not just a few daubs of red paint but *Composition* or *Angry Evening*—and we look at *Composition* differently from the way we would look at *Angry Evening*.

The texts of picture books often function as anchoring labels in exactly this way. Even the simple sentence "This is a cat" allows us to see the accompanying picture differently from the label "This is my friend, Peter, who is a cat," or the label "Peter was not happy that day." The first merely demands we pick up the general idea of cats, the second asks us to look for

something like human personality, and the third requires our attention to a specific emotion. Similarly, Sendak's picture of Zolotow's Mr. Rabbit and little girl relaxing in the woods would look quite different if it were labeled "Have some Madeira, my dear?" That label would change the emotional implications of the visual image—tell us to interpret this visible appearance in terms of different emotions. We cannot see what goes on in the minds of the characters we see in pictures; it takes words to point out the emotional content of visible gestures.

In a slightly less obvious way, the picture in *Wild Things* of Max making mischief by chasing a dog with a fork would be changed drastically if the words accompanying it read, "The dog ran so fast trying to escape the bad boy that she nearly banged her head on the door." With these different words, the same picture is now centrally about the dog and not the boy. Or consider another possibility: "The boy and the dog rushed into the living room to attack the monster; the dog was a little frightened, and looked back to make sure the boy was with her"; now the dog and boy are no longer enemies. Or another: "Max picked up the magic fork and, just as the dog fairy had promised, he began to fly. The dog fairy got out of his way in a hurry."

In these instances, the new words I have provided imply that the same visible gestures might stand for quite different situations. If we then look at the picture and believe that it might indeed be showing us what we have been told, then we have learned something important about the relationships of words and pictures. We would not accept a text that told us that this picture of a boy and a dog showed a goat and a pig running down the stairs; we tend to believe the evidence of our eyes when it comes to appearances. But the fact that we do so easily accept even minimally plausible verbal descriptions that change the meaning of the action suggests how words predominate in our reading of pictorial information about causes and effects and about the passage of time. As I showed earlier, pictures can and do convey these things, just as words can describe faces, but in picture books the texts more significantly specify temporal information, just as the pictures convey the most significant descriptive information.

Some aspects of pictorial meaning are particularly in need of the clarifying presence of texts. A picture cannot by itself tell us that it is a flashback, and without the use of conventions like the cloudy shapes that surround dreams in cartoons, a picture cannot by itself tell us that it represents a character's fantasy. Consequently, when looking at Piatti's *Happy Owls* pictures without the accompanying words, no one guesses that he or she is looking at representations of the visual images the owls are merely talking about. In Arnold Lobel's pictures for Judith Viorst's *I'll Fix Anthony*, similarly, while we see the same characters throughout the book, we see them in two different sorts of reality. At the beginning and end we see what they are actually doing; in the middle they appear inside the young narrator's imagination. But we can only know that the two boys are *not* actually playing bingo on one page but *are* really playing with a toy car on the facing page because of the grammatical relationships provided by the accompanying words. Stephen Roxburgh's suggestion in "A Picture Equals How Many Words" that the first and last pictures in *Outside Over There* are "almost identical images that comprise a sequence depicting an action, in fact, a baby's step" (21) reveals how Sendak takes advantage of the vagueness of the temporal information in pictures: without a text which asserts that the events of the story in between these two pictures occur instantaneously, in the time of a baby's step, we are left only with a sense of something wrong that supports the mystery this book so successfully conveys.

I said earlier that the fact that words do not describe everything that can be seen in a picture creates a game, since we can ourselves notice details that have not been mentioned. That suggests a third important effect of words on pictures. In addition to informing us of the emotional or narrative significance of visible gestures, and specifying cause-and-effect and other grammatical relationships between parts of pictures and series of pictures, words can tell us what matters and what does not. It is the text that tells us that the insignificant-looking bone that we did not even at first notice in *The Amazing Bone* is an important part of the story; on the other hand, it is the text's silence about the fox in Piatti's *The Happy Owls* that tells us not to be concerned about him or to imagine that he has a part in

the story—as people believe he has when they do not know Piatti's words. Similar silences inform us that the man in eighteenth-century dress playing a musical instrument inside a cottage in the exact center of one of the pictures in Sendak's *Outside Over There* is not at all significant to the plot and tell us to ignore the goat who appears centrally in some of the pictures in *Rosie's Walk*.

If pictures show us more than words can say, then they can easily confuse us as to what is important about all the things they show. In this sense, the pictures in picture books, like all pictures, are most significantly images to put words around—most interesting, and most communicative, when we have some words to accompany them. The *Mona Lisa* on its own may or may not be an interesting image: it becomes a fascinating one when we look at it with knowledge of even a few of the vast number of words that commentators have woven around it. Even the most abstract of pictures becomes an illustration when its artist provides it with a title, and even a title like *A Canvas All Painted Blue* tells us what to see in what we look at—not night, not melancholy, just the color blue on a canvas. The pictures in picture books are most interesting when the words that accompany them tell us how to understand them.

So far in this chapter, I have suggested two paradoxical truths: first, that words without pictures can be vague and incomplete, incommunicative about important visual information, and second, that pictures without words can be vague and incomplete, lacking the focus, the temporal relationships, and the internal significance so easily communicated by words. In *Ideology and the Image*, Bill Nichols sums up the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two different media when he suggests that language, which is made up of the discrete units of individual words separated by moments of non-sense, is something like the on-off digital code of computers—capable of conveying subtle connections and relationships simply because it misrepresents the continuum of reality by dividing it into discrete parts. But pictorial representation, in which the images do in some way resemble the objects they signify, are an analog code, in which separate meanings are not discrete and tend to shade off into each other. Ac-

cording to Nichols, "The graded quality of analog codes may make them rich in meaning but it also renders them somewhat impoverished in syntactical complexity or semantic precision. By contrast, the discrete units of digital codes may be somewhat impoverished in meaning but capable of much greater complexity or semantic signification. . . . As a consequence of this difference between analog and digital codes we are often in the position of using the complex instrument of language to speak about the rich meaning of art where a proliferation of words can never match the gradations of meaning to which the words allude" (47–48). The words Nichols refers to here are those used in the criticism of art; but in picture books the texts themselves allude to the pictures, and the pictures have been made in response to the texts. The situation has been designed to offer information from both digital and analogical codes at once; the unity of the whole emerges from a subtle interplay of the differing parts. In terms of the geography of the brain, Gardner says, "Since the left hemisphere operates primarily by processing elements in sequence, while the right hemisphere treats elements simultaneously ('in parallel'), activities which exploit both forms are particularly enhanced by interhemispheric collaboration" (376). Reading a picture book is clearly such an activity.

I suggested earlier that the pictures in a sequence act as schemata for each other. When a story is told in words as well as pictures, we first understand both the words and the pictures by means of the schemata we have already established for them—at first, our general expectations about stories and our general understanding about how pictures communicate. Then, the words correct and particularize our understanding of the pictures they accompany, and the pictures provide information that causes us to reinterpret and particularize the meanings of the words. Then all of that information becomes a schema for each new page of words and each new picture as we continue throughout a book.

For instance, if we looked at the first picture in *Where the Wild Things Are* before we hear the text and without knowledge of the images of Wild Things on the title page, we might say that we see a boy, meaning that the figure we see fits our schema of a young human being—and, perhaps be-



cause he does not wear a skirt, a young male human being. We might add that he looks angry and upset, his downcurved mouth fitting our schema for unhappiness, and we might be confused by his bushy tail, and conclude, perhaps, that he is not human at all, but half animal. Or we might bring into play our schema of occasions for costumes and assume that it is Halloween. Thus far, our interpretation of the picture depends on our basic models of human behavior.

But if we know the title of the book, the words "Where the Wild Things Are" might change our response—we might assume that this wild-looking child is indeed one of the Wild Things and that, perhaps, equally wild children might appear in later pictures. Or, remembering the images of wild creatures on the title page, we might assume that this child is in the process of being transformed from human to monster. Or we might alternatively bring into play our schema of children's books and toys and assume that it is the stuffed animal on the left who is the main character and that this wild half-human is out to get him. Furthermore, we might also bring into play various of our schema for pictorial conventions: the picture is dark, so it must be a sad story, and so on.

If we now add the words of the text, our perception of the pictures changes—and becomes much more specific. We now know that it is night and therefore not necessarily gloomy. We know that the creature's name is Max and that he is wearing a wolf suit; that means Max is not the dog and that it is indeed a wolf suit, a costume, so that Max is indeed a person, a human being. We know that this person, Max, and not the dog, is the main character. We also know for sure that he is a male, since it is "his" wolf suit. And we are told he is making mischief, which specifies the meaning of his downturned mouth: malevolence, not gloom. Furthermore, we have learned what matters in this picture: that it is not to be about how Max built a tent—not about the specific bad action—but merely an example of the more generalized conception, mischief.

In fact, we read both words and pictures here in relation to each other; rather than make the possible wrong assumptions I have outlined, our simultaneous or almost-simultaneous experience of both words and pic-

tures allows us to use each to correct our understanding of the other. But what might we expect next? According to conventional patterns of human behavior—and, perhaps, of children's stories—we would most likely expect an angry, adult woman to appear in the next picture. But perhaps not; the grammatical incompleteness of the text suggests that there is more of the sentence to come and therefore more mischief to come, most likely a continuation of the same sequence of action we have seen part of already, since that is what we tend to expect in stories. So perhaps we will see Max looking through a large hole in the wall that he has made with his hammer, and his mother's angry face looking through it at him.

In fact, the next picture confirms the grammar's suggestion that there was more to come, but rather than a continuation of the same sequence, we are provided with a quite different action. So the picture tells us that the phrase "of one kind" was indeed meant to be balanced off; its meaning is changed by the words "and another" not because we did not expect those words but because we most likely expected more words than that. But those words on their own set up a sort of repetitive pattern that we might well expect to continue—an extended series of "and others" depicting yet more sorts of mischief. The picture changes that expectation by setting up the beginning of a chase that we might well expect to see the end of: the most likely slapstick conclusion to this situation would be a picture of Max barreling into his mother once he gets through the door. The next page thwarts that expectation both by bringing the series to an end and by showing us a quite different sort of scene. Part of the reason this sequence of pictures and words is so interesting is that the words change the meanings of the pictures, and the pictures then change the meanings of the words—sometimes by confirming our expectations and sometimes surprising us by not confirming them.

This process of making assumptions on the basis of our previous knowledge and then correcting them is basic to perception itself. As Ulric Neisser says, "The schemata that accept information and direct the search for more of it are not visual or auditory or tactual, but perceptual. To attend an event means to seek and accept every sort of information about

it, regardless of modality, and to integrate all the information as it becomes available. Having heard something, we look to see it, and what we see then determines how we locate and interpret what we hear" (29–30). That last sentence nicely sums up the picture-book experience; picture books elegantly bring into play the basic patterns of perception. Having heard about something in the words, we look to see it, and having seen it, we now interpret what we hear differently. The words change the pictures, and the pictures change the words.

Pictures do that by adding visual information to what we have been told—show us, for instance, that Max is not just making mischief in general but that he is driving a nail into the wall. For that reason many commentators say that the purpose of pictures in picture books is to "extend" the texts, but cognitive theories of perception suggest that extension may be the wrong metaphor. It would be more accurate to say that pictures *limit* the text—and to add that the text also limits the pictures.

Consider some pictures of people suspended above flights of stairs. Without words we might guess that Sendak's Max above the stairs with a fork in his hand and Van Allsburg's Alan above the stairs in Abdul Gasazi's garden are flying or floating, or that Max is a creature that is half human and half animal and that Alan is a girl in jeans, or that both are midgets. But Sendak's words tell us Max is making mischief, and since the text does not refer to them, we discount the less plausible interpretations of the picture, like flying. Even more obviously, Van Allsburg's text tells us that Alan has, indeed, fallen down the stairs. In both cases, the words limit the range of possible responses to the picture.

Now consider the sentence "The boy fell down the stairs" unaccompanied by a picture. It clearly describes an action, but we have no way of understanding the meaning of the action. So we can imagine countless possibilities. The boy tripped. The boy was pushed. The boy was wearing a dress. He was a Norwegian. He was in a wheelchair. And so on. Any picture at all will narrow these possibilities to a very few. A picture of a boy in slacks without a wheelchair will eliminate the possibility of the dress and the wheelchair, and a picture of a boy in a kilt will eliminate the

possibility of the Norwegian—and a picture of a boy above a stairway in a garden will demand a quite specific response. Furthermore, the picture might even show us a banana peel that would account for the fall. Furthermore, as I suggested earlier, the quality of the picture itself might inform us of the proper attitude to take toward it; it might be a cartoon that tells us to laugh at the boy, or it might be a broodingly realistic picture that tells us to feel sorry for him. In either case, the picture would limit not only plausible interpretations of the situation but also the range of plausible responses to it.

By limiting each other, words and pictures together take on a meaning that neither possesses without the other—perform the completion of each other that Barthes calls "relaying." The words in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* do not in fact tell us that it is a stairway that Alan is falling down; they merely say he slipped and fell. And the picture does not tell us that it is somebody named Alan who is doing the slipping. Each tells us of something the other is incapable of telling or that the other could tell only with difficulty; together, they mean something quite different and a lot more specific than each on its own—in this case, that this is indeed a boy, that his name is Alan, that he has indeed slipped, and that it is indeed a stairway he is falling down.

Because they communicate different kinds of information, and because they work together by limiting each other's meanings, words and pictures necessarily have a combative relationship; their complementarity is a matter of opposites completing each other by virtue of their differences. As a result, the relationships between pictures and texts in picture books tend to be ironic: each speaks about matters on which the other is silent.