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The Playground of the Peritext

Margaret R. Higonnet

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Playground of the Peritext

Margaret R. Higonnet (bio)

In children's literature, the brevity of the average text throws into the foreground what French critics have called the "peritext." (By peritext, they understand "peripheral" features such as the cover, titlepage, table

of contents, chapter titles, epigraphs, postface, and above all illustrations. Genette, for example, in *Palimpsestes*, lists "titre, sous-titre, intertitres; préfaces, postfaces, avertissements, avant-pages etc; notes marginales, infrapaginales, terminales; épigraphes, illustrations; pièce d'insérer, bande, jaquette" (9). Obviously, in picture-books the verbal narrative constitutes but a portion of the whole, and what surrounds it becomes a more conspicuous part of the book.

The relative weight of non-verbal material in nineteenth-century children's books reflected the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, which held that even endpapers might play a role in unifying the design of a book. If organicist theory guided many artists, so did theories of education through pleasure. An interest in play gave relief to comic articulations between picture and caption, or between title and contents. Features that in adult literature are usually taken by critics to be peripheral to the text, in children's literature are deliberately used to enhance the reader's consciousness of the material existence of the text as an object, a "toy" as well as a text. And the frequent evocation in children's literature of an oral dialogue (even more common in Victorian fiction than it is today) draws attention to the text as an ever-renewable dramatic occasion. Thus children's literature offers a particularly rich domain for the exploration of the functions and effects of peritexts.

We routinely assume that the (printed) verbal text is the "body" of the book. Outside this "body" of the narrative lie elements that physically precede it, those that lie in the margin, those that cut into the text or interrupt it, and those that fall at the end. The physical order most often corresponds to the sequence in which we actually encounter them. A reading of the front cover, frontispiece, and table of contents, for example, usually precedes one's reading of the text—though French books throw the table of contents to the back. Prefaces, footnotes, and appendices are more problematic; some of us, like secret prestidigitators, delight in interrupting the text by recourse to these extra-texts and have a special penchant for books in whose bindings there are strings to help us flip back and forth.

The children's book puts the hierarchy and order of encounter with these peritextual elements into question, for a child familiar with books as objects of play will often look at the last page, or check out the illustrations going from back to front, before entering into the narrative. Such subversive techniques short-circuit suspense and the tyranny of narrative concatenation; yet they are, paradoxically, valuable ways of building a normative sense of narrative form.

The typical book for very young children continuously opens itself up through the functioning of devices extrinsic to the work and to narrative. The material existence of children's books has an importance that is virtually absent in serious literature for adults. We can offer various explanations for this difference. Historically, Newbery already assimilated books to "toys," by marketing some (for boys) with a top and others (for girls) with a pincushion. Eighteenth-century educational theorists stressed the coordination between muscular and mental development (the old concept of *mens sana in corpore sano* given a new twist). One could botanize while enjoying a walk or learn the alphabet by baking shaped cookies.

Harlequinades, moveable books, and pop-ups, often accompanying a story full of surprises, dramatize the reader's role in unfolding every narrative. Even more explicitly, so does the fold-out book. The process by which every reader, in turning the page, extends and perpetuates the narrative, takes physical shape in the fold-out. Although some of these, like the art-books by Warja Lavator published by the Galerie Maeght, are completely wordless, many double the verbal sequence with a visual one. An example is Warja Lavator's *Blanche Neige, une imagerie d'après le conte*. This story...

Kelly-Byrne, Diana. "The 1994 Conference . . . A Participant's Response." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 9: 1984-5: 195-198.

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Peter Hara teaches Children's Literature at the University of Wales, Cardiff, UK. His latest novel is *Going Up*, and his latest book for young children is *A Fat Cow and the Missing Milk*.

The Playground of the Peritext

by Margare R. Heyman

In children's literature, the brevity of the average use of lines into the foreground of what French critics have called the "peritext." (By peritext, they understand "peripheral" features such as the cover, titlepage, table of contents, chapter titles, epigraphs, postface, and above all illustrations. Concrete, for example, in *Père Corcoran*, but "une, sous-titre, introduction, préface, postface, inventaire, avant-propos, etc. tous ensemble, l'infrastructure, le matériel, l'épigraphie, l'éclaircissement, le préface, le titre, l'après-lettre" (9). Obviously, in picture books the verbal narrative constitutes but a portion of the whole and what surrounds it assumes a more conspicuous part of the book.

The relative weight of non-verbal material in nineteenth-century children's books reflected the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, which held that even one paper might play a role in unifying the design of a book, if organic theory guided many artists, so did theories of education through pleasure. An interest in play gave relief to some articulations between picture and caption or between title and content. Features that in adult literature are usually taken by critics to be peripheral to the text in children's literature are deliberately used to enhance the reader's consciousness of the material existence of the text as an object, a "toy" as well as a text. And the frequent evocation in children's literature of an oral dialogue (even more common in Victorian fiction than it is today) draws attention to the text as an event, a readable dramatic occasion. Thus children's literature often a particularly rich domain for the exploration of the functions and effects of peritexts.

We routinely assume that the (typed) verbal text is the "body" of the book. Outside this "body" of the narrative lie elements that physically precede it: those that lie in the margin, those that cut into the text or interrupt it, and those that fall at the end. The physical order most often corresponds to the sequence in which we actually encounter them. A reading of the front cover, frontpiece, and table of contents, for example, usually precedes one's reading of the text—though French books throw the table of contents to the back. Prefaces, forewords, and appendices are more problematic; some of us, like secret prestidigitators, delight in interrupting the text by recourse to these extra-texts and have a special penchant for books in whose bindings these are strings to help us flip back and forth.

The children's book puts the hierarchy and order of encounter with these peritextual elements into question, for a child familiar with books as objects of play will often look at the last page, or check out the illustrations going from back to front before entering into the narrative. Such subversive techniques

short-circuit suspense and the tyranny of attentive concentration yet they are, paradoxically, valuable ways of building a narrative tissue of narrative links.

The typical book for very young children continuously opens itself up through the functioning of devices extrinsic to the work and to narrative. The material existence of children's books has an importance that is virtually absent in serious literature for adults. We can offer various explanations for this difference. Historically, Newbery already exhibited books to "boys" by marketing some (for boys) with a top and others (for girls) with a pin cushion. Eighteenth-century educational theorists crossed the coordination between muscular and mental development (the old concept of *muscularis corporis* given a new twist). One would learn while enjoying a walk or learn the alphabet by having shaped cookies.

Half-apertures, movable books, and pop-ups, often accompanying a story full of surprises, dramatize the reader's role in unfolding every narrative. Even more explicitly, so does the fold-out book. The process by which every reader, in turning the page, unfolds and perceives the narrative, takes physical shape in the fold-out. Although some of them, like the art-books by Wajda Lavator published by the Galerie Maeght, are completely wordless, many double the verbal sequence with a visual one. An example is Wajda Lavator's *Blanche Neige, une histoire d'après le conte*. This story, which is told through the geometric figures of a yellow ball with a black curve (the eye) and a black and white circle containing a red center (Snow White), presupposes familiarity with the story—indeed with the Disney version, in which the dwarves (seven red oranges) peer around the trees on which Snow White lies. Thus there may be no text, but there is a definite interest.

Personnes de la série in the Père Corcoran series exploits this doubleness as well as its continuity in quite playful ways. A typical fold-out, the book can open in two directions: one, a colorful, undulating landscape that appears to proceed without break from a Provençal port (Le Touron port-Marseille to the dolphins of Brittany, the other a black, white, and grey illustrated set of explanations about the formation of the coast, organization of a harbor, salt-water fish, seaside sports, and many of the usual activities already illustrated on the verso. The two outer sections (that when folded become the covers) fit the two sequences, one an abstract design of boxes and lines in black, white, and grey (the side in red), the other a multicolored loop of coast scene around a bright blue sea (the side in black and white). And the interplay that underlies and motivates all these scenes is explained on the first page.



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