

## Inviting the Reader to Play in Selected Stories of Postmodern Children's Literature

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### Abstract

*Children's picture books are generally dismissed when considering great works of literature. That is due to the fact that they are presumably written for a child audience and are, therefore, thought to be of no literary value, except for their recognition as much loved childhood stories. However, as any parent or teacher can notice, many children books give as much to the adult reader as to the child listener with surprising sophistication and layers of meaning. This study will address the positive impact of this aspect of postmodern children's literature. This will actually create an intelligent reader who must pull from outside knowledge to look past the outward appearance of a text in order to understand a given work. By inviting the reader to play, postmodern children's literature assumes that the reader will investigate the texts and images to form their own meaning. By the act of the readers "playing", they engage with the postmodern devices in the stories and become active readers and formers of meaning. Postmodern children's literature both assumes and then creates a reader through the ongoing process of reading and creating that takes place within the covers of the books. This reader interacts with the text and is able to create diverse meaning, significant to each individual's own respective experience, counteracting the metanarrative and claiming literature as his or her own.*

**Keywords:** Children Literature, Picture Books, Postmodernism, Reader and Listener  
دعوة القارئ للمشاركة في أداء قصص مختارة من أدب الأطفال ما بعد الحداثة

المستخلص

شيرين مصطفى الشوري

استاذ مساعد بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية كلية الآداب جامعة بنها

لعل كتب الأطفال المصورة، بشكل عام، يتم تنحيتهما جانباً عند الحديث عن الأعمال الأدبية العظيمة، ويرجع السبب في ذلك إلي أن القارئ لهذه القصص يعتقد أنها ما دامت كتبت للأطفال فإنها غير ذات أهمية، وبالرغم من ذلك فقد لاحظ المعلمون والآباء أن كثيراً من هذه الكتب تعطي الكثير من الدروس المفيدة والمعاني القيمة ليس فقط للأطفال الذين يستمعون لهذه القصص بل أيضاً للقائمين علي حكاية هذه القصص، ولهذا فإن هذه الدراسة تلقي الضوء علي مدي التأثير الإيجابي لمجموعة مختارة من القصص المصورة لأدب الأطفال ما بعد الحداثة علي القارئ والمعلم والطفل لأن هذا يستلزم إعداد قارئ ذكي لديه قدر وافر من التعليم لينظر خارج إطار النص الأصلي لفهم هذه القصص، ولذلك من الأفضل أن يشترك القارئ و الطفل معاً في أداء القصص تمثيلاً وهذا لأن ما بعد الحداثة تشترط النظر إلي المعني الحقيقي من وراء هذه القصص مع الأهتمام أيضاً بأغلفة هذه القصص المصورة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أدب الأطفال، القصص المصورة، ما بعد الحداثة، القارئ والمستمع

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Children's picture books are generally dismissed when considering great works of literature. That is due to the fact that they are presumably written for a child audience and are, therefore, thought to be of no literary value, except for their recognition as much loved childhood stories. However, as any parent or teacher can notice that many children books give as much to the adult reader as to the child listener with surprising sophistication and layers of meaning. The position of children's literature within the realm of popular art and the tendency of such books to be overlooked as serious works of art lends itself to postmodern evaluation—which allows and encourages works to transcend between the worlds of popular art and high art.

As stated by Thacker and Webb in their introduction of their text that discusses children's literature in the context of literary movements:

While there are exceptions...for the most part, children's books are largely ignored in this branch [literary history] of literary scholarship. It may be that mainstream literary historians assume that books written for children are independent of the forces that influence literary change. Alternatively, the text themselves, focused as they are on educational values, may appear merely to be exercises in social control. Children's literature specialists have demonstrated repeatedly that the exclusion of such texts belies the complexity of their engagement with literary questions, whether thematic or formal. (2)

This study will address the particular advantages that children's books have as representative works of postmodern literature. Therefore, postmodern literature requires an intelligent reader who can understand imbedded allusions, irony, parody and context in order to derive the layers of intended meaning from writing. The study will also discuss the positive impact of this aspect of postmodern children's literature. This will actually create an intelligent reader who must pull from outside knowledge to look past the outward appearance of a text in order to understand a given work. The study will also discuss the negative aspects, which include the risks that are taken when an audience fails to comprehend the meaning behind the writings.

To deal with works of children's literature, the study is specifically addressing books that are written for beginning readers as *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka (1954), *Beware of the Storybook Wolves* (2002) and its sequel *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* (2002) by Lauren Child (1965), *The Giving Tree* (1964) by Shel Silverstein (1930-1999) and *The Taking Tree* (2011) by Shrrill Travesty. These are the books that are first read by an adult reader to a child listener. These are the same books that child then go on later to read on his/her own as she/he gains the skills to do so. They are short enough to be read in fifteen minutes before a child's bedtime, as they are absorbed and analyzed not only by the child, but by the parent or other adult reader. However, the important distinction between the children's books addressed here within and children's books at large is the implied audience that includes both the adult reader and the child listener or the beginning reader, as the author attempts to engage both. This distinction is meant to provide a limitation on the scope of discussion and to narrow down the large field of books that are purportedly written for children.

Because the intended audience of such books is at first unable to read the written words, the books naturally include pictures or visually engaging elements that correspond (or contrast) with the written words to provide meaning to the audience that is unable to read, or to enhance meaning for the audience that is able to read. Picture books demand that attention must be given to both words and images in examining the content and meaning. As for postmodern children literature, the particularly engaging picture books are most notable for the interplay between words, images and the mixed media.

The term postmodernism has been used to describe an era which to some has already come and gone. To others, it is seen as an opposite to modernism, with Flynn pointing out the inherent problem of considering postmodernism to be the binary opposite of modernism due to problematizing of binary oppositions (Flynn 545). It is more often seen as a reaction to or against modernism its predecessor. It has come of age in a changing society where technology plays an increasing role in peoples' lives, and where people have constant access to a wide variety of information from all over the world.

The term "postmodern" has been used in many different fields, including philosophy, visual and performing arts, literature, and also used to encompass essentially any creative or intellectual endeavor. By looking at some of the commonalities between philosophy, visual arts, and literature, one can come to a general understanding of what is meant by term postmodernism. Postmodernism reflects the term "incredulity of the

metanarrative” (Lyotard xxiv). While the postmodern art forms react against the preceding modernist art forms, they often do so by directly quoting and acknowledging the modern pieces that have come before them. Hence, the reader can expect postmodern children's picture books to take elements of both postmodern art and literature, drawing from traditional children's stories but then moving beyond them to create new meaning that can be significant to both the adult reader and child listener, even when the viewpoints seem to be at odds.

Postmodern children's literature invites the audience—both the beginning reader and listener, and the adult the reader—to play along and to become the creator of meaning through the employment of techniques that leave meaning open to interpretation. Daniel Green illustrates that audience's willingness to play as: “Most readers of even serious literary fiction expect a novel or short story to disclose its meaning in some directly discernible way; when it doesn't seem to do so readily or according to recognizable methods some readers no doubt conclude that such fiction has no meaning to disclose” (735).

Postmodernism uses self-refuting irony to create humor, wherein the audience must be able to laugh at itself. Perhaps essential to postmodernism and modern children's books specifically, is the author or creator's ability to play with meaning, which invites the audience to play along in order to create meaning even in the absence of the author whose work is left open for interpretation by an audience with conflicting viewpoints.

Children's literature is in a unique position to exemplify the pop-cultural aspects of postmodernism, to be postmodern it must also offer sufficient literary content to hold up to thoughtful analysis. Thacker and Webb states that; “books for children have, until very recently, been relegated to the realms of the popular and, therefore, they are often outside the remit of literary critics” (7). However, it is precisely the fact that children's literature has historically been overlooked as a serious form of literature while inhabiting the realms of popular, that it is now able to ascend as an exemplar of postmodern art when it also offers substantial literary content.

Because these stories are written to be accessible by young children who are beginning readers, the language is accessible to any reader. Similarly, the subject matter tends to be equally approachable using concepts that are readily understood by children but may nevertheless address the same complex issues addressed by high literature.

Due to this ease of accessibility to both the adult and the child audience, the child's picture book has a firm place in popular culture

which is precisely where postmodern artworks aim to subsist. At the same time, the content of a successful postmodern children's book that is able to spark thoughtful analysis is also worthy of high culture status. Therefore, often without even trying, authors of children's picture books have given their writings a unique advantage of accessibility and placement within popular culture, which is not as easy to achieve in the case of adult literature, while also remaining relevant to a more sophisticated high culture reader who takes the time to delve into thoughtful analysis. In other words, the authors of children's books automatically place their artworks into the hands of an audience that is naturally at once varied and contradictory, contrary to the more select audience of traditional readers of high literature, while simultaneously remaining relevant to both groups.

Children's picture books target at least two recognizable and specific partners: beginning readers/listeners (children) and the adult that are guiding the children to literacy (parents and teachers), while acknowledging that this relation results in an audience that is comprised of readers with world views that are directly at odds with each other. "Perhaps the most obvious class of works written for two distinct audiences is one well known to all parents: children literature. Many works of this genre appeal both to the child's mind and sensibility and at the same time to the very different interpretive framework of adults" (Richardson 259).

By its very nature, children's literature is viewed at once by two dual part of audience; however, the author must choose to address and be relevant to its readers on both ends of the spectrum in order to take advantage of its natural position, resulting in contradiction or self-refutation. Although all children's picture books have this natural advantage of being read by constituents of popular culture—adult and child—the author of a specifically postmodern work of children literature will choose to take advantage of this unique position by addressing the duality and inherent contradictory viewpoints of the dual audience.

In spite of the fact that a child and adult simultaneously are reading one story, hearing the same words and seeing the exact same images, each will find different meaning in what he is experiencing. That is due to the differences in each reader's past experiences and understanding of the world. While any two readers/ viewers experiencing the same artwork will naturally have different perspectives, the vast difference in life experiences between a child and an adult, which are given equal consideration and validity, can result in self-contradiction within the book. Subtle "double encoding" can be employed to address

each respective audience member: Stevenson describes this as a “wink past the child reader to the adult beyond, or wink past the adult to the child” (33). When a story is “doubly coded” (Richardson 260), the author has acknowledged the importance of the multi-narrative of both the adult and the child. This has attempted to simultaneously address both using language and context that will appeal and translate differently to each reader with apparent contradiction.

By “doubly coding” a story, an author is therefore rejecting the idea of the metanarrative, in that he is rejecting the notion that there is one story to be told to one audience in given work. The author is providing stories that are subtly different and potentially self-contradictory depending on the reader, therefore accounting for the different perspectives that can be present within one audience and one story.

In Lauren Child's *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*, both the child listener and adult reader are specifically included as characters within the narration of the story, which begins with a mother (adult reader) reading a bedtime story to her son Herb (Child listener). Both adult and child are immediately involved into story since the adult reader will be drawn to relate the adult mother figure, as she—like the story mother—is reading a story to a child and the child listener is shown as Herb. The perspectives of the characters are at odds with each other, with one knowing that the storybook wolves are not real but are simply make-believe creations that pose no true danger, and with the other believing that they are real and scary. This is due to the difference between fiction and reality that has not yet been fully realized in a young child.

One can then go on to read the words in the story, choosing to view the narration from either point of view, as they become divergent and sometimes conflicting. After Herb asks his mother to take his storybook from the room when she leaves, due to the wolf inside, the narrator says, “Herb's mother would smile to herself because she knew that storybook wolves are not at all dangerous”. In this case, the reader adopting the perspective of the parent figure might smile, able to reflect on her own child's fear of “storybook wolves” and her knowledge, like the story mother's knowledge, that storybook wolves are in fact harmless. On the other hand, to the perspective of a child reader (or sympathizer) and Herb alike, storybook wolves are in fact scary and dangerous as any flesh and blood wolf, being one and the same, particularly as Herb is preparing to embark on an adventure including a real encounter with a storybook wolf. Thus, the contradictory points of view of both the reader and child listener assert that neither child nor adult member is incorrect in their

interpretation of the story. Each interpretation is equally valid in the sense of the micro-narratives that make up the whole of the story. The mother, who in her experience knows that stories are not dangerous, will view storybook wolves as a figment of imagination with no real power. On the other hand, the child who can imagine a confrontation with the storybook wolf as a reality will see a different danger in storybook wolves. Each individual will gain something possibilities of divergent perspectives.

One cannot forget while reading the story to the child voice or character of the writer. It is easy to overlook the writer of a story when one's focus is on the characters in a story. An interesting trait of postmodern works is the writing's own acknowledgment of the writer self-referentiality. This allows the writer to assert herself/himself, to assert her/his existence something with a fictive self, even once the story is out of her/his hands with interpretation and creation of meaning left to the reader in the author's absence. Employing self-referentiality leads to a work of metafiction, or a work that does not let the reader become so drawn into the story that the reader ceases to recognize it as being simply a story. "One common aspect of the discussions about metafiction is its self-referentiality or self-consciousness; metafictional texts draw attention to their status as fiction and text through the use of a number of devices or techniques" (Panteleo 19-20).

Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith have chosen "Jack" as their narrator, or their fictive self in *The Stinky Cheese Man*, as he identifies himself on the first page as he accosts the Red Hen: "I'm Jack. I'm the narrator. And no, I can't help you plant the wheat. I'm a very busy guy trying to put book together". Thacker and Webb discuss Jack's role as postmodern narrator: "the construction of the text is physical task. The reader thus gains a sense of the book as physical entity rather than a linguistic and visual representation divorced from the actualities of production" (158).

Instead of invisibly narrating the stories that follow, Jack obtrusively makes his presence known as he directly addresses his readers in his role as the creator of the book. After an upside-down page appears in the book, presumably at the direction of narrator Jack, he states, "I know. I know. The page is upside down. I meant to do that". This calls attention to both the author and the narrator of the book, and to a book as an imperfect expression of the author's ideas. The reader is not allowed to immerse herself in the fairy tales within the book, as she was likely encouraged to do when she originally encountered the same stories told in a fashion in the past. Thus, the reader is immersed into the book itself alongside the creator. Jack keeps reminding the reader that these are just stories that were created by the author. This indicates that the

author/creator is not other than human but is rather the teller of a story that comes from his own perspective within the limitations of his own skills and abilities and has become a part of the story.

The author's absence from the reading of the text becomes an expression of the text. The reader is left with textual clues that form an interpretation of who the author is, and what she/he is trying to express within the pages of the book once the text is in the hands of the reader.

In Lauren Child's *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?*, the skills of the creator are called into question. Herb, who began as the reader of stories, has suddenly and literally become part of the stories he is reading, and attempting to flee a series of well-known storybook characters. Tongue; the narrator (who now becomes a character in the book, as does the illustrator) states as Herb stands before a looming brick wall with a large door, "It was difficult to open because the illustrator had drawn the handle much too high up but, after three attempts at jumping, Herb managed to grab and slowly creak the door open". In this case, the creator of the book (author) has actually hindered the reader (Herb's) ability to literally navigate through the story.

Another metafictional device employed in *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?* is described by Suzanne O'Sullivan: "Child also resists the spatial boundaries of the text by having characters 'break through' the page" (49). The reader expects a book to be linear, able to be read left and right, top and bottom. She anticipates that the book will flow naturally from beginning to end. This does not allow the reader to remain within the normal boundaries of a book but expects the reader to go beyond them, just as Herb has done.

The line between the book that is held the reader, and the books that are held by Herb, is blurred. When Herb has the "odd pea squashed between the pages", there too does the reader of child's book have a printed representation of pea squashed between the pages. At one point, Herb must literally cut through the pages of his book to escape to the next page, and the reader also finds an actual hole in his copy of the story. By blurring the difference between the reader's book, and Herb's books, the author brings herself as the narrator, the reader, and the characters of the book into the same reality. The author and the reader are now subjects to the structures of the text, which conditions and creates their reality and identities.

When considering the various features of postmodernity within children's literature, it would be impossible to discuss the meanings of the text without discussing the meanings of the illustrations. It is also problematic to consider simply the terms "text" and "illustrations,"

because postmodern children's picture books in fact employ more complex visual representations than can simply be described as words and pictures. The visual aspects of the books include not only drawings and words, but also the font size, in which the words are written in order to convey meaning and interest. The illustrations themselves are affected through a wide variety of mixed media, from painting, collage, computer graphics, and everything between.

If postmodern visual arts employ a pastiche of styles and materials, Child's children's books certainly embody this characteristic. In both *Beware of the Storybook Wolves*, and *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book*, the illustrations consist of a combination of drawings, reproduced stickers, realistic photographs, reproduced textured fabrics, and other colorful and visually exciting medium. The text itself adds to the visual elements of the story, as described by O'Sullivan: "Child also uses typography to imitate oral delivery, often giving each character their own 'voice' by setting their dialogue in a unique font" (51).

When attempting to read and view a postmodern picture book, the reader is not given a simple picture that can be expected to correspond to the written words and be easily interpreted. Instead, the viewer/reader is confronted with irregular variety of visual effects that may or may not correspond to the text. The illustrator gives the reader a scene, and the writer gives the reader words, but each component may be offering a different narrative. In the case of Child's books, one must examine the pictures, and might even have to turn the book sideways and upside down in order to take in whole intended scene. Therefore, the use of visual images and text that may be telling different stories does not allow for easy interpretation; instead, the audience must reflect, analyze, and consider the connections between the words and images in order to discover meaning within postmodern children's literature.

Postmodern children's literature tends to uproot the exception of the reader, listener, and viewer. It does not convey to represent as objective reality, but rather supports a micronarrative interpretation with the meaning that is jointly created by the author as a product of the text, and the reader who is similarly drawn into the text. Because the readers are unable to depend on their first impressions of the story, they are forced to reread and take a second look at the pages in order to find the intended meaning and be passive observer. O'Sullivan describes the reader as "for this kind of playful interactivity to succeed, readers must be willing to play" (50). In other words, because the story does not offer an attempt to an objective metanarrative, the reader must draw on their interpretation of the signifiers to construct her own understanding of the

micronarrative. The audience of postmodern children's literature must work to find meaning within the text, to find the truth that is being represented. Because the author does not offer the answers directly, the reader must be willing to actively engage in the story for meaning to be conveyed.

The title of this children's book authored by Shrill Travesty, *The Taking Tree* immediately reminds the reader of Shel Silverstein's children story, *The Giving Tree* (1964). To understand this parody, one must therefore remember *The Giving Tree*. It is simple story about a boy who grows to be an old man through the course of the book, during which time he repeatedly takes from an apple tree that is portrayed to be happy with the sacrifices. The tree first offers a place to climb, later offers apples and branches, and finally offers her whole trunk in self-sacrifice. Though seemingly a simply tale, the story has been interpreted by parents, educators, and readers primarily with unending variations of two themes: as an instructional tale about selflessness from the perspective of the tree, which seems to be a favored interpretation; or as a tale about greediness without repercussion from the perspective of the boy essentially in parody of tales about selflessness (Strandburg and Livo 17-18).

*The Taking Tree* begins on the dust jacket with the summary: "We all know the story of the selfless tree that gives and gives and gives just to make sure one little boy is happy. This is a different tree. A different boy. And a very different book." The cover of *The Taking Tree*, similar to that of *The Giving Tree*, depicts a boy taking leaves off a tree. However, the parody features a tree whose body language is oriented away from the boy, with a grimace. This is in contrast to that of the original giving tree, which is leaning towards the boy offering an apple seemingly of its own accord. The original story allows the boy some ambiguity of motivation, and although he takes from the tree, the tree for its part is happy to give. The tree, which is symbol of nature, is passive to the will of the boy. On the other hand, *The Taking Tree* is clearly reluctant representing a resistance of nature against man, and the boy is depicted to be clearly mean spirited and exploitative. The tree in *The Taking Tree* is represented to be resentful of the boy's constant taking: "The tree just hated the kid. But she couldn't get away from him. She was a tree. This was where her roots were". When the kid asks if he can cut down her trunk, the tree that has been given a voice, unlike the tree in *The Giving Tree* says, "Are you out of your mind?" The author thereby asserts that there is another story to be told, the story from the perspective of the tree as a representative of nature that is quite different from a reality in which

a tree gives selflessly and quietly of itself. He gives a tree a voice, and that voice insists that it is indeed not happy or selfless, but simply unable physically to fight back (until the end, it should of course be noted, where the boy cuts down the tree which in turn crushes him. In Silverstein's version, the tree and nature do not have a voice, but the narrator informs the reader that the tree is happy. In Travesty's version, the tree speaks for itself as a representative of the natural world, while the narrator also offers his own commentary, calling the boy a "real jerk".

In *The Giving Tree*, the narrator's voice as created by the text appears to be non-judgment. However, the author/narrator of *The Taking Tree* almost becomes a part of the story with the offered judgments, such as calling the boy a jerk and concluding the story, "I have no idea if the tree is happy about this or not". In this way, the author becomes a part of the story, directly imparting opinions of the situation between the tree and the boy. In the absence of the author while the reader is viewing the book, the author becomes a character within the reality of the story, telling the reader how the situation. Thus, the reader must then accept or reject the author's explicit perspective, thereby subjecting himself to the structures of the text and also taking his own role in the story.

Travesty takes advantage of his dichotomous audience by inserting remarks that are clearly directed at an adult audience. One page depicts the boy with his arms crossed, with the words "And he carved things into the tree ---that he almost instantly regretted". The following page shows the tree, attempting to cover its trunk with its branches. When the small house that the boy built from the tree's branches burns down, the narrator says, "The tree was very happy---until she found the kid survived the fire. In fact, he had insured the little house for five million dollars. For some reason". The adult will recognize that the kid burnt the house for the insurance money, while a younger reader may not know the complexities of insurance fraud as implied by the narrator.

By parading *The Giving Tree*—an ambiguous book that is often seen as an instructional tale about selflessness from the perspective of the tree—with an unambiguous story that portrays the boy as selfish and troublesome, Travesty takes a beloved story with beloved characters and brings the characters out of the realm of fairytale, calling attention to a different story, a different micro-narration with a different moral. Travesty takes an old story and creates new meaning, or perhaps calls attention to the meaning that was lost through interpretation of the original story.

Parody requires the writings to portray one thing while simultaneously meaning something different. When properly employed,

and received by a willing player, parody creates a strong message by first calling attention to the literal image or idea portrayed, and the subverting that image by implying an entirely different meaning that is contrary to the literally represented idea. In order to function and produce the intended meaning, parody assumes knowledge and complicity of the audience. Poorly executed parody risks only portraying the literal image or idea, with the second subversive meaning falling short of audience understanding.

A young child's ability to understand complex literary devices can be seen as an audience that is more willing to play, perhaps even better suited to read postmodern literature than the adult audience due to his generally open mind and natural interaction with stories. The child audience is naturally curious, and is known to read the same picture book over and over again in order to understand the multiple layers of meaning that must be unraveled. Although the young audience may have a different perspective than the adult audience, young readers are nevertheless able to make meaning from postmodern children's literature that allows room for multiple interpretations and multiple understandings.

By inviting the reader to play, postmodern children's literature assumes that the reader will investigate the texts and images to form their own meaning. By the act of the readers "playing", they engage with the postmodern devices in the stories and become active readers and formers of meaning. Postmodern children's literature both assumes and then creates a reader through the ongoing process of reading and creating that takes place within the covers of the books. This reader interacts with the text and is able to create diverse meaning, significant to each individual's own respective experience, counteracting the metanarrative and claiming literature as his or her own.

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