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The kinds of imagination in picture books

A single word often conveys multiple meanings, and the word imagination is an example. Rather than thinking of imagination as a single, monolithic entity, I want to suggest that the term imaginings with an -s ending, seems more appropriate.

When we consider the variety of ways in which picture book authors and illustrators work, it seems that three different kinds of imagination are evident. I've called these individual imagination, parallel imagination, and paired imagination. I'd like to describe these and give some examples of each. What different ways of imagining does this category system suggest?

INDIVIDUAL IMAGINATION

In the category of individual imagination, we see someone who can create both in words and in visual images, fashioning interesting, compelling text, and then enlarging our understanding and appreciation of those words by also creating visual images.

Someone whose name comes to mind in this category is Jan Brett, who has been crafting language into stories and then enriching them with the visual images she also creates. Nearly 20 years ago, Houghton Mifflin published **Fritz and the Beautiful Horses**, in which her intricately detailed, realistic and slightly romanticized full-color art gives children much to examine at leisure. Printed on an elegantly heavy matte paper, this art is done without the encompassing borders which have since then become her trademark.

More recently, her **The Hat** (Putnam, 1997) shows the direction this imaginative artist has taken.

The art remains as completely detailed as ever, and her ability to create the illusion of three dimensions on a flat piece of paper is indeed impressive. Where in previous books the borders had been narrower, showing in small vignettes additional story developments, in this book the borders have enlarged to become almost as important as the main piece of art on each opening. The humor in the words is reinforced by the visual humor in the art: children will giggle at the final double spread in which each of the animals is wearing what it believes to be a hat. The final line of the story itself, "Don't they know that animals should never wear clothes," provides a direct link to Judi Barrett's **Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing** (Atheneum, 1970); use the two books together to explore with children how two different author-artists can use a similar story idea and come up with two quite different final products.

Another artist who has been stimulating her readers' and viewers' imaginations through her own imagination is Lois Ehlert. Her **Eating the Alphabet** (Harcourt, 1989) has indeed become since then a classic, exemplifying the potential in painted collage papers. Ever the experimenter, Ehlert has varied page size in her highly saturated images in **Circus** (Harper, 1992), done on a high-gloss paper that intensifies the color. Like Tana Hoban, who also understands the value of black as a foil for bright colors, Ehlert uses her flat, geometric shapes to compel us into the kinetic environment she depicts. In **Snowballs** (Harcourt, 1995), she explores a calmer world, using the shapes and painted papers for which she is so well-known, but adding photographed items to the collage and in the process stretching our

imaginations again. The page layout, which midway into the book forces the turning of the book from horizontal to vertical, in order to accommodate the full size of the snowman, is a clever solution to the problem. It is a solution similar to what Gail Haley did in her **Jack and the Bean Tree** (Crown, 1986). Use these two books together, with other such examples you can locate of artists making the reader shift book position, to help children think about how artists use page orientation to their purposes.

An artist newer in the field also represents this category of individual imagination. Denise Fleming, in a series of books, has shown us how very simple story lines can be accompanied by equally simple, precisely edged shapes done in the luminous colors she achieves through the pouring of colored paper pulp.

In her book, **Barnyard Banter** (Holt, 1994), Fleming's wraparound dust jacket introduces us to the chickens, hens gabbling on their nests while the obstreperous rooster prances across the front, leading us into the loudly squawking geese, necks akimbo on the title page pursuing that dragonfly that could become a tasty snack if it didn't prove so elusive.

The pig's bulky body is a riot of loud, close tonalities in pink and peach colors, showing this artist's skill in mixing her liquid fibers.

There's an immediacy to this art, perhaps because of how close we are to most of the characters. The way the goose's neck curls around the page on the third opening from the end is nothing short of inspired composition. Fleming can't be beat in the ability to create stone and gravel textures, and in contrast, her goose bills are intense orange-red. The simple words repeat the animal sounds and compel children to repeat with the reader.

In her book, **Where Once There Was A Wood** (Holt, 1996), she spreads the art across the gutter to get a full 19-inch horizontal dimension

for her work. The words are done in a ragged-edged style that reflects the textures of the pictures. In an addition not present in earlier of her works, Fleming provides two double spreads at the book's end with factual information about the environment and what children can do to help conserve it.

PARALLEL IMAGINATION

In a second category, which I've called parallel imagination, we find the author working separately on one half of the picture book to spin a story, which is then—through the auspices of the editor—transmitted to the illustrator the editor has chosen. So there is an intermediary involved, the person who first looked at and valued the word-creation of the author, and then used their imagination to select someone else who could create a comparably imaginative, but related visual interpretation of those words.

It's a complicated process, I can tell you from firsthand experience. As an author who has written picture books, I use my imagination—often by doing extensive background research in story variants from many cultures, before I set for myself the task of using my imagination in creating

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something new, using the characters and plot others before me have also used. In the process, I am trying to transform the story from something apart from me into a finished piece that reflects who I am and what I am trying to say about these characters and why they are important to me.

Somewhere along the process I have entrusted the story to an editor whose imagination I respect. We come to an understanding that in some ways our two imaginations can become one in the final book. Trusting, I then turn the manuscript over to her and rest—uneasily—until I see what the artist's imagination has created. Typically, the editor has selected, from among the many artists whose work

she has seen and respected, an illustrator to do the book. And then it is the artist's imagination which must work, bringing into visual completion whatever his or her vision of my story is. Nine months or so later, the bound book arrives and I can then re-see my story, through another's eyes.

It seems to me there is a distinct difference between these two types of imaginative creation, that of the author and that of the illustrator. Those of us who work with words are aware that we don't usually make up new words. Rather, our task is to create characters, setting, and all the other story elements, in ways that reflect a mood, by combining distinctive words that will serve our purposes. In contrast, the artist does make up completely new images, never before seen, even though these are done through the use of materials that are widely used by others. The exception to this distinction is those artists who *do* use images borrowed from elsewhere, as in collage and computer-enhanced art.

The author must create a springboard from which the artist can launch a visual interpretation of the words, not inhibiting but providing potential. At each stage in the writing process, I see my words in terms of their image potential, crafting language I hope will release, rather than constrain the artist's imagination. But because I, and other authors like me, work in a noncontact collaboration with the illustrator, the finished book is always a surprise.

Just this past week I thought again about an author who has been able to work this way for several decades, and has done it again. Listen to the words of Russell Hoban, which so effectively create characters and a setting so distinctly different from anything we have experienced before, in his new book, **The Sea Thing Child**.

The wind was howling, the sea was wild, and the night was black when the storm flung the sea-thing child up on the beach. In the morning the sky was fresh and clean, the beach was littered with seaweed, and there he lay—a little black heap of scales and feathers, all alone.

All alone he was, and behind him the ocean roared and shook its fist. He lay there, howling not very loud, "Ow, ow, ow! Ai-ee!" while the foam washed over him and went hissing away again. He was too little to swim very well and he hadn't learned to fly yet. He was nothing but a little draggled heap of fright. (Candlewick, 1999)

Hoban's prose rolls across our awareness, curling in convoluted arrangements, long and leisurely, combining elements in sentences that juxtapose two comparison phrases against three phrase comparisons. This is the motion of the sea, set into words. Will children notice this? Probably not. But part of this text's ability to hypnotize us into believing is the way in which Hoban combines words.

His words are so evocative that one might think they need no illustration, and indeed this is a picture book text strong enough to make compelling listening, without pictures. Nonetheless, Patrick Benson's art is equally successful in evoking an unfamiliar environment, a recognizable seascape setting but depicted with such elegant understatement that we sense its otherness, knowing it not as a real place, but an imaginary one. A conversation with Hoban's British editor (where the book was first published) confirmed that there was no direct contact between the author and illustrator. Because this artist had such a strong visual concept of the book, he didn't choose to communicate with the author, so the editor served, as editors often do, as the intermediary.

Another consistently imaginative author who chooses to limit herself to creating words is Candace Fleming. Her *Gabriella's Song* (Atheneum, 1997) is a quirky exploration of how this young girl responds to the rhythms of the sounds that come to her from many sources in her home, Venice. She is so delighted by the sounds around her that she has to create a little melody of her own, and the way in which sharing it enriches so many lives is the subject of the book. Full of particular, sometimes unexpected detail that lifts the story from the generalities of some children's books, this evokes a particular place and a little girl unlike any we have known before. The art which Giselle Potter created so perfectly captures the essence of the words that we must credit the imagination of the editor, Anne Schwartz, for pairing the author and illustrator. Potter works in a semi-representational style, subtly mixing realistic colors but retaining the right to exaggerate proportions for her own purposes, creating recognizable but unfamiliar environments and people who capture our attention because they are interesting to look at, though not attractive by conventional standards. More recently, in her book titled, *When Agnes Caws* (Atheneum, 1999), Fleming tells us about Agnes Peregrine, "daughter of the well-known ornithologist, Professor Octavia Peregrine, (who)

was a real birdbrain.” We know from this first sentence that we’re off on another unexpected but energizing adventure with Fleming, in which Potter once again leads us on our way visually.

A very different visual style has served Malcah Zeldis well in the art she created for a group biography by Yona McDonough in **Eve And Her Sisters: Women of the Old Testament** (Greenwillow, 1994) and for a biography of **Martin Luther King** by Rosemary L. Bray (same publisher, 1995). In **Eve And Her Sisters** the author has provided brief profiles (a page in length) about people we know: Eve, Ruth, and Esther, for example, as well as others we may not know: Hagar, Jael, and Abigail. Despite the brevity, these tellings draw us immediately into a culture and people’s concerns within that culture. Facing each kinetically bordered text page is a piece of Zeldis’s art on the left side, vibrant in largely flat colors. The quasi-folk art style she uses is firmly outlined in a variety of colors, and patterns repeat and juxtapose in interesting, unexpected ways. As is often the case in folk art, the artist varies sizes of objects to suit her purpose, making things larger or smaller than real, as she chooses. In the art for the page on Deborah, for instance, the threatening Sinsera army are small blocks of undersized men, placed for their use in the overall composition, not for realistic representation. Their placement harks back to some arrangements in Persian miniatures, though because of the intensity of the color and design here, the connection isn’t readily apparent.

In a review of the King biography, **USA TODAY** praised the clarity of the text by Rosemary Bray, but in calling the art “lively and accessible” the reviewer missed the opportunity to point out how well Zeldis’s style works in this book. Figures are arranged to serve compositional purposes, which sometimes results in exaggeration or attenuation of body parts, and the flatness of both people and objects shown serves only to intensify our awareness of this artist’s delight in repeated patterns.

PAIRED IMAGINATION

Finally, there is the third type of imagination, that of an author and an illustrator, often related to each other, working side by side, in the same space and time, to evolve a combined creation that is altered hour by hour as the two people interact. We can call this paired imagination.

Probably the first time I became aware of that sort of pairing was many years ago when I came

upon the work of Alice and Martin Provenson. Go back and look again at their book, **The Year at Maple Hill Farm** (Atheneum, 1978), which remains to this day a deeply satisfying exploration of the bucolic turning of seasons in this rural environment. The oversized vertical format is perfect for the occasional double spreads that grace the text, but equally appropriate for the multi-panel pages in which several smaller illustrations are interspersed among the simple words. The vocabulary and sentences are simple, drawing readers/listeners in because of their compassionate projection of the animals’ feelings. The gentle humor in the equally simple art is everywhere apparent. The drawing of the young couple holding a cat to give it medicine shows “the scratchy one who must be wrapped in a towel to have her pill pushed down.”

Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney showed us this kind of imagination in their first book, a biography of **Alvin Ailey** (Hyperion, 1993). Andrea’s words evoke a time and place unfamiliar to many of us, and her husband’s swirling scratch board illustrations bring to vivid life the aspirations of the young boy whose energy would propel him far from his beginnings into a world prominence in dance. More recently, Andrea Davis Pinkney’s words have brought to equally vivid life another important black man of science and mathematics in the collaboration with Brian Pinkney on their book, **Dear Benjamin Banneker** (Harcourt, 1994). The artist’s cross-hatching on black scratchboard highlighted with full-color overpainting results in a surface texture full of vitality.

Another couple, representing a different kind of collaboration, is the kind of paired visual imagination evident in the work of Leo and Diane Dillon. If you’ve never heard them speak at a convention, by all means do so, as what they have to say about how two independent artists work together, passing pieces from a forthcoming book back and forth between themselves, helps us understand in new ways the meaning of collaboration. Most recently, they have once again presented us with an impressive book, their **To Everything There is a Season** (Scholastic, 1998). Drawing from the design motifs of 15 different societies across a wide span of time, they knit these seemingly disparate elements into an integrated whole because of the underlying dignified sense of calmness, even in such ominous text lines as “a time to hate.” The comfortably

predictable page format and the elegantly understated serif lettering contribute to the positively self-possessed presentation.

SUMMARY

What I hope these few brief examples have illustrated is that, in the best of picture books, we

are not talking about a single kind of imagination. Rather, what seems evident is that some book creators show us individual imagination, others show us parallel imagination, and still others show us paired imagination. We have a richer array of picture books as a result of this variety in types of imagination.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

The IRA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group is seeking nominations for a **VICE PRESIDENT** and **THREE NEW MEMBERS** of the Board of Directors for a three-year term.

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The Board of Directors shall attend two meetings annually and exercise general supervision over property and affairs of the group.

Nominees must be IRA and SIG members, who are especially interested in children's literature and literacy. Include the candidate's resume with the nominating letter.

Deadline for nominations
FEBRUARY 1, 2002

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