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Heil: Article: Hidden Treasure for Everyone in Picture Books

Hidden Treasures for Everyone in Picture Books

Lillian Heil

Those who are blind never take vision for granted. Adults who have sight frequently look at the world automatically, focusing only on what they expect to see. In contrast, young children seeing the earth for the first time view it with wonder and delight. Picture book writers and illustrators produce books for the child audience knowing they will "read" the pictures while listening to the text. Artists, of course, have known for a long time that part of being really alive is to have a sense of seeing for the first time. They consciously work to recapture that childlike sense of newness and would consider themselves partially crippled and dead to create ideas without it. This spark of creativity seems to lessen as children reach the upper elementary grades, but picture books can provide both older children and adults with a pleasurable path back to hidden treasures--the ability to see the visual work of subtle surprises, hidden humor, new relationships and pleasurable form, color and design. This, then, is an invitation to rediscover the visual world through the limitless possibilities in illustrated books. Some of the treasures in picture books are illustrations that:

- (1) Create suspense (Artists discover new ways all the time).
- (2) Provide a visual joke against a "straight man" text (Quite hilarious for all ages).
- (3) Create and/or solve mysteries (Great fun when they are discovered and shared with someone else).
- (4) Provide picture symbols to emphasize the overall feeling of the story (Gives the reader a sense of oneness with the story).
- (5) Invite the reader to play a visual game (Games are fun when everyone can win).
- (6) Supplement and enrich the story (Each person can discover details that he enjoys).

But before heading for the bookshelves, the reader needs to know that, in this article, a picture book is one in which the illustrations are equal in importance to the text or they tell the whole story. There are pictures on every page (usually under 64), and the text is often limited to one or two lines per

page or to none at all. Perry Nodelman has pointed out that there is a built-in tension between illustrations and text--the text pushes the reader forward and the pictures invite him to linger. The better the illustrations and the text, the more intense becomes the conflict between studying the picture and flipping the page. It's pleasant tension, because with book in hand, one is very aware that the answers to all questions are available anytime one chooses to read on. This tension is purposely intensified by several illustrators, and is the first pattern to be discussed. The technique is to stop in mid-sentence so that the reader feels even more impelled to turn the page at the same time as he wants to look at the picture that illuminates the text. Examples of this are found in Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak, Andy and the Lion by James Daughterty, and Once a Mouse by Marcia Brown.

Goodall has a different way to create small moments of suspense in his picture books. He uses half-pages which one opens after reading the left-hand side of the open book. Frequently it will be a door, the corner of a house, or a bush, and turning the half-page shows what's behind the door, around the corner, or in back of the bush. This technique is used in The Adventures of Paddy Pork, a wordless picture book in which the fox is always appearing from behind the bushes and trees to get poor Paddy.

Mitsumasa Anno creates curiosity in Anno's Britain by putting characters from British children's books along the roadside, in the square and in the meadows. Once the characters from Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame have been spotted, the reader starts looking for others and wondering if he's missing some because he's not familiar with the books. There are three reactions---one the pleasing discovery of old friends, one of trying to find others, and one of wondering which people are characters in books unread.

The second pattern is the joke between text and pictures. Several very popular picture books invite the reader to share the joke against a dead-pan text. One is by Pat Hutchins, who tells how Rosie the hen walks around the pond, the haystack, the barn, the beehive, and back but never mentions the hapless fox, who while trying to catch Rosie, falls in the pond, gets buried in the haystack, has flour dumped on him and finally is chased off by angry bees. The characters and the joke are delightful.

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In Nothing Ever Happens on My Block by Ellen Raskin, Chester Filbert sits on the curb lamenting his fate at living on such a dull street. Around him all the variations of what he says isn't happening are taking place in the illustrations---a robber runs by chased by a policeman, a girl breaks her leg and is carted off in an ambulance, a sky diver floats down, an armoured car has a wreck and spills money all over---you name it, it happens. Chester finishes his list and walks away announcing that he is moving. "It's just too dull." It's a small book so it should be read to one or two who can see the many picture stories surrounding Chester.

Number three is the way illustrators create mysteries. If one tried to read Helga's Dowry by DePaola without looking carefully at the illustrations, he would be mystified by the appearance of the troll king at the end. If he has read the pictures he will have seen the troll king hiding, peering and spying on Helga all through the story and will be pleased to discover who he is. It will make very good sense to him when the king says, "Then marry me, for I already love you for who you are." Obviously the king has seen her in action and he does know her. The mystery is very satisfactorily resolved.

Chris Van Allsburg invites the reader to create his own mysteries with a series of haunting pictures such as a house lifting off like a rocket, caterpillars spelling out goodbye in a girl's hand, and a pumpkin that glows with an eerie light as a knife is raised to cut it. Each picture pushes the viewer to wonder what came before and after the scene shown. The book is entitled The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.

Fourth is visual symbolism. Visual symbolism requires the reader first to notice and then to realize the relationship of symbol to story. Errol LeCain uses a snake to symbolize evil in Thorn Rose. The reader has to read and reread the pictures to see how the snake is used---on the wicked fairy's cane, the gigantic serpent on the roof of the castle, the snake twined over the door to the tower and the snake design in the tower room itself. Seeing these repeated motifs helps the reader to feel the intensity of the fairy's hatred and the power of her spell. Groups of people have a great time helping each other find these details. In McDermott's Arrow to the Sun, visual symbolism is used to show the relationship between the fatherless boy and his father, the sun. Those who (like the arrow-maker) see the symbol know who the boy is.

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Ed Young's repetition of a shell motif interwoven into the design of every page of White Wave by Diane Wolkstein gives the reader a mystical sense of the power of the moon goddess who watches over the lives of the young man and his family. Children and adults enjoy finding the shell pattern on each page---in a hat, radiating from a plate, looking like a mountain, or encompassing a basket in its curve.

Fifth is the visual game. Anno loves visual games and plays them with his readers in a variety of ways. In Topsy Turvies he plays with perspective, especially on steps, so that the viewer's eye goes part-way up and suddenly discovers that the picture has turned upside down or sideways. Children enjoy turning the book around and seeing how many ways are rightside up for the parade of little men climbing and walking over Anno's fantastic structures.

The sixth and last category is a conglomeration of some of the details in picture books that have delighted this author. They are incidents which aren't mentioned in the texts but add depth, humor, and richness.

In Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, a whole series of animals are called before the council to explain their part in causing a little owl's death. The crow says he spread the alarm because he saw the rabbit running for his life in the day-time. The rabbit says he ran out of his hole because the big snake came in and chased him out, and so on. A picture on the right-hand side shows the way the crow remembers the rabbit streaking like a bullet through the forest (much faster than he actually ran), while the rabbit reports a gigantic python with jaws gaping wide. The reader can feel the exaggerated defense of each animal who tries to pass the buck. It is much more effective than words.

There are lots of visual jokes in Jamberry by Bruce Degen, like patties of butter in the middle of buttercups, marshmallows and jellybeans growing in the marsh grass, and signs that say "Do not pick the jellyrolls" or a boat called Jelly Bean II. It's a joyous book that makes the reader laugh, and the children quickly begin to examine each page for the jokes and surprises.

Readers won't want to miss how the flat earth gradually becomes rounder as the history of the world unrolls in Anno's

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Medieval World. As transportation becomes faster and people finally realize the world is round, it becomes a giant globe. It is a great way to visualize history. Usborne Publishers show all aspects of living in their Time Traveller series--the foods, games, baths, schooling, recreation, homes, burial plots, marriage customs, and so on--to help the reader put himself back into the time of the Romans, and of knights and castles.

In Turkle's Deep in the Forest, look for the little bear who crawls out of his forest world into a human scene in a funny twist on Goldilocks. At the end of the havoc the bear has caused in a frontier cabin, he crawls happily and a little guiltily back out of the story into his mother's cave.

The particular visual images that will delight each person are waiting in picture books done by illustrators who invest time, thought, and expertise for the reader who will take time to "read" them. Adults who think they are going to show children pictorial details that might otherwise be missed may be surprised to find that young children notice more than their adult guide. Who sees it first doesn't matter---just go find the hidden treasures in picture books.