

---

# 9 Decoding the images

## How picture books work

Perry Nodelman

---

### Editor's Introduction

Picture books are commonly assumed to be the province of the very young, or pre-literate child – a simple form that is beneath serious critical notice. However, they can be seen as children's literature's one genuinely original contribution to literature in general; they are a polyphonic form that embodies many codes, styles, textual devices and intertextual references, and which frequently pushes at the boundaries of convention. If you take the first view, it may seem unlikely that anyone could write a 6,000-word chapter on a single picture book, let alone a single picture. But Perry Nodelman's analysis of the first picture from John Burningham's *Mr Gumpy's Outing* demonstrates not only how much there is to say about a picture, but also how much there is to learn about the process of reading pictures.

P.H.

I open a book. I see a picture of a man, standing on a path in front of a house. Under the picture, printed words appear: 'This,' they tell me, 'is Mr Gumpy.'

What could be more straightforward, more easily understood? And for good reason: the book, John Burningham's *Mr Gumpy's Outing* (1970), is intended for the least experienced of audiences – young children; and therefore it is a 'picture book', a combination of verbal texts and visual images. We provide children with books like this on the assumption that pictures communicate more naturally and more directly than words, and thus help young readers make sense of the texts they accompany.

But are pictures so readily understood? And are picture books really so straightforward? If I try for a moment to look at the picture of Mr Gumpy without engaging my usual assumptions, I realise that I'm taking much about it for granted.

Burningham's image does in some way actually resemble a man, as the words 'man' or 'Mr Gumpy' do not; it is what linguists identify as an 'iconic' representation, whereas the words are 'symbolic', arbitrary sounds or written marks which stand for something they do not resemble. Nevertheless, if I didn't know that what I'm actually looking at – marks on a page – represented something else, I would see nothing in the picture but meaningless patches of colour. I need some general understanding of what pictures are before I can read these patches as a person, apparently named Mr Gumpy, living in a real or fictional world which exists somewhere else, outside the picture.

Even so, my previous knowledge of pictures leads me to assume that this man is different from his image. He is not four inches tall. He is not flat and two-dimensional. His eyes are not small black dots, his mouth not a thin black crescent. His skin is not paper-white, nor scored with thin orange lines. I translate these qualities of the image into



This is Mr Gumpy.

Figure 1 From *Mr Gumpy's Outing* by John Burningham. Copyright © 1971 John Burningham. Reprinted by permission of Jonathan Cape and Henry Holt and Co. Inc.

the objects they represent, and assume that the four-inch figure 'is' a man of normal height, the orange lines on white merely normal skin.

But before I can translate the lines into skin, I must know what skin is, and what it looks like. I must have a pre-existing knowledge of actual objects to understand which qualities of representations, like the orange colour here, do resemble those of the represented objects, and which, like the lines here, are merely features of the medium or style of representation, and therefore to be ignored.

For the same reason, I must assume that the sky I see above the man does not end a few inches above his head – that this is a border, an edge to the depiction, but not a representation of an edge in the world depicted. And I must realise that the house is not smaller than the man and attached to his arm, but merely at some distance behind him in the imaginary space the picture implies.

But now, perhaps I'm exaggerating the degree to which the picture requires my previous knowledge of pictorial conventions? After all, more distant real objects do appear to us to be smaller than closer ones. But while that's true, it's also true that artists have been interested in trying to record that fact – what we call perspective – only since the Renaissance, and then mostly in Europe and European-influenced cultures. Not all pictures try to represent perspective, and it takes a culture-bound prejudice to look at visual images expecting to find perspective and, therefore, knowing how to interpret it.

Children must learn these prejudices before they can make sense of this picture. Those who can accurately interpret the relative size of Mr Gumpy and the house do so on the

expectation that the picture represents the way things do actually appear to a viewer. Applying that expectation might lead a viewer to be confused by Burningham's depiction of Mr Gumpy's eyes. These small black dots evoke a different style of representation, caricature, which conveys visual information by means of simplified exaggeration rather than resemblance. In order to make sense of this apparently straightforward picture, then, I must have knowledge of differing styles and their differing purposes, and perform the complex operation of interpreting different parts of the pictures in different ways.

So far I've dealt with my understanding of this image, and ignored the fact that I enjoy looking at it. I do; and my pleasure seems to be emotional rather than intellectual – a sensuous engagement with the colours, shapes and textures that leads me to agree with Brian Alderson (1990: 114), when he names *Mr Gumpy's Outing* as one of 'those picture books which have no ambitions beyond conveying simple delight'. But Alderson forgets the extent to which experiencing that simple delight depends on still further complex and highly sophisticated assumptions about what pictures do and how viewers should respond to them.

These particular assumptions are especially relevant in considering art intended for children. Ruskin famously suggested in 1857 that taking sensuous pleasure in pictures requires adults to regain an 'innocence of the eye' he described as 'childish' (quoted in Herbert 1964: 2). The implication is that children themselves, not having yet learned the supposedly counterproductive sophistication that leads adults to view pictures only in terms of their potential to convey information, are automatically in possession of innocent eyes, automatically capable of taking spontaneous delight in the colours and textures of pictures.

But according to W. J. T. Mitchell (1986: 118),

This sort of 'pure' visual perception, freed from concerns with function, use, and labels, is perhaps the most highly sophisticated sort of seeing that we do; it is not the 'natural' thing that the eye does (whatever that would be). The 'innocent eye' is a metaphor for a highly experienced and cultivated sort of vision.

Indeed, I suspect my own pleasure in the way Burningham captures effects of light falling on grass and bricks relates strongly to the impressionist tradition the picture evokes for me – a tradition that built a whole morality upon the pleasure viewers could and should take in just such effects.

Could I have the pleasure innocently, without the knowledge of impressionism? I suspect not; as Arthur Danto asserts (1992: 431), 'To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.' The 'simple delight' sophisticated adults like Brian Alderson and me take in this picture is not likely to be shared by children unaware of the ethical value of an 'innocent eye', untutored in the 'artworld'.

Nor is the picture the only thing I've read in the context of previous assumptions. There are also the words. 'This is Mr Gumpy,' they say. But *what* is, exactly? The paper page I'm looking at? The entire image I see on it? Of course not – but I must know conventions of picture captioning to realise that these words are pointing me towards a perusal of the contents of the image, in order to find somewhere within it a depiction of the specific object named.

And besides, just *who* is telling me that this is Mr Gumpy? It's possible, even logical, that the speaker is the person in the picture – as it is, for instance, when we watch TV news broadcasts; and then perhaps he's telling us that Mr Gumpy is the name of the watering

can he's holding? It's my prior knowledge of the narrative conventions of picture books that leads me to assume that the speaker is not the figure depicted but someone else, a narrator rather than a character in the story, and that the human being depicted is the important object in the picture, and therefore the most likely candidate to be 'Mr Gumpy'.

As does in fact turn out to be the case – but only for those who know the most elementary conventions of reading books: that the front of the book is the cover with the bound edge on the left, and that the pages must be looked at in a certain order, across each double-page spread from left to right and then a turn to the page on the other side of the right-hand sheet. And, of course, these conventions do not operate for books printed in Israel or Japan, even if those books contain only pictures, and no Hebrew or Japanese words.

In other words: picture books like *Mr Gumpy's Outing* convey 'simple delight' by surprisingly complex means, and communicate only within a network of conventions and assumptions, about visual and verbal representations and about the real objects they represent. Picture books in general, and all their various components, are what semioticians call 'signs' – in Umberto Eco's words (1985: 176), 'something [which] stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity'.

The most significant fact about such representations is the degree to which we take them for granted. Both adults and children do see books like *Mr Gumpy* as simple, even obvious, and, as I discovered myself in the exercise I report above, it takes effort to become aware of the arbitrary conventions and distinctions we unconsciously take for granted, to see the degree to which that which seems simply natural is complex and artificial.

It's for that reason that such exercises are so important, and that thinking of picture books in semiotic terms is our most valuable tool in coming to understand them. According to Marshall Blonsky, 'The semiotic "head", or eye, sees the world as an immense message, replete with signs that can and do deceive us and lie about the world's condition' (1985: vii). Because we assume that pictures, as iconic signs, do in some significant way actually resemble what they depict, they invite us to see objects *as* the pictures depict them – to see the actual in terms of the fictional visualisation of it.

Indeed, this dynamic is the essence of picture books. The pictures 'illustrate' the texts – that is, they purport to show us what is meant by the words, so that we come to understand the objects and actions the words refer to in terms of the qualities of the images that accompany them – the world outside the book in terms of the images within it. And the world as they show it is not necessarily the world all viewers would agree to seeing. Speaking of what he identifies as 'visual culture', Nicholas Mirzoeff sets all visual information firmly in the context of the specific culture that produces and receives it, and describes it as 'a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racial identities' (1999: 4). Picture books, with their intended purpose of showing viewers what the world implied by the words looks like, and thus means, are particularly powerful milieus for these sorts of interactions.

Furthermore, the intended audience of picture books is by definition inexperienced – in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others. Consequently, picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture.

As John Stephens suggests, 'Ideologies ... are not necessarily undesirable, and in the sense of a system of beliefs by which we make sense of the world, social life would be impossible without them' (1992: 8). But that does not mean that all aspects of social life are equally desirable, nor that all the ideology conveyed by picture books is equally acceptable. Picture books can and do often encourage children to take for granted views of

reality that many adults find objectionable. It is for this reason above all that we need to make ourselves aware of the complex significations of the apparently simple and obvious words and pictures of a book like *Mr Gumpy's Outing*. As Gillian Rose says, 'Looking carefully at images ... entails, among other things, thinking about how they offer very particular visions of social categories such as class, gender, race, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and so on' (2001: 11).

What, then, do John Burningham's picture and text mean? What have I been led to assume is 'natural' in agreeing that this *is*, in fact, Mr Gumpy?

Most obviously, I've accepted that what matters most about the picture is the human being in it: it encourages a not particularly surprising species-centricity. But it does so by establishing a hierarchic relationship among the objects depicted: only one of them is important enough to be named by the text, and so require more attention from the viewer. Intriguingly, young children tend to scan a picture with equal attention to all parts; the ability to pick out and focus on the human at the centre is therefore a learned activity, and one that reinforces important cultural assumptions, not just about the relative value of particular objects but also about the general assumption that objects do indeed have different values and do therefore require different degrees of attention.

Not surprisingly, both the text and the picture place the human depicted within a social context. He is *Mr Gumpy*, male and adult, his authority signalled by the fact that he is known only by his title and last name and that he wears the sort of jacket which represents business-like adult behaviour. The jacket disappears in the central portions of the book, as visual evidence that Mr Gumpy's boat trip is a vacation from business as usual, during which the normal conventions are relaxed. Then, at the end, Mr Gumpy wears an even fancier jacket as host at a tea party which, like the meals provided to children by adults at the end of children's stories from 'Little Red Riding Hood' through Potter's *Peter Rabbit* (1902) and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), confirms the benefits for children of an adult's authority.

But despite the absence of this visual sign of his authority in many of the pictures, Mr Gumpy always remains *Mr Gumpy* in the text – and he is always undeniably in charge of the children and animals who ask to accompany him on his ride, always entitled to make the rules for them. Apparently, then, his authority transcends the symbolism of the jacket, which might be donned by anybody and therefore represents the status resident in a position rather than the power attached to an individual person. Mr Gumpy's authority must then emerge from the only other things we know about him: that he is male and adult, and that, as the text makes a point of telling us, he 'owned' the boat.

Apparently it is more important for us to know this than anything about Mr Gumpy's marital status or past history or occupation – about all of which the text is silent. Both by making ownership significant and by taking it for granted that adult male owners have the right to make rules for children and animals, who don't and presumably can't own boats, the book clearly implies a social hierarchy.

Nor is this the only way in which it supports conventional values. A later picture shows us that one of the children, the one with long hair, wears a pink dress, while the other has short hair and wears shorts and a top. In terms of the behaviour of actual children, both might be girls; but a repertoire of conventional visual codes would lead most viewers to assume that the child in shorts is male – just as we assume that trouser-wearing figures on signs signal men's washrooms, skirt-wearing figures women's washrooms. But whether male or not, the wearer of shorts behaves differently from the wearer of the dress. A later picture of the aftermath of a boating accident shows the one wet child in shorts sensibly



topless, the other equally wet child still modestly sodden in her dress. This picture takes for granted and so confirms that traditionally female attire requires traditionally constraining feminine behaviour.

I suggested earlier that the text is silent about Mr Gumpy's marital status. That silence might itself speak loudly, for it mirrors and might be seen to represent the silences created by the closeting of homosexuality in the world outside the book – the need of many people *not* to speak about it. I might then follow Melynda Huskey's advice, view the book as might queer theorists (those interested in becoming aware of the attitudes to homosexuality lurking in literary texts), and try to 'make visible the ways in which queerness inheres in a variety of picture books' (2002: 69). If I do that, I find myself focusing on the fact that Mr Gumpy seems to be living on his own, surrounded by a traditionally feminine aura of domesticity and with no apparent female connections – the kind of bachelor often assumed to be secretly gay. I have, in other words, presumed to 'out' Mr Gumpy. Mr Gumpy's outing might reveal the degree to which picture books, indeed children's books generally, replicate counter-productive cultural prejudices about sexual diversity by their forms of silence about it.

More obviously, the story of *Mr Gumpy's Outing* revolves around Mr Gumpy eliciting promises that the children not squabble, the cat not chase the rabbit, and so on, before he allows them on to his boat; the creatures break their promises, and the boat tips. My knowledge of the didactic impulse behind most picture-book stories leads me to expect that an ethical judgement is about to be made: either Mr Gumpy was wrong to demand these promises, or the children and animals were wrong to make them.

Curiously, however, the book implies no such judgement. The pictures, which show Mr Gumpy as a soft, round man with a pleasant, bland face, suggest that he is anything but the sort of unreasonable disciplinarian we ought to despise; and even though the breaking of promises leads to a spill, nothing is said or shown to insist that we should make a negative judgement of the children and animals. After all, exactly such outbreaks of anarchy are the main source of pleasure in most stories for young children, and therefore to be enjoyed at least as much as condemned. Mr Gumpy himself is so little bothered that he rewards the miscreants with a meal, and even an invitation to come for another ride.

Not accidentally, furthermore, the promises all relate to behaviour so stereotypical as to seem inevitable: in the world as we most often represent it to children in books, on TV and elsewhere, cats always chase rabbits – and children always squabble. In centring on their inability to act differently, and the fun of the confusion that ensues when they don't, this story reinforces both the validity of the stereotypes and the more general (and again, conservative) conviction that variation from type is unlikely.

But why, then, would Mr Gumpy elicit promises which, it seems, could not be kept? This too the text is silent on; but the silence allows us to become aware that his asking the children and animals to do what they are not sensible enough to do reinforces the story's unspoken but firm insistence on his right to have authority over them. If they ever did mature enough to keep their word, then we couldn't so blindly assume they were unwise enough to need his leadership. Someone else might be wearing that jacket at the final tea party.

*Mr Gumpy's Outing* thus reinforces for its implied young readers a not uncommon set of ideas about the similarity of children to animals, the inevitability of child-like irresponsibility in both, and the resultant need for adult authority. In accepting all this as natural, readers of *Mr Gumpy's Outing* and many other apparently 'simple' picture books gain complex knowledge, not just of the world they live in but also of the place they occupy as individual beings within it – their sense of who they are.

This latter is important enough to deserve further exploration. Like most narrative, picture-book stories most forcefully guide readers into culturally acceptable ideas about who they are through the privileging of the point of view from which they report on the events they describe. Knowing only what can be known from that perspective, we readers tend to assume it ourselves – to see and understand events and people as the narrative invites us to see them. Ideological theorists call such narrative perspectives ‘subject positions’: in occupying them, readers are provided with ways of understanding their own subjectivity – their selfhood or individuality. But, as John Stephens suggests, ‘in taking up a position from which the text is most readily intelligible, [readers] are apt to be situated within the frame of the text’s ideology; that is, they are subjected to and by that ideology’ (1992: 67).

All stories imply subject positions for readers to occupy. Because picture books do so with pictures as well as words, their subject positions have much in common with what Christian Metz (1982) outlines as the one films offer their viewers. The pictures in both offer viewers a position of power. They exist only so that we can look at them: they invite us to observe – and to observe what, in its very nature as a representation, cannot observe us back.

In *Mr Gumpy’s Outing*, Burningham makes the authority of our viewing position clear in the same way most picture-book artists do: by almost always depicting all the characters with their faces turned towards us, even when that makes little sense in terms of the activities depicted. Indeed, the picture in which Mr Gumpy stands with his back to his house while smiling out at us makes sense only in terms of the conventions of photography or portrait painting; as in family snapshots, he is arranged so as to be most meaningfully observable by a (to him) unseen viewer who will be looking at the picture some time after it was made. In confirmation of the relationship between this image and such snapshots, the caption tells us, ‘This *is* Mr Gumpy’, in the same present tense we use to describe photographic images of events past (for example, ‘This *is* me when I *was* a child’). The story that follows switches to the more conventional past tense of narratives.

In making their faces available to an unseen observer, the characters in *Mr Gumpy’s Outing* imply not just the observer’s right to gaze, but also their somewhat veiled consciousness of an observer – and therefore their own passive willingness, even desire, to be gazed at. Like the actors in a play or movie, and like characters in most picture books, they share in a somewhat less aggressive form the invitation to voyeurism that John Berger (1972) discovers in both pin-up photographs and traditional European paintings of nudes. Their implied viewer is a Peeping Tom with the right to peep, to linger over details, to enjoy and interpret and make judgements.

But meanwhile, of course, the power such pictures offer is illusory. In allowing us to observe and to interpret, they encourage us to absorb all the codes and conventions, the signs that make them meaningful; they give us the freedom of uninvolved, egocentric observation only in order to enmesh us in a net of cultural constraints that work to control egocentricity. For that reason, they encourage a form of subjectivity that is inherently paradoxical. They demand that their implied viewers see themselves as both free and with their freedom constrained, and both enjoy their illusory egocentric separation from others and yet, in the process, learn to feel guilty about it.

Interestingly, *Mr Gumpy* confirms the central importance of such paradoxes by expressing them, not just in the position of its implied viewer, but also in the ambivalence of its story’s resolution. Are we asked to admire or to condemn the children and animals for being triumphantly themselves and not giving in to Mr Gumpy’s attempts to constrain them? In either case, does their triumphantly being themselves represent a celebration of

individuality, or an anti-individualist conviction that all cats always act alike? And if all cats must always act in a cat-like way, what are we to make of the final scene, in which the animals all sit on chairs like humans and eat and drink out of the kinds of containers humans eat and drink from? Does this last image of animals and children successfully behaving according to adult human standards contradict the apparent message about their inability to do so earlier, or merely reinforce the unquestionable authority of the adult society Mr Gumpy represents throughout?

These unanswerable questions arise from the fact that the story deals with animals who both talk like humans and yet cannot resist bleating like sheep – who act sometimes like humans, sometimes like animals. While such creatures do not exist in reality, they appear frequently in picture books, and the stories about them almost always raise questions like the ones *Mr Gumpy* does. In the conventional world of children's picture books, the state of animals who talk like humans is a metaphor for the state of human childhood, in which children must learn to negotiate between the animal-like urges of their bodily desires and the demands of adults that they repress desire and behave in socially acceptable ways – that is, as adult humans do. The strange world in which those who bleat as sheep naturally do, or squabble as children naturally do, must also sit on chairs and drink from teacups, is merely a version of the confusing world children actually live in. *Mr Gumpy* makes that obvious by treating the children as exactly equivalent to the other animals who go on the outing.

The attitude a picture book implies about whether children should act like the animals they naturally are or the civilised social beings adults want them to be is a key marker in identifying it either as a didactic book intended to teach children or as a pleasurable one intended to please them. Stories we identify as didactic encourage children towards acceptable adult behaviour, whereas pleasurable ones encourage their indulgence in what we see as natural behaviour. But, of course, both types are didactic.

The first is more obviously so because it invites children to stop being 'child-like'. In the same way as much traditional adult literature assumes that normal behaviour is that typical of white middle-class males like those who authored it, this sort of children's story defines essentially human values and acceptably human behaviour as that of adults like those who produce it.

But books in the second category teach children *how* to be child-like, through what commentators like Jacqueline Rose (1984) and myself (1992) have identified as a process of colonisation: adults write books for children to persuade them of conceptions of themselves as children that suit adult needs and purposes. One such image is the intractable, anti-social self-indulgence that Mr Gumpy so assertively forbids and so passively accepts from his passengers. It affirms the inevitability and desirability of a sort of animal-likeness – and child-likeness – that both allows adults to indulge in nostalgia for the not-yet-civilised and keeps children other than, less sensible than, and therefore deserving of less power than, adults.

That picture books like *Mr Gumpy* play a part in the educative processes I've outlined here is merely inevitable. Like all human productions, they are enmeshed in the ideology of the culture that produced them, and the childlikeness they teach is merely what our culture views as natural in children. But as a form of representation which conveys information by means of both words and pictures, picture books evoke (and teach) a complex set of intersecting sign systems. For that reason, understanding of them can be enriched by knowledge from a variety of intellectual disciplines.

Psychological research into picture perception can help us understand the ways in which



human beings – and particularly children – see and make sense of pictures; Evelyn Goldsmith (1984) provides a fine summary of much of the relevant research in this area. The *gestalt* psychologist Rudolph Arnheim (1974: 11) provides a particularly useful outline of ways in which the composition of pictures influences our understanding of what they depict, especially in terms of what he calls ‘the interplay of directed tensions’ among the objects depicted. Arnheim argues (11) that ‘these tensions are as inherent in any precept as size, shape, location, or colour’, but it can be argued that they might just as logically be viewed as signs – culturally engendered codes rather than forces inherent in nature.

In either case, the relationships among the objects in a picture create variations in ‘visual weight’: weightier objects attract our attention more than others. In the picture of Mr Gumpy in front of his house, for instance, the figure of Mr Gumpy has great weight because of its position in the middle of the picture, its relatively large size, and its mostly white colour, which makes it stand out from the darker surfaces surrounding it. If we think of the picture in terms of the three-dimensional space it implies, the figure of Mr Gumpy gains more weight through its frontal position, which causes it to overlap less important objects like the house, and because it stands over the focal point of the perspective. Meanwhile, however, the bright red colour of the house, and the arrow shape created by the path leading towards it, focus some attention on the house; and there is an interplay of tensions among the similarly blue sky, blue flowers and blue trousers, the similarly arched doorway and round-shouldered Mr Gumpy. Analysis of such compositional features can reveal much about how pictures cause us to interpret the relationships among the objects they represent.

Visual objects can have other kinds of meanings also: for a knowledgeable viewer, for instance, an object shaped like a cross can evoke Christian sentiments. Because picture books have the purpose of conveying complex information by visual means, they tend to refer to a wide range of visual symbolisms, and can sometimes be illuminated by knowledge of everything from the iconography of classical art to the semiotics of contemporary advertising. Consider, for instance, how the specific house Burningham provides Mr Gumpy conveys, to those familiar with the implications of architectural style, both an atmosphere of rural peacefulness and a sense of middle-class respectability.

Furthermore, anyone familiar with Freudian or Jungian psychoanalytical theory and their focus on the unconscious meanings of visual images will find ample material for analysis in picture books. There may be Freudian implications of phallic power in Mr Gumpy’s punt pole, carefully placed in the first picture of him on his boat so that it almost appears to emerge from his crotch; in the later picture of the aftermath of the disastrous accident, there is nothing in front of Mr Gumpy’s crotch but a length of limp rope. Meanwhile, Jungians might focus on the archetypal resonances of the watering can Mr Gumpy holds in the first few pictures, its spout positioned at the same angle as the punt pole in the picture that follows, and the teapot he holds in the last picture, its spout also at the same angle. The fact that this story of a voyage over and into water begins and ends with Mr Gumpy holding objects that carry liquid, and thus takes him from providing sustenance for plants to providing sustenance for other humans and animals, might well suggest a complex tale of psychic and/or social integration.

Nor is it only the individual objects in pictures that have meaning: pictures as a whole can also express moods and meanings, through their use of already existing visual styles which convey information to viewers who know art history. Styles identified with specific individuals, or with whole periods or cultures, can evoke not just what they might have meant for their original viewers, but also what those individuals or periods or cultures have

come to mean to us. Thus, Burningham's pictures of Mr Gumpy suggest both the style of impressionism and the bucolic peacefulness that it now tends to signify.

In addition to disciplines which focus on pictures, there has been an extensive theoretical discussion of the relationships between pictures and words which is especially important in the study of picture books. Most studies in this area still focus on the differences Lessing (1766/1969) pointed out centuries ago in *Laocoön*: visual representations are better suited to depicting the appearance of objects in spaces, words to depicting the action of objects in time. In a picture book like *Mr Gumpy*, therefore, the text sensibly says nothing about the appearance of Mr Gumpy or his boat, and the pictures are incapable of actually moving as a boat or an animal does.

But pictures can and do provide information about sequential activity. In carefully choosing the best moment of stopped time to depict, and the most communicative compositional tensions among the objects depicted, Burningham can clearly convey the action of a boat tipping, what actions led the characters to take the fixed positions they are shown to occupy, and what further actions will result. Furthermore, the sequential pictures of a picture book imply all the actions that would take the character from the fixed position depicted in one picture to the fixed position in the next – from not quite having fallen into the water in one picture to already drying on the bank in the next. Indeed, it is this ability to imply unseen actions and the passage of time that allows the pictures in picture books to play the important part they do in the telling of stories.

Nevertheless, the actions implied by pictures are never the same as those named in words. The bland statement of Burningham's text, 'and into the water they fell', hardly begins to cover the rich array of actions and responses the picture of the boat tipping lays out for us. W. J. T. Mitchell (1986: 44) concludes that the relationship between pictures and accompanying texts is 'a complex one of mutual translation, interpretation, illustration, and enlightenment'. Once more, *Mr Gumpy's Outing* reveals just how complex.

Burningham's text on its own without these pictures would describe actions by characters with no character: it takes the pictures and a knowledge of visual codes to read meaning into these simple actions. Without a text, meanwhile, the pictures of animals that make up most of the book would seem only a set of portraits, perhaps illustrations for an informational guide to animals. Only the text reveals that the animals can talk, and that it is their desire to get on the boat. Indeed, the exact same pictures could easily support a different text, one about Mr Gumpy choosing to bring speechless animals on board until the boat sinks from their weight and he learns a lesson about greed. So the pictures provide information about the actions described in the words; and at the same time, the words provide information about the appearances shown in the pictures.

If we look carefully, in fact, the words in picture books always tell us that things are not merely as they appear in the pictures, and the pictures always show us that events are not exactly as the words describe them. Picture books are inherently ironic, therefore: a key pleasure they offer is a perception of the differences in the information offered by pictures and texts.

Such differences both make the information richer and cast doubt on the truthfulness of each of the means which convey it. The latter is particularly significant: in their very nature, picture books work to make their audiences aware of the limitations and distortions in their representations of the world. Close attention to picture books automatically turns readers into semioticians. For young children as well as for adult theorists, realising that, and learning to become more aware of the distortions in picture-book representations, can have two important results.

The first is that it encourages consciousness and appreciation of the cleverness and subtlety of both visual and verbal artists. The more readers and viewers of any age know about the codes of representation, the more they can enjoy the ways in which writers and illustrators use those codes in interesting and involving ways. They might, for instance, notice a variety of visual puns in *Mr Gumpy's Outing*: how the flowers in Burningham's picture of the rabbit are made up of repetitions of the same shapes as the rabbit's eyes, eyelashes and ears, or how his pig's snout is echoed by the snout-shaped tree branch behind it.

The second result of an awareness of signs is even more important: the more both adults and children realise the degree to which all representations misrepresent the world, the less likely they will be to confuse any particular representation with reality, or to be unconsciously influenced by ideologies they have not considered. Making ourselves and our children more conscious of the semiotics of the picture books through which we show them their world and themselves will allow us to give them the power to negotiate their own subjectivities – surely a more desirable goal than repressing them into conformity to our own views.

## References

- Alderson, B. (1990) 'Picture Book Anatomy', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 14, 2: 108–14.
- Arnheim, R. (1974) *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*, London: BBC and Penguin.
- Blonsky, M. (ed.) (1985) *On Signs*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Burningham, J. (1970) *Mr Gumpy's Outing*, London: Cape.
- Danto, A. (1992) 'The Artworld', in Alpers, P. (ed.) *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 426–33.
- Eco, U. (1985) 'Producing Signs', in Blonsky, M. (ed.) *On Signs*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Goldsmith, E. (1984) *Research into Illustration: An Approach and a Review*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herbert, R. L. (ed.) (1964) *The Art Criticism of John Ruskin*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.
- Huskey, M. (2002) 'Queering the Picture Book', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26, 1: 66–77.
- Lessing, G. E. (1766/1969) *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, trans. Frothingham, E., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Metz, C. (1982) *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Mirzoeff, N. (1999) *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1986) *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Nodelman, P. (1992) 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17, 1: 29–35.
- Potter, B. (1902) *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, London: Frederick Warne.
- Rose, G. (2001) *Visual Methodologies*, London: Sage.
- Rose, J. (1984) *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, London: Macmillan.
- Sendak, M. (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*, New York: Harper and Row.
- Stephens, J. (1992) *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, London and New York: Longman.

## Further reading

- Anstey, M. and Bull, G. (2000) *Reading the Visual: Written and Illustrated Children's Literature*, Sydney: Harcourt.
- Children's Literature* 19 (1991) New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (an issue of this journal devoted to discussions of picture books).

- Doonan, J. (1993) *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books*, South Woodchester: Thimble Press.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1972) 'Visual Image', *Scientific American* 227: 82–94.
- Kiefer, B. Z. (1995) *The Potential of Picture Books: From Visual Literacy to Aesthetic Understanding*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ and Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Lewis, D. (2001) *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text*, London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Mirzoeff, N. (ed.) (2002) *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd edn, London and New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1994) *Picture Theory*, Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Moebius, W. (1986) 'Introduction to Picturebook Codes', *Word and Image* 2, 2: 63–6.
- Nikolajeva, M. and Scott, C. (2001) *How Picturebooks Work*, New York and London: Garland.
- Nodelman, P. (1988) *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- (1992) *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Schwarcz, J. H. (1982) *Ways of the Illustrator: Visual Communication in Children's Literature*, Chicago, IL: American Library Association.
- Schwarcz, J. H. and Schwarcz, C. (1991) *The Picture Book Comes of Age*, Chicago, IL and London: American Library Association.