

# FROM COMICS TO PICTUREBOOKS: The Reading Moment as Focus for Devising Hybrid Narratives

Rebecca Palmer

This article presents findings from ongoing practitioner research that looks closely at the relationship between comics and picturebooks as I attempt to synthesise these forms in my work. I embarked on this study as a visual storyteller working principally in comics, having found this medium best suited to the kinds of narratives I wanted to make, and the way that I wished to communicate them. One of the reasons for this is, I think, the dramatic, dialogic mode of the comic, which has no need of a narrating text or 'voice' (though such a voice may also come into play). I was more comfortable with the directness of a dialogue, which allows the creator to efface herself by inhabiting her characters and speaking through them. In answer to the idea that an author must 'find their voice', Molly Idle, a maker of wordless picturebooks, jokes that "my voice is no voice at all" (Bayliss n.p.). The

statement makes sense to me, for though the sequences I make certainly 'narrate' a story in images, it is the choices made in structuring and editing the images that constitute the narration, and thereby act as the telling 'voice'. Where I differ from Idle is in the use of dialogue, and part of the motivation for conducting this research was a wish to find ways of making picturebooks where direct speech is viable as the only text; i.e. it should work as part of reading a picturebook out loud.

In the first stages of my research, when considering what real distinction could be said to exist between comics and picturebooks, the ways that the two are read and used by their readers stood out as an important difference. As I wrote in a previous article,

a comic is best suited to be read in silence, whereas picturebooks are designed to be enjoyed out

loud with others. Comics seem to resist being read out: to do so flattens the dialogue and robs the sequence of its careful timing. Pace and rhythm is of central importance to both comics and picturebooks, but it is no surprise, given the different modes of reading they project, that the emphasis for theorists and practitioners should be on visual rhythm in comics, while the rhythm of the text as it is spoken plays a vital role in the picturebook, its 'sayableness' and momentum central to the dynamic relationship of word and text.<sup>1</sup> (Palmer 2014a, 298)

This is not to say that comics are never read aloud, nor that picturebooks are not also viewed and read in solitude. Nevertheless, the structures and conventions that are particular to each have developed to accommodate the kinds of reading they project.

Yet picturebook makers have found ways to adapt a dialogic text to be read out loud. There are a number of excellent examples of this: John Burningham achieves it in *Grandpa* and the two *Shirley* books; Chris Rashka's *Yo! Yes?* is another interesting example. Mo Willems' books often make use of direct speech, and borrow the convention of the speech bubble from comics,

either addressing the readers themselves (in *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*) or representing a dialogue between two characters (in the *Elephant and Piggie* series). The *Elephant and Piggie* books, which are specially designed for children learning to read, highlighted explicitly to me that reading out loud is reading *with*, rather than *to*. This is true whether we engage with both words and pictures or concentrate on the imagery, but Willems gives each reader a part in the text. This brought a book from my childhood to mind. In Maurice Sendak's *Hector Protector*, two enigmatic nursery rhymes provide the barest bones for the visual sequences that elaborate on them. In each, Sendak gives his exuberant characters speech bubbles, most of which contain single syllable words rhyming with 'NO'. These vocal outbursts from the cast seem, by their very simplicity, designed for those in the very early stages of reading to take as their part, interrupting the pat rhythm of the nursery rhyme with the impassioned drama of events unfolding visually.

Where image and word work together to convey meaning, the continual back-and-forth that the eye and mind perform between pictures

and words creates what Groensteen calls an “intermittent, elliptical, jerky” progress, where “each new panel hastens the story and simultaneously holds it back” (45). The visual and the verbal interrupt one another. In picturebooks, the rhythm of words may seem to push ahead, while the images hold us back, as Nodelman observes (245–248). In comics, longer captions or passages of dialogue may cause a delay in the pace set up by the images and panels. Skilful creators working in these forms take these constant interruptions into account and turn them to good purpose. But, as Nodelman also points out, when a picturebook becomes a collective reading experience, as they are often intended to, the rhythm of picture and word acting together is itself changed and interrupted in unpredictable ways (see *ibid.* 263–264).

Thinking of Willems’ dialogues and Sendak’s playful one-word speech bubbles in the light of reading a picturebook as a continually interrupted process, I wondered whether it would be possible to design a piece of visual-verbal narrative that expressly invited interruption by writing it into the text. The interruptions would be simple, easy to read and/or to remember. They would be designed positively to invite the child to interrupt the adult reader,

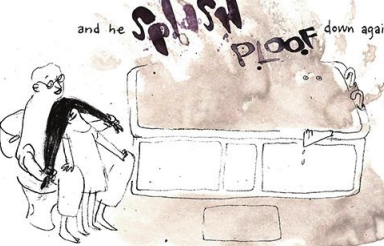
and might therefore (I reasoned) be a potential encouragement in the process of learning to read.

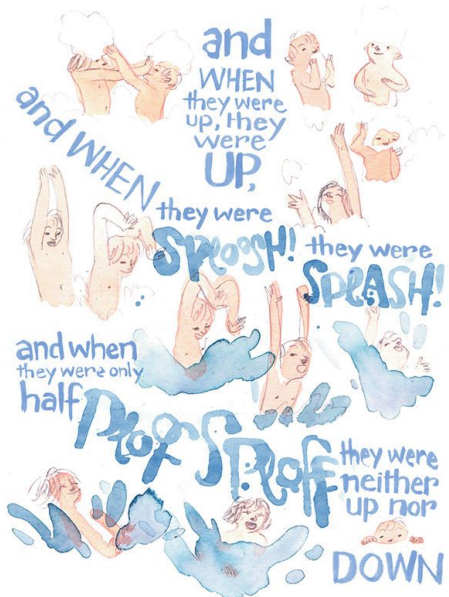
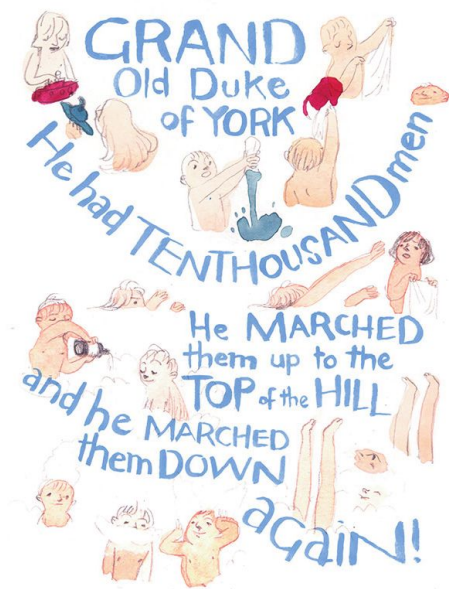
I set out to explore this idea in a series of experiments, trial hybrids that combined conventions and techniques from comics and picturebooks. For the subject-matter, I chose what I initially thought of as a simple anecdote from my own childhood. Coming from a large family, many of us were often in the bath together. When we were washed and ready to get out, my father would come in to dry our hair. Draping the towel over your head, he would take hold of each end and pull it from side to side as you stood between his knees, keeping time with a rendition of “The Grand Old Duke of York”, an English nursery rhyme and song. Meanwhile those left in the bath would continue their games. The strong marching rhythm of the rhyme and the action of drying a child’s hair, coupled with the uncontrolled mayhem of children playing in the bath, suggested an interesting contrast and the potential for some comedy. But translating this simple domestic story onto paper in a legible manner was by no means as straightforward as I had anticipated. Its unforeseen complexity was fortunate, though. Problems that we have no prior experience in tackling necessitate a conscious, analytic

approach to arrive at effective solutions, a process that results in a better understanding of the form with which we are working.

I describe the first experiments in this series, and the thought-process that accompanied them, in an article published in *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*. The experiments have since developed in response to reading these early trials with children. I will begin here with one of the key understandings I arrived at as I worked on those first hybrids. Comparison is often made between comics and film because their techniques for

visual storytelling are frequently comparable. However, the attempt to represent a scene full of motion and sound as a static, silent visual sequence quickly draws attention to the fact that the medium is not film. A more complex translation must therefore take place to represent imagined or remembered events in such a way that the reader's eye and mind breathe life into them again. As I was battling with this, Edward Tufte's *Visual Explanations* suggested an alternative analogy to me, one that focussed my attention on the communicative purpose of the drawings I was making.





Ill. 2: © Becky Palmer 2014

Tufte writes of the difficulty of representing the three-dimensional and temporal on a static, flat surface (see 17). He draws his readers' attention to interesting examples of good and bad design that attempt this translation in various ways. His focus is on diagrams, maps and other means of conveying factual information, but the parallel with visual narrative is clear.

Thinking of the page as a diagram for communicating information prompted me to return to what I wanted to communicate, rather than trying to reproduce the scene as I saw it in my mind's eye, and focus on how the page could convey

these essential points. I realised the potential for words and speech bubbles to visually 'interrupt' one another, or an image, by seeming to overlay each other on the surface of the page. This produced two alternative versions of the bath-time anecdote, shown in figures 1 and 2. My idea was that the simple words and sounds coming from the children in the bath could be easily read out loud by children, as interruptions to the adult reading or singing the apparently oblivious father's song.

Reading this little series with children on two different occasions gave me the opportunity to experience the

reading-together that I had projected. It highlighted two things:

Firstly, I assumed that the visual solution I had found, which is effective when interpreted mentally in silence, would also work when read out loud. It is true that the *idea* of interruption can be conveyed neatly by certain speech bubbles or sounds effects placed 'over' others, as if they were 'getting in the way'. But in practice, I discovered that there is a difference between a page that communicates the idea of interruption and one that, when read collectively, produces the aural impression of a disordered bath-time.

Secondly, the 'flow' of the nursery rhyme's rhythm, which the interjections do not disrupt when we interpret the sequence visually and internally, is difficult to reproduce with other readers, especially where they are encountering the story for the first time. If the sequence were read more than once, so that readers were familiar with the text and their speaking parts in it, the whole might become very satisfying to perform, those with interrupting parts perhaps anticipating the moment of their shout as my siblings and I used to anticipate the three cooks' chorus in Maurice Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen*.<sup>2</sup> Yet even so, my arrangement requires some practice to read collectively in the way I had pro-

jected: the shouts and splashes must be timed right to maintain the momentum of the whole. During one reading, the children I read with enjoyed shouting 'SPLASH' so much that they did it throughout the rhyme, louder and louder, with increasing hilarity, so that the reading was in fact very much as anarchic as I had had in mind. By contrast, I saw plainly how carefully orchestrated my attempts at an interruptive read-aloud story were.

These points brought with them the realisation that I was approaching the task of making a text designed for reading out loud as if I were making a comic. Having recognised that reading picturebooks with others entails a greater and more unpredictable variety of interruptions than those produced by the seesaw between pictures and words, I had gone about trying to control what it is beyond the picture-book maker to dictate: how and when those interruptions take place.

Contemplating this irony, I arrived at two conclusions. Firstly, whilst picturebooks and comics may borrow conventions and techniques for visual storytelling from one another, their function in each context is not necessarily equivalent. To go back to the comparison of a narrative image or sequence to a diagram: when attempting to convey information to an audience,



it is important to consider not only what we want them to understand, but also take into account by what means and in what context the diagram is likely to be interpreted. Thus music that is intended to be played from beginning to end by a musician can be represented in a linear form, on staves, the different parts equidistant above and below one another without reference to the physical placement of an orchestra on a stage. A piece of choreography, on the other hand, may well require the page to be representative of the space in which a dance is to be performed, for the dancers must interpret the movements physically through three dimensions. Equally, the function and interrelationship of images and words on the pages of a picturebook, where that picturebook anticipates being performed for and with others, will differ from their function and relationship in a comic that foresees a solitary reading. A composition that succeeds in using speech-bubbles to visually communicate the idea of a chaotic bath-time does not achieve the same end where it attempts to be the 'script' for a re-enactment of the mayhem.

Describing visual narrative as a script brings us closer to the notion of the picturebook as a performance, part external and potentially collective,

part internal and personal to the individuals.

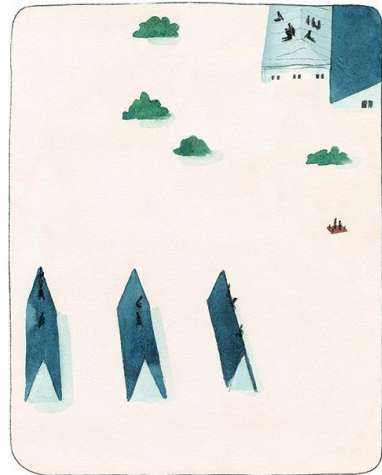
Mo Willems, who is an enthusiastic proponent of the book as a play, designed the *Elephant and Piggie* books as scripts for reading together as a kind of performance (see Willems 2009). These books are very funny, and the humour often depends on maintaining a certain momentum. The economy of text and image, combined with the energy and exaggerated body language in the drawing, help to encourage readers to keep moving at the pace set for them. The lack of any non-essential visual detail does mean, however, that there is little cause to linger on the pictures, no secrets to discover, little encouragement for non-scripted, non-linear discussion or speculation. The setting is not the point: the relationship between the characters is the focus for all our imaginative engagement. These characters exist purely on the page, as if it were an empty stage, and in this sense, the script is perhaps as open to interpretation as it could be, since we might perform it in any context. Yet this is a tightly managed script in other ways, radically restricting the potential for other forms of improvisation and digression, and in doing so, ensuring as far as possible that the comic timing, set up so well in the dialogue, action and turning of the

page, is not undermined by too great an interruption.

It is in this sense, as well as the borrowing of visual conventions such as speech bubbles, codified facial expressions, exaggerated physical gestures, and 'emanata'<sup>3</sup>, that Willems' *Elephant and Piggie* books are closer to comics than many picturebooks, for comics exert far greater control over the viewers' experience of narrative time and action. They do not do so as definitively as film does, of course, for the viewer is still free to go through the story at their own speed. They may at any time jump backwards or forwards, or sit back from the story to contemplate individual panels or the entire page. Yet the rhythm in the

layout of panels, the transitions between them, the varying density and complexity of composition, and not least the dialogue and action are all represented in a way that is designed to communicate visually the idea of a certain pace: the pace of an event, of the relationships between characters, and between elements of the narrative. Thus, though we may quickly take in and move on from a double-page spread like figure 3, taken from my first book, *La Soupière Magique* (60–61), we still understand it as a pause in contrast to the busy division into panels of the previous and subsequent page.

Picturebooks, on the other hand, often relinquish that control, creating





opportunities for shared interpretations that are idiosyncratic, whether they are different at each reading or become unvarying intimate rituals. They are scripts for a particular play, but they also create space for play that is improvisatory and unpredictable. Reflecting on my own experiments and my decision to use speech bubbles, I was reminded of Jan Ormerod's books, *Sunshine* (1981) and *Moonlight* (1982), both of which I read as a child, and understood the wisdom of their lack of words. Ormerod uses a single tier of panels throughout both books, the transitions between panels being usually (to use the terminology that Scott McCloud develops in his analysis of comics) 'moment-to-moment' and 'action-to-action', with less frequent 'scene-to-scene' transitions restricted to simple movement between identifiable rooms in a family home (see McCloud 70–89). The decision to leave this blend of picturebook and comic wordless puts all the dialogue, the narration and commentary, in its readers' hands. In an interview with Sylvia and Kenneth Marantz, Ormerod makes the following observations:

People often say of my books that they are crammed with details, when in fact they're not. I think that what people are saying is that they were able to talk with their

child about the pictures, there was a lot to talk about. They confuse that with me putting a lot in. I don't actually talk to the child, because I don't remember being a child, and I'm not a very child-centered person. I'm talking to other adults who have a child on their lap. What I think about when I'm doing the work is what sort of conversation they'll be having, so I like to leave space for the child and the adult to bring their own experience to it and talk about it and enrich it in that way. Which is another reason I like to cut back and back. If I put too much in it limits that process. (Marantz/Marantz 175)

By describing the page as a conversation piece, Ormerod gives us a further analogy to add to the diagram and the script. Each of these highlight a particular function, and each function is essential, for the 'diagram' must be well designed and the 'script' well structured for the narrative and its world to form a coherent basis for discussion.

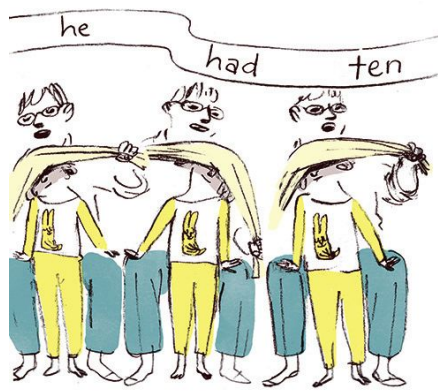
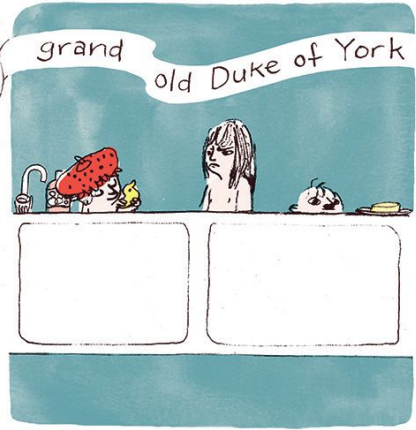
Wordless narratives require a certain level of sophistication in the viewer, for there is much that is coded and conventionalised in a picture sequence intended to convey a story. As Judith Graham writes with reference to Shirley Hughes' *Up and Up*: "if you are an inexperienced reader, you do not know what to look for in the

pictures.” (as cited by Hynds n.p.). It is through negotiating the visual sequence with others (whether adults or children) that we overcome this impediment and learn what Kress and van Leeuwen call the grammar of visual design (1). The most important realisation, however, is that a wordless picturebook is not necessarily designed to be read in silence: in fact, where they are shared, they invite more talk, as Jeff Hynds observes:

You have only to see two or three children with Jan Ormerod’s *Sunshine*, for example, to realise that seemingly wordless books are liable to generate words in abundance! It is quite usual for a great deal of commentary to ensue – questioning, speculating or even arguing. One seven-year-old, encountering the double-page spread in *Sunshine* where the little girl gets dressed, declared “You can’t read this: there’s too many words on these pages”. (7)

Whether she meant that the number of images would require an inconceivable volubility to describe them, or used ‘words’ to mean the ideas that the picture sequence conveyed, or perhaps just got muddled, her comments seem to recognise the capacity of pictures to communicate a great deal of complex information, though interpreting them can require much thought and lively discussion.<sup>4</sup>

This being the case, images are more than equal to the task of interrupting the flow of a text. They are certainly capable of provoking enough attention, remark and laughter to obliterate the singing of a glib nursery rhyme. In the most recent development of the series of experiments described above, I have expanded the sequence to the standard 32 pages of a picturebook, exaggerating the bath-time anecdote shamelessly to create a strong, ‘silent’ narrative that accompanies the nursery rhyme. Figure 5 shows a sample of that sequence. Alongside the oblivious father and the child whose hair he towels, both to the left of the gutter, a parallel narrative unfolds on the right. This sequence is wordless, though what it represents is far from silent. As well as the battle between two of the children, there is a third child’s apparently unconcerned activity and the vagaries of a rubber duck to attract the viewer’s notice. Finally, events in the bath reach a climax, culminating in a pop-up, which physically invades the left-hand, orderly side of the spread, drowning out all verbal remonstrance from Dad. This new attempt to represent the scene, though still in the early stages of development, has met with interest and laughter from readers of early dummy-books.





In the course of the series of experiments that began the spiral process of making, reading, reflecting, re-conceiving and remaking, my understanding of comics and picturebooks developed as I perceived them in the light of new analogies. It is tempting to describe this trajectory in terms of a continual refinement, or replacement of erroneous perceptions, as practice and reflection produce more acute insights. To grow through change, where an advance entails the rejection of what went before, is a narrative whose hold on our perception of progress, especially in the arts, continues to be persuasive. What has become evident even in the course of this set of experiments, though, is that the process in this case is closer to an accumulation of different perspectives on the nature of the forms I am using to communicate. Coming to picturebooks as a maker of comics, the problems arising in transition from one to the other force me to find alternative means of arriving at effective solutions. Looking at it as a type of diagram, a script and a conversation piece (amongst many other possible analogies one could fruitfully use for picture narratives) creates a series of new frameworks, each focusing a different light on the processes by which picturebooks and comics convey

meaning and narrative. In turning my attention to the act of reading as a collaborative process, which requires the creator/designer to strip out judiciously what is unnecessary in order to make room for the readers, I hope that I am approaching a solution that accommodates and encourages the unpredictable interruptions that so interested me from the outset.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Shannon 138–147.

<sup>2</sup> “Milk in the batter! Milk in the batter! We bake cakes and nothing’s the matter!” (Sendak 36–37).

<sup>3</sup> Coined by Mort Walker in a tongue-in-cheek piece for the National Cartoonists Society in 1964, this term is now commonly used to describe the visual code or ‘short-hand’ developed by cartoonists to convey motion and emotion efficiently in comics. Examples include lines behind a figure to indicate speed, spurting tears to signify anguish, and a black, thundering cloud to show anger. Walker has since published an expanded version of his original article, entitled *The Lexicon of Comicana* (1980).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, such narratives level the playing field, so to speak, inviting interpretations from their audience whether its members can read written text or not. This openness to conjecture and negotiation of meaning is one of the qualities that suits wordless books to pedagogic research projects such as the study conducted by Evelyn Arizpe in collaboration with academics working in three different countries, in which they shared Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* with groups of children where the majority were immigrants for whom English was a second language (see Arizpe et al).

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