Bette P. Goldstone
Beaver College, PA

Traveling in new directions:
Teaching non-linear picture books

David Macaulay's *Shortcut* (1995) opens with Albert and his horse, June, going off to sell melons at the market. Then in Chapter two, Patty's pet pig, Pearl, disappears. Chapter three describes how Professor Twee spends his days studying bird behavior aloft in a hot air balloon. Chapter four begins, "Someone has opened the switch, sending the Darlington Cannonball onto the abandoned line."

What's happening here? Where's the ending? Which story is the beginning? How do all these different plots connect? This intriguing story is an example of a new form in the picture book genre — a non-linear narrative presentation. These non-linear stories, which have been emerging over the past 20 years, challenge traditional story structure.

Aristotle wrote in *The Poetics* that well-constructed plots have a beginning, a middle, and an end, each emerging naturally from preceding events and occurrences (Anderson & Groff, 1972). For close to 25 centuries this concept has held true in western literature. Now, new principles of text organization are being revealed. Multilinearity and networks of information are replacing hierarchy, centrality and linearity (Landow, 1992). In these non-linear children's books, stories and illustrations are deliberately constructed with gaps in information, seemingly superfluous irrelevant information, multiple story lines and ambiguity. As seen in *Shortcut*, there is not a hierarchy of events or a central story line.

These new picture books have their own codes of logic, their own rules of organization and expectation. Understanding this new system of plot structures is a critical component in the comprehension process. Research shows that knowledge of text structure guides predictive thinking (Hennings, 1997). The more students are able to successfully predict what will happen next in the reading act, the more they will read with purpose, confidence and certainty. Teaching narrative structure and related genre definitions enhances comprehension, but practice tends to focus not on these literary factors but on sequencing and traditional predictive thinking activities (Hunt, 1991). It is time to counter this, to examine these exciting books critically and to actively pass on information about non-linear structure to our students. This will make them more informed readers and pose new possibilities for their writing.

Characteristics of non-linear picture books

Non-linearity affects the rhythm of reading and the degree of co-authoring needed. Traditional story books like Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1971) are read sequentially from beginning to end. This linear movement creates a steady rhythm, an expectation of an orderly procession of events and actions (Bolter, 1991). In non-linear books, however, the story may not flow from beginning to end. The reading rhythm changes. The

reader may be backtracked or enticed to linger on the page longer than usual. For example, in Jan Brett's *Trouble with Trolls* (1992), the primary narrative is about a little girl, Treva, who cleverly outwits the trolls she meets. The story begins with Treva proceeding up Mount Baldi to visit her cousin:

> "My dog, Tuffi, and I walked up the path until we reached the place where the last of the old trees stood. And that is where the trouble with trolls began."

The natural response, and certainly the traditional one, is to proceed forward to learn more about this impending problem. Jan Brett, however, diverts the reading rhythm by adding a competing story. On the bottom of each page is a peek into trolls' underground existence. Should the reader proceed ahead or linger to learn about the trolls' secret life? If the reader lingers, then the eye backtracks to the lower left hand page. The linearity of the story is broken.

Another major feature that distinguishes non-linear stories from traditional picture books is their "open text" construction (Thacker, 1996). Open texts require involved and active story creation by the reader. Of course, in all stories, the reader augments meaning through prior knowledge and personal emotive responses (Rosenblatt, 1978). Non-linear picture book authors and illustrators, however, deliberately provide gaps in the stories and insert ambiguities which foster, indeed, force co-authoring. Jan Brett does not design a plot in her secondary story of the trolls' underground habitat. There are pictures of setting, characters and action, but no accompanying narrative. The story grammar is incomplete for the initiating problem is omitted. The reader is the author of this story, filling in the gaps, adding as much or as little information as desired.

Categories of non-linear picture books

Non-linear picture books fall into two categories — ones that contain integral intertwined narratives and others that contain multiple non-essential story lines. Integral intertwined story lines have multiple stories that all must be used to create a cohesive meaningful whole. David Macaulay's *Black and White* (1990) is a quintessential example of this type of non-linear book. He writes on the title page:

> This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended.

Within each double page spread are four images, each has its own illustrative style, particular color use, characters and text. To make the most sense out of this book, the reader must actively co-author and make connections among the stories. The reader makes inferences about how characters and events from one story influence another. Macaulay does not provide any concrete answers. The finalized version of the story may vary from reader to reader, but integration of story lines is essential for comprehension.

John Burningham's tender story *Granpa* (1984) is another example in this category. Each two-page spread captures one particular moment in time in the relationship between a little girl and her grandfather. It is as if the book is a picture album, showing discrete and separate moments of the two, caught unaware of the camera. The settings and actions shift suddenly without transitions. The text is made up of sparse dialogue with no descriptive elements. For example, in the potting shed Granpa says, "There will not be room for all the little seeds to grow." Granddaughter says, "Do worms go to heaven?" On the next page, the two are singing in the parlor. In the next scene, they are playing dolls. This book makes sense only when the reader weaves all these components together, gathering information about this special intergenerational relationship. Other non-linear picture books that fall into this category are: Istvan Banyai's *Zoom* (1995) and its sequel *Re-Zoom* (1996), John Burningham's *Come Away From the Water, Shirley* (1977) and *Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley* (1978), and Jon Scieszka's and Lane Smith's delightfully zany *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992).

The second category is one in which the non-linear picture books contain non-essential multiple story lines. These narratives add interest and insight to the primary story but are not necessary for story comprehension. *Trouble with Trolls* by Jan Brett is such a story. The illustrations at the bottom of the pages provide imaginative ideas about how trolls live, but

the reader does not need to use this information in understanding the primary story of Treva. Another example is Chris Conover's rendition of *Simple Simon* (1989). On each left hand page is a full-color, whimsical illustration of Simple Simon at the fair. Each right hand page contains the text and a decorative medallion — plus hidden illustrations of characters from other Mother Goose rhymes. The linearity of the story and the steady rhythm of reading is broken as the child searches for Humpty Dumpty, Wee Willie Winkie, etc., but these forays into Mother Goose rhymes are not needed to understand Simple Simon's story. Other examples of stories with non-essential multiple story lines are: Mitsumasa Anno's, *Anno's Alphabet: An Adventure in Imagination* (1975), Jan Brett's *Comet's Nine Lives* (1996), Anthony Browne's *Zoo* (1992), and Janell Cannon's *Stellaluna* (1993).

Teaching strategies

Because these stories are non-linear, teaching strategies need to be modified accordingly. Asking students prediction questions (i.e. What will happen next?) or having them search for traditional story structure clues such as "What is the problem?" is not appropriate. Children need to understand non-linear text structure and be encouraged to make intertextual connections. Of course, children do come to school with a sense of story structure, developed through day-to-day story telling devices —books, television, movies, etc., (Applebee, 1989). They are also not strangers to non-linear structure. Our students are the point and click generation. They interact with electronic worlds where "information is gained not in a linear fashion but from bytes and text fragments that certainly do not consistently follow a left to right sequence" (Dresang & McClelland, 1996, p. 40). However, students are not always successful in applying this knowledge. In his study of over 700 students, Protherough (1989) found that students can have problems explaining story elements and distinguishing different types of stories. He found, as did Jordon (1995), that explicit and implicit, formal and informal teaching helps to mold and solidify ideas of story form. To fully appreciate these wonderful non-linear books, delight in their ambiguities, and relish the story making, students must be aware of how they

differ from traditional picture books. Below are some suggested teaching ideas to foster understanding of this new form of picture book:

- Focus questions on the interconnections among multiple story lines. Are the competing stories occurring at the same time? Who are the characters in each story line? How are the actions and behaviors of the characters in the competing story lines similar or different? Where are the different story lines occurring? Is the mood of each of the story lines the same? Different? Can the story lines stand alone? How do they interact? Why did the author create a second story line?

- Model thinking about non-linear book out loud for the students. Describe how you, the teacher, approach the text. Point out the changes in rhythm. Describe why you decide to linger over a page, or backtrack, rather than to proceed forward. Talk about the multiple story lines, and how you interpret them.

- Discuss the illustrations, noting style, color and composition. Have the students think about why the artist selected a certain palette or chose a specific style. How do illustrations from competing story lines compare? Keifer (1993) found children as young as kindergarten age can learn to make subtle and sophisticated distinctions in analyzing illustrations.

- Use similar texts to complement and reinforce ideas. Organize books in clusters — use books with integral interwoven story lines together or plan lessons focusing on books with non-essential multiple story lines.

- Have the students write their own non-linear picture books. The students could model Jan Brett's *Trouble with Trolls* by having a human meet a character from another world. The main story would proceed through words and pictures. The secondary story could be drawn on the bottom of the pages, giving further insights and details about that second character.

Narrative texts are designed to entertain. Stories may seek to inform the reader generally or teach morals or facts. Sometimes the story provides a forum for the author to reflect upon, expand, and share experiences with the audience. Its most important function,

however, is "to nourish and extend the reader's imagination" (Derewianka, 1990, p. 40), and indeed, these non-linear picture books do just that. They are highly imaginative literary experiences that prod and entice the reader to think flexibly, to solve problems, and to see unusual relationships.

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