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## How Picture Books Work

Perry Nodelman

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

HOW PICTURE BOOKS WORK Perry Nodelman Pictures in children's books should be simple and clear and colorful. They should not be abstract. The figures in them should be large, and they should not blend into the background. These opinions, shared by many of the students in my children's literature classes, say more of their ideas about children than their understanding of art. They think that pictures in children's books should be simple because children, being inexperienced, are simpleminded; clear, because children's untrained eyes cannot perceive subtleties; and colorful, because children themselves are bright spirits with no capacity for gloom. My students also think that while words are always hard to understand, the right sort of pictures — ones that are simple and clear and nonabstract — require no effort at all. In fact, they believe that is why children's books contain pictures; the pictures contain information that allows children to understand the words. They think that children can make no sense of an idea like "a woman sat at a window" until a picture shows them what a woman is and what a window is, and they are sure that a complex depiction of an unrealistic woman sitting by an abstracted window does not do the job. Of course, children are not simple-

mindful nor always cheerful. Their pictures are rarely simple and need not be non-abstract or colorful. Words are no harder to understand than pictures; even though knowing how to read words is hard, infants understand spoken ones before they understand pictures. Above all, children's books do not contain pictures merely to convey factual information. In fact, pictures by themselves convey little. Just as our understanding of language depends on our knowledge of the grammar that gives it shape, our understanding of pictures depends on our knowledge of the conventions by which they operate. Even understanding a photograph requires a knowledge of conventions; we must understand that the one-inch person we see in a three-by-five inch photograph is not really one inch high; that that person is probably not as flat as his image nor surrounded by a white frame; that the place the photograph depicts is probably more colorful than a black and white photograph of it; and that even though the subject's hand will be raised in the photograph for as long as the photograph exists, he has probably lowered it by now in the world outside the picture. As well as the usual pictorial conventions, picture books have conventions of their own. When my three-year-old son looks at Wanda Gág's *Millions of Cats*, he cannot understand why the pond the cats have emptied on the right-hand page that first caught his eye has become full again on the left-hand page. He has not yet learned that time conventionally passes from left to right in picture books. He also does not understand that the ten cats on one double-page spread in the same book are all actually the same cat, depicted at different moments in a chronological sequence that moves from left to right. Conventions aside, however, there are many things pictures simply cannot communicate. A picture of a woman sitting at a window does not tell us if she has been there a long time or has just sat down; if the significance of the picture is her beauty, her dress, or the things she does while she sits; or if she is remembering, planning, or just waiting for someone. We need words to make sense of the picture. In some instances, pictures may actually hinder communication. A student once conducted an experiment to prove to me that young children do not respond to a story without pictures. She divided her nursery school children into two groups. She read one group a story without pictures and the other the same story accompanied by the pictures meant to go with it. She did her best to make the experiment come out right; the book she chose was intended for beginning readers, and its pictures were more subtle and more interesting than its unrhythmic, repetitious, and simplistic text. To her horror, the children who...

## HOW PICTURE BOOKS WORK

Ferry Nodelman

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