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*Picture Book Analysis in Six or Seven Easy Steps*

Gene Nelson

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What I Learned During the Caldecott Committee Process
or
Picture Book Analysis in Six or Seven Easy Steps

By Gene Nelson
Provo City Library Director

I just concluded a wonderful, enlightening year serving on the Randolph Caldecott 2000 Committee. From March of 1999 to the dramatic conclusion at the Newbery/Caldecott banquet this past July, I spent any “extra” time immersed in the visual language of the picture book. As I entered this fascinating process, I felt quite competent and qualified as a new committee member. I have been very involved in reading and teaching children’s literature for more than two decades. My bookshelves are crammed with children’s books, folktale collections, criticisms, and a complete collection of Arbuthnot and Sutherland’s *Children and Books*. I felt pretty good about myself.

After reading close to seven hundred picture books, most receiving close analysis, and studying many articles and books written by eminent critics about picture books, and after sitting at the feet of three of the nation’s top “experts” in the field and after twenty-four hours of intense committee discussion of picture books... 

**Caldecott Rule #1** (Blatant ripoff of Newbery Award winner Christopher Paul Curtis)

Just when you think you know what you’re talking about, SOMETHING will hit you across the face to gently persuade you that you don’t.

My “something” was what I call the Caldecott Experience. In a few short sentences, I hope to toss together a vicarious Caldecott meal, juiced with some authentic Caldecott anecdotes and a side order or two of ideas to help kids make the Caldecott connection. A delicious bibliography of some of the best reference materials to support an ongoing diet of Caldecott titles will wrap up the course.

Dripping with sweat (for it was quite humid in New Orleans in June), I literally slid into a chair in a conference room labeled “Caldecott 2000 Committee,” my first meeting with the other members of the Caldecott committee. Eight of us were elected by the membership of the Association for Library Services to Children, and seven were selected by the president-elect of the association. Thirteen women and two men represented a diverse geographic distribution and different minority groups. As we introduced ourselves, I couldn’t help but pinch myself as I sat next to some of my heroines in the children’s literature community. Barbara Kiefer, the chair, has written many articles on picture books and is the author of an excellent text, *The Potential of Picturebooks: From Visual Literacy to Aesthetic Understanding*. Barbara Elleman, the creator of *Book Links* magazine, and author of many articles on picture books, had just completed a biography of artist Tomie dePaola entitled *Tomie dePaola: His Art and His Stories*. My last heroine is Ginny Moore Kruse, Director of the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She, too, has written many reviews and articles in the field. These experts plus eleven other very knowledgeable folks combined to make quite an illustrious committee.

**Caldecott Rule #26**

Fifteen heads think better than just one.

Our meetings in New Orleans were short, more to meet each other and be oriented to the selection process. We discussed the terms and criteria of the award and haggled over semantics and other fun stuff (terms and criteria for the *Caldecott can be found at*
The work was just beginning.

For the next six months, it was Christmas every day. Almost without fail, I received at least one box of books each day.

Caldecott Rule #19
You’ll never get tired of getting free books in the mail.

By about the three hundredth title, I started to realize I had a lot of work to do. I began by organizing the books into three basic piles: the “Oh Wow!” books, the “I like this book and it is starting to grow on me” books, and the “good try, but no cigar” books. The cigar books went onto my slush-pile shelf and basically lived a quiet life. Now and then I would revisit the shelf, just to make sure I hadn’t missed an Oh Wow book and to let the cigar books know that I thought about them. The Oh Wow titles and the Starting to Grow on Me books were closely read and reread. I read not only the text, but also probably more important, the pictures. General and specific thoughts were scribbled down. My critical thought process became more concise and I think, intelligent as more and more books were read.

As I started this involving process, I remembered an article that Barbara El1eman wrote for the Journal of Children’s Literature entitled “Evaluating illustration.” As she says in that article, “The textual orientation of fiction and nonfiction makes them easier to evaluate; picture books, with their integration of word and illustration, demand a more complex approach and response.” This is Barbara’s five-part method for “approaching and evaluating a picture book.”

1. “I flip through the book to get a feel for the tone and approach.” At this step, readers could ask themselves what type of picture book is being presented and what type of artistic expression is being used.
2. “I read the text carefully, mentally blocking out the illustrations.” No cheating, no pictures. Determine the rhythm and pacing of the storyline, go through a mental list of literary criteria: plot, characters, setting, conflict, and theme.
3. “I page through the book again, this time letting the story unfold through the art.” This time, block out the text and focus on the art and read the pictures. Concentrate on the art and how it complements, expands, or competes with the text. Don’t read the text with the illustrations; let the pictures tell what they will tell.
4. “I read through the book again, making a leisurely but thorough perusal of art and narrative.” Have fun and enjoy the complete story.
5. “I page through one last time, trying to keep all these thoughts in mind as I mull over my observations and assimilate my impressions.” At this stage, Barbara particularly concentrates on design elements and the relative merits of the artist’s work.

As I studiously followed these five steps, I found my analysis to be more thoughtful and critically sound. I couldn’t just say anymore, “I don’t like this book.” I discovered how critical thought relates to picture books. My pleasure or displeasure of a specific book could now center on actual reasoned judgment rather than strict emotion. Granted, this process is still relatively subjective. At one point in our deliberations, Barbara and I felt quite different about a book. She said, with a smile in her voice, something to the effect, “Gene, did you read the same book I did?” I replied, “Yep, and I used the five-step process.” Well, we had a good laugh, but it did remind me that we all bring different perspectives and different biases to picture book analysis. I strongly recommend Barbara’s approach of evaluation. It will lead to greater understandings of the symbiotic relationship of text and illustrations in picture books. Children can also profit from this structured procedure.

In October we were presented with perhaps the biggest task to date: each of us had the opportunity to select our top three choices! I spent days narrowing down my favorites to the finalists. These were days of second guessing, rereading, and feeling good about my choices, only to wake
up the next morning knowing I had to change a title or two or three. I knew I would have the chance to choose again in December, but that didn’t seem to help a lot. Choices were finally made in both months, and we prepared ourselves for the BIG meeting in January.

Caldecott Rule #50
The weather person in the sky always knows when you’ll be sequestered in a hotel conference room for days. It’ll be beautiful outside.

I left Salt Lake City on January 13 and flew to drop-dead gorgeous downtown San Antonio, Texas. Ah, the Riverwalk, the mouth-watering Mexican food, the 70 degree weather, the romantic walks (yes, my wife was with me)! In this beautiful city, my lot was in a hotel conference room down the hall from the Newbery committee. Early on, we bet each other on which committee would finish their deliberations first. We won. After reintroducing ourselves, we got right to work and began discussing our top books. We winnowed the approximate seven hundred books to a more manageable list of somewhere between forty and sixty titles. The committee members are sworn to secrecy on many of decision-making aspects, so the actual number will die with me. By mutual agreement, some books were dismissed from the list, and then the discussions got really interesting. Understand that most of these books had probably been collectively read, oh, 75 times as a minimum. We all had favorites that someone else disliked intensely.

Many favorites fell by the wayside as the official balloting began. By Caldecott rules, each individual ballot consists of a first, second, and third choice. The ballots are collected and tabulated. Three of our group were asked to be Official Tabulators. As they officially tabulated, the rest of us paced, drank favorite sodas, started or gave up smoking, and otherwise made ourselves obnoxious. After the Official Tabulators completed their tabulating, the results were announced by the chair. The winning book would have to receive eight of the fifteen first-place votes and be eight total points ahead of the second place book. Our winner wasn’t selected on the first ballot, or the second, or the third. Sandwiched between the official ballots was more, sometimes heated, discussion. Details of illustrations and text were discovered and advanced as the deliberations continued. Many good titles didn’t make the final ballot because of inconsistencies that hurt the overall presentation of the book.

Caldecott Rule #9
If you think the Honor books are just "runner-ups," you’re dead wrong.

Caldecott Rule #66
You’d think that after 22 hours of talking about picture books you’d be reallill sick of it. You aren’t.

Finally, we reached that magical point at which all the points are tabulated, and enough first-place votes have been cast, and a winner is announced. Barbara Kiefer, our chair, immediately burst into tears following the announcement, and hugs and kisses were spread all around. Simms Taback’s Joseph Had a Little Overcoat would be our Caldecott winner. But our task was far from over. Remember Caldecott Rule # 9? Honor books do not have to be chosen, but our committee quickly chose four titles that had also risen to the top: David Wiesner’s Sector 7; Mollie Bang’s When Sophie Gets Angry, Really, Really, Angry; Jerry Pinkney’s adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s The Ugly Duckling; and Trina Schart Hyman’s A Child’s Calendar.

I had previously been of the attitude that honor books, both Newbery and Caldecott, were second-rate, runners up. Never again. I know that on a different day, our award winner could have been one of the honor books. Remember Caldecott Rule #9.

Was our work done? Nope, press releases were awaiting. We separated into groups to write the releases, and each of us had an opportunity to contribute. Early the next morning, we called the
illustrators and happily announced their award. All the artists were delighted with our choices, as were their publishers. The BIG announcements were made at 9 A.M., along with the other awards, and our work was completed. All that remained to be done was to attend the wonderful award banquet in July in Chicago.

*Caldecott Rule #101*  
*Have fun.*

The evening was glorious, full of smiles and well wishes. Our committee realized a bonding that was sweet and touching. Lifelong friends had been made. Tears were shed as we said goodbye that night. I had the opportunity to sit with Molly Bang during the dinner and thoroughly enjoyed myself. I floated back to my hotel with little mementoes and eternal memories, believing that my Caldecott Experience was over. Since then I have found that the experience is never over. My numerous opportunities to speak of the Experience have kept the Experience alive, but the most enduring factor of the Experience is my ongoing discovery of the joy and wonder found in picture books.

So what else did I learn? I learned and relearned, among many things, that an artist chooses style, composition, color, line, and texture with reason and intent. For example, in Taback’s *Joseph,* the folk-art style and technique are used with conscious deliberation. The scraps of fabric and old photographs used in collage further the design elements of the book. Clearly, the reader has encountered an optimistic tailor in an old-world time. How can we not taste the flavor of this timeless tale and exult with Joseph as he makes lemonade from lemons?

Or examine Bang’s *Sophie* getting really, really angry. As her anger reaches its zenith, the colors themselves become angry! Bright reds and yellows flood the page as Sophie’s anger spills over all in her path. Did Bang purposefully choose those colors? Absolutely.

Each of this year’s award winners exhibit different strengths, yet in each one, after careful analysis, we see the result of amazing choices and deliberate intent. Now whenever I examine a new picture book (using of course Elleman’s five-step process), I consciously attend to the small details and nuances of the art. The position of characters, the juxtaposition of white spaces, the careful leading of the reader to the next page via the delicate use of lines, and many other artistic “tricks of the trade” can all contribute to the overall success of the picture book.

*Caldecott Rule #34*  
*Caldecott books are supposed to be for kids, but good books will be attractive to adults too.*

How can we help children understand the secrets of the picture book? We can start by teaching them *how* to read a book (see Elleman). We can teach them about art. We can teach them the elements of art, which include line, color, shape, texture, and composition.

We can introduce them to the artist. Younger children, in particular, don’t often understand that a real human person painted the pictures used in a picture book. Let’s talk to them about the artist and how she makes her art. Then let’s get our hands dirty with clay or watercolors or gouache. Let’s get our scissors out and try our hand at collage and cut-paper art. Go to an art supply store and buy little squares of scratch board to let the kids try their hand at Brian Pinkney’s artistic technique. The possibilities are unlimited.

“Mock” Caldecott’s are tons of fun. ALA produces a publication entitled *The Newbery & Caldecott Mock Election Kit.* It walks you through the process of setting up a mock Caldecott. (*Call me if you need help!* I led this election for a number of school classes before and after the actual Caldecott announcement. The kids have fun, learn about artists, see new books, and learn how these awards are actually determined. At Joaquin Elementary School in Provo, one-fifth grade boy, Javier, selected not one, not two, but *three* of the final five books. Unbelievable! I was so overwhelmed that I gave him a copy of one of the award winners.)
I hope these experiences and ideas will give you a little nudge to include a Caldecott Connection in your classroom or library. The next Keats or Fleming or Sendak or Wisniewski or Zelinsky or Taback just might be waiting for us to show them the way.

The following bibliography is far from exhaustive, but the titles are guaranteed to make you think and help children make the Caldecott connection.


