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Abstract

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Adel G. Aiken

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All four of my own children clamored for the Sesame Street book titled, *The Monster at the End of This Book*. On each double page spread, Grover begged them, "Please don't turn the page because there's a monster at the end of this book and I am so scared of monsters." Of course, they loved to tease Grover, so they kept turning pages. The book ends with a smiling Grover, announcing, "I, furry, lovable old Grover am the monster at the end of this book and you were so scared" (Stone, 1971). Despite the silliness of the whole book, it did breed an excitement about turning the page and was a clever way to instill interaction between author and listener or reader. Published in 1971, this particular book was possibly one of the first picture books to show the influence of postmodern thought. It recognized the reader/listener as someone who had a role to play in the story as it unfolded, someone who could influence the outcome or meaning of the story, and ultimately, someone who could question the authority of the text or the author. In the decades since the publishing of this book, many more picture books have been published that bear the mark of postmodernism, so many, in fact, that a new sub-genre, postmodern picture books, has been suggested (Goldstone, 2004).

Realizing that postmodernism has impacted children's literature, those who wish to influence children's lives for the good need to think about the following questions. (1) What are the critical features of children's picture books that stem from the present cultural, ideological milieu? (2) How might these changes in books impact children? (3) As a Christian, how does my faith inform my understanding of and responses to these issues? These are the questions that I will address in this paper, limiting my analysis to picture books published since 1985. Though postmodernism influenced art, architecture, and society prior to 1985 (Meacham & Buendia, 1999), its presence became more obvious in

children's literature after 1985.

Children's literature, like the visual arts and architecture, has been unquestionably affected by the philosophies of the postmodern age (Paley, 1992). In fact, one study reports that of the books listed on "annual best books lists" at the end of the 20th century, 30-70% (depending on the list) are books that are identified as "radically changed" or extremely different from the traditional American literature written for children in the modern age (Dresang, 1999). This pronouncement comes as no surprise to those who look over their shoulders, cognizant of their place in the line of ideologies that influence our culture. Because some understanding of postmodern thinking is necessary as background for this paper, a brief description will acclimate the reader, though a full definition of this complex ideology is not the intent of this introduction.

Postmodernism is often identified as a philosophical reaction against modernism, with such prefixes as non-, de-, or multi- modifying the adjectives that describe modernism. If modernism is linear and hierarchical in its way of thinking, postmodernism is non-linear and nonhierarchical. If literature in the modern age is centered on the author's meaning, postmodern literature is characterized by the decentering of the author, which opens the text and privileges the reader. If modernism is the story of one culture and one perspective, postmodernism is a multicultural narrative with multiple perspectives (Doll, 1993; Middleton & Walsh, 1995; Wolterstorff, 2002; Van Brummelen, 1997).

Reactions against modernism as an ideology came out of an era of distrust. Science and the scientific method had provided the framework for cultural and societal developments throughout the modern era, but science and its methods had not only failed society in the sense that diseases still afflicted and disaster still struck, but the preeminence of scientific progress had

regrettably spawned disease and disaster. The investigation, discovery and objective application of scientific knowledge had not yet erased human suffering, had not prevented the horrific Challenger disaster, nor had it solved even the most mundane problems such as those that plagued our schools. Thus, the culture was ripe for a change, a change that paved the way for postmodern thinking.

In contrast to the objectivity of modernism, the foundational principle of postmodernism posits that the sign or symbol (i.e. word) does not have a one-to-one correspondence with the object or experience it represents. Therefore, instead of objective certainties deduced from observable phenomena, postmodernism refers to possible meanings with metaphors such as “collage,” “matrix,” or “rhizome.” Each of these images implies interconnectedness, branching, overlap, and therefore, multiple perspectives, decentered texts, and nonlinear thinking. How do these traits present themselves in the field of children’s literature as it is understood and taught within a Christian worldview? How might they then impact children?

Multiple perspectives and decentered texts in children’s literature may, on one hand, challenge children to be more engaged in the process of reading and more attuned to varied perspectives and different voices than when they read traditional literature. On the other hand, the influence of multiple perspectives and reader privilege may champion individual voices to the extent that children do not ever get a sense of community or shared purpose through the narratives. Non-linear and nonhierarchical characteristics in picture books mimic the branching of computer menus and channel surfing so these traits may help children to include handheld books in their learning. In contrast, these same traits may desensitize children to the order of the created world and disrupt their understanding of the linear progression of history within the biblical framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Before considering the faith-based implications that these changes present for children and teachers, it is important to examine the evidence of change in a few specific picture books.

The genre of picture books, which is the focus of this article, is identified by the design of the book, rather than its content. Constructed with illustrations playing a prominent role, those that I use as examples are

intended for elementary school-aged children. The following comprehensive definition of this particular genre underscores the excitement generated by a picture book.

A picture book is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page. On its own terms, its possibilities are limitless (Bader, 1976, p. 1).

And limitless seems to be the operative word when it comes to the changes in today’s picture books.

Contrasts Between Traditional and Postmodern Picture Books

Children’s books with postmodern influence depart greatly from traditional books in both visual format and narrative content. Visually, pages often provide multiple focal points just as a computer screen does. A carnival of images and text fonts with no clearly delineated priority or direction cavort across the pages (i.e. Skippyjon Jones, Schachner, 2003) rather than the well-defined lines and focus in traditional children’s picture books. Whereas the soft watercolors against the white page of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (Potter, 1902) draw the viewer’s eye to one easily apprehended illustration, the four frames on one page of *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) immediately demand that the viewer make a choice among five options. Should she read all of the frames on page one first, or should she read the top left corner or top right corner or bottom left corner or bottom right corner of each page in turn? David Macaulay, the author of *Black and White* writes with an understanding of our current cultural propensity for options. He knows that children are accustomed to making choices.

Narratively, postmodern children’s literature is often described as non-linear, with several seemingly disconnected threads of text or stories with ambiguous plot lines that invite the reader to be the co-author. For example, *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) has such spare text that the viewer/reader actually does have many viable options for creating the narrative. Four separate stories may engage one reader’s imagina-

tion, but another reader may choose to name one story frame as a realistic anchor story with the other three serving as imaginative dreams, and yet another reader may be compelled to think about a common truth in all four stories working together. One begins to wonder if the latter is the most satisfying option when noticing that the title, *Black and White*, is colored with a wash of green and blue and that the title page portrays jail bars broken apart to reveal an escape. One wonders. Images of masks appear throughout all four frames, and one wonders, "Is this a storybook or is this a puzzle or is it a commentary on worldview?"

Other visual and narrative innovations are manifested via the spatial planes used in the illustrations. Most traditional picture books (i.e. *Madeline*, Bemelmans, 1939) are clear examples of the two-dimensional pictorial plane (Goldstone, 2004). The illustrations appear flat and most occupy the middle ground. In contrast, *The Three Pigs* by David Wiesner (2001), surprises the viewer with multiple spatial planes and narrative perspectives. The story begins as the original story did with an omniscient narrator, but it is interrupted by one pig stepping out of the pictorial plane and off the page to speak for himself, as shown by speech balloons. This perspective is one that Wiesner uses to make his books self-referential, allowing the characters in the book to see the illustrations from a point outside of the story, and to talk about the story the way that the reader does. The characters in *The Three Pigs* actually escape from the "story" by fashioning a paper airplane from one page of the book. They then fly in and out of various fairy tales, rescuing other characters that are in trouble, and thus take control of the story, rewriting it as they experience it.

Two additional traits found in postmodern picture books, satire and ambiguity, are traits that leave the reader/listener with questions. One of the best-known examples of satire is *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Scieszka, 1992), which parodies the excesses of the happily-ever-after fairy tales and the concept of a handheld book. The last line in the introduction to the book warns "If you read this last sentence, it won't tell you anything," a foreshadowing of the seemingly meaningless text to follow. Another spoof on the parts of a book takes place when the Table of Contents falls on *Chicken Licken*, and pages that are labeled "End Pages" appear in the middle of the book. Scieszka's "Tale of the Ugly Duckling" unfolds

so that the ugly duckling grows up to be a really ugly duck. In the same style, "The Giant Story" starts at the end of the plot with the words "The End," and ends with "Once upon a time." On every page, pictures and words work together to convince the astute reader that he must ask questions in order to construct meaning.

Black and White (Macaulay, 1990) provides one last example of change. On the final page, a life-sized hand appears to be picking up an illustrated page from the story that also carries the copyright and cataloging information, but no text from the story. The previous page brings the story to a close, but it never resolves all of the questions that the reader has or explains the "whys." The image of the hand may underline the idea that *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) was just a story, but even if the picture and story are taken away, the reader is left with her own interpretations of what happened. This last image of the hand removing a page of the story also uncovers the mystery of the book-making process and invites the reader to be the co-author and finish the book, thus giving opportunity for another perspective.

The picture books briefly discussed above are only a few examples of a phenomenon that is well represented in children's literature, a phenomenon that shows the far-reaching effects of postmodernism. These innovations reflect nonlinear traits, decentered text and illustrations, and many varied perspectives such as are germane to postmodernism. These traits also give rise to multiple realities and reference points for truth. Objective "truth" is on the same level as subjective experience, and therefore there is no transcendent truth or metanarrative to guide cultural norms. Unexpected sequences, unresolved endings, scattered images, and satire all signal the undercurrent of postmodern ideology in a number of picture books. This amount of evidence should compel one to question how these traits might affect children.

Postmodern Picture Books and Children

Possible effects on children abound, but I will discuss only three of them here. Children's books that are marked by postmodern characteristics slow down the reading process to make the reader more cognizant of the transaction and all that is involved. The nature of this subgenre almost demands that children reread and linger to reflect, interacting with the complexity of

each page and the accompanying surprises in perspective. By slowing down the process, the book makes the reader more active and responsive. The process takes on the qualities of a conversation where information is revealed over time in layers, not as a list to be read all at once. This type of book often makes the reader/viewer/listener retrace her steps, turn back the page, and ask questions. "What else was in that picture?" "Now that I understand what the parents were doing with the newspaper, let me see that picture at the train station again." "I know the author was trying to put the bandit in all of the stories, but why a bandit?" Questioning is one of the outcomes that one of my students noticed immediately when she read these books to her class. "...their comments and questions were more divergent in nature. The students were asking questions of their own thinking and questions of the authors" (Clegg, 2005). When these questions naturally occur as a child looks at the book, the knowledgeable "other" can call attention to the strategy of asking questions as a useful one in comprehension and contemplation.

Picture books with postmodern traits often refer to other books or past historical events or icons that cause readers to make connections, giving them a more comprehensive and coherent view of literature and history. *The Three Pigs* by David Wiesner (2001) tells a story of three pigs escaping a story and visiting other stories such as "St. George and the Dragon" and "Hey Diddle Diddle." *Starry Messenger* by Peter Sis (1996) is a picture biography of Galileo Galilei, but it begins with Ptolemy and Copernicus and has an abbreviated timeline throughout that helps the reader situate the events in history. Reading intertextually or with connections to other texts prepares young readers for the type of reading that is required in an informed life, a process that requires the reader to question and construct meaning.

One last impact on children is the heightened ability to deal with ambiguity and stories that lack a clear resolution. When I show the picture book, *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990) to adults, the most common reaction is, "Ugh, that is really different," followed by, "I don't think I would want to read that," or "that looks too hard for children to understand." Some who are teachers say, "I hate books like that; they aren't really for children. They are for adults." Most children take the multiple pictures in a varied format in their stride,

and begin to turn pages. They are not sure what to make of it right away, but they are not put off by the ambiguous warning on the first page: "This book appears to contain a number of stories that do not necessarily occur at the same time. Then again, it may contain only one story. In any event, careful inspection of both words and pictures is recommended" (title page). The ambiguity and the surprises are what engage them and invite them to participate in the reading process of constructing meaning. Upon getting to the ambiguous ending of *Black and White* (Macaulay, 1990), one child in particular paged back through the book a second time, and then said, "Okay, I get it now." He proceeded to resolve all of the ambiguities that he had noticed and constructed a story that made sense to him. Ambiguity did not stop him.

Postmodern picture books, it may be concluded, impact the process of reading by (1) making children read more slowly thereby encouraging reflection, (2) providing opportunities for intertextual connections, and (3) requiring children to deal with ambiguity by filling in the gaps themselves. All of these influences guide children to more proficient reading in the same way that they would also play a critical role in proficient reading by adults. Even though the impact on the process of reading is positive, the question of a faith-informed perspective on the topic remains.

Through the Eyes of Faith

When judging any piece of workmanship, C.S. Lewis recommended that we "know what it is-what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used." (Lewis, quoted in Griesinger, 2003, p. 305). Picture books are "socially constructed objects that function as part of the wider cultural context and reflect many of that culture's preoccupations, aesthetic themes, and systems of thought" (Paley, 1992, p.152). They are intended primarily to provide pleasure for children, but also to edify and challenge. Because of the nature of children and the nature of picture books, these books are meant to be read in partnership with an adult at least some of the time. With definition and purpose established, I will use Albert Wolters' (1985) framework to guide my thinking about perspective as presented in *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*.

Wolters (1985) defines worldview as a framework of basic belief, and a reformational worldview, in particu-

lar, as one that is scripturally informed. Acts 17:11 and Romans 12:2 indicate that the thoughts of the mind are renewed by testing a worldview against scripture. In other words, scripture speaks about all areas of life, secular as well as sacred, economics as well as morality, technology as well as prayer. Wolters suggests that the central categories of scripture – Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration, be used as a basis for analyzing worldview issues. This principle distinguishes a reformational worldview from other Christian worldviews. These categories are not only reserved for the religious or sacred realm, but they may contribute to an integrated perspective of all realms when scripture is the lens through which the world is viewed. God's commands are sovereign whether they govern ice and snow or people (Ps. 147:15-20); scripture informs the created realm and all that issues from it.

Two additional concepts facilitate this process of scripturally informed thinking that uses the themes of Creation, Fall, and Redemption to analyze worldview issues; Wolters (1985) calls them structure and direction. Structure refers to the created nature or essence of what a thing is, and direction refers to the movement of that structure either toward or away from God. "What was formed in creation has been historically deformed by sin, and must be reformed in Christ" (Wolters, 1985, p. 76). With this principle as the basis, worldview questions may be analyzed by discerning their structure and direction.

What is structural about postmodern children's literature or what is its creational nature? It is a form of artistic and literary human expression. As such, it should be respected and understood as a product that reflects a gift from God. True to its artistic design, postmodern children's literature considers the nature of children and present day culture. In doing so, it entertains and edifies. When children look at these radically changed picture books, listen to them, and read them, they are challenged to reflect, ask questions, make connections, deal with ambiguity, analyze patterns, imagine, laugh, and learn. The artful product and the reading processes it evokes are all part of the structure or creational intent of postmodern children's literature.

Black and White (Macaulay, 1990) convincingly illustrates some other principles that support a Christian worldview or creational nature. The story illustrates the value in community (Rom. 12:5) when commuters,

waiting for a train, band together to entertain themselves; when the parents involve their children in a playful activity, it depicts the value in balancing work and play, a habit that helps to liberate the imagination. Creating a liberated imagination seems to be one of the overarching goals of the book that could be identified as structural. Middleton and Walsh (1995) declared that the imagination is a "prerequisite for facing the future," one that helps us seek God's kingdom and know his redemptive purposes. Viewing Black and White with these principles in mind allows both teacher and student to see the structure or the creational intent of the book.

What is directional about this literature or how does it deviate from its creational essence and how may it be reformed or renewed in Christ? One trait in postmodern children's literature that deviates from the creational intent is the dismantling of metanarratives, universal stories that explain the condition of the world and its salvation, such as the biblical narrative. The postmodern world is a private one that is open to negotiated individualistic meanings with no universals. The Three Pigs (Wiesner, 2001) illustrates this destruction of universal narrative by allowing the pigs to walk out of the original story and create their own divergent story. On the one hand, it invites the reader to step into the story and be a co-author, thus engaging the reader in an active and positive posture. The underlying message, on the other hand, could be that individuals have the power to create whatever story they choose without regard to past and present realities, thus moving away from God's intent. If this were the only message that children heard, it could prove to be problematic. However, in the context of other stories, this story is redeemable.

Reforming this message involves calling attention to the "givens" or the limitations in the story, and then contrasting this story with one that does not rewrite the traditional storyline. Even though the traditional story sequence is suspended, there are still three pigs and they still go home after their adventures. So the basic pattern is home-away-home, a classic structure that could be compared to many other stories as a reminder of metanarratives. A contrasting book to The Three Pigs is Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1975), a tale of a child who wants to have his own way, but upon getting his wish, decides that the security of home and people who love him, are better options. It

is a home-away-home story, but the difference is that his adventure obviously is a daydream, whereas the adventure in *The Three Pigs* is a rewrite of the original story that convincingly becomes the new reality as determined by the self-referential nature of the book. Sendak's book invites our participation imaginatively, but the reality of the story is a given, like the unchanging nature of historical narrative. Making the contrast explicit is one way that the teacher can anchor the concept of unchanging universal truth as compared to changing reality to fit individual concepts of truth. Reforming postmodern children's literature by encouraging intertextual interpretation with comparison texts and active reader participation is reminiscent of an informed view of interpreting scripture with scripture. Reforming or renewing in this manner then moves the literature toward God.

For teachers, it is critical to realize that reading postmodern children's literature requires a partnership between child and mentor, active participation in the process of interpretation, and the interactive contributions of other texts. This does not mean that children cannot read postmodern picture books alone; it means that both teacher and student must be active in the learning of how to read the text and the context, the word and the world. Teachers must teach children the strategies and language to understand postmodern picture books. For example, giving children the language to talk about the illustrations is one way that teachers can support the reading process. Showing the difference between surrealistic and realistic illustrations or foreground and middle ground teaches students to see things from different perspectives. Comparing illustrations that support the text with those that contradict it is another way for the teacher to facilitate understanding. Knowing, understanding and doing are the forerunners of enjoyment; an active learner and an active teacher will work together to produce the most beneficent outcome in reading postmodern literature.

Conclusion

Robert Bruinsma, author of *The Joy of Language: A Christian Framework for Language Arts Instruction* (2003), opines that what children hear, see, and read does affect their lives; and therefore they should learn to celebrate, among other things, the artfulness of literature. According to Bruinsma, the selection of lit-

erature should increase understanding of culture and heighten the students' sensitivity to the human condition. More specifically, teachers need to be able to discern the structure or creational norms in culture, and by extension, children's literature, and its direction or how it was deformed by the Fall and how it can be reformed for use through a Christian worldview (Wolters, 1985). With teachers as knowledgeable guides, children need to be literate in reading the postmodern world at a level that they can understand (Meachem & Buendia, 1999), and I believe that postmodern picture books can provide a bridge to that understanding. Teachers must be faithful to their callings to not only teach the facts, but to stand in the gap between the present-day culture and the reformed world that students must imagine. They must realize that the redemptive narrative breathes hope into the chaos of the postmodern narrative, and reading postmodern children's literature with a reformational worldview is a first step toward that understanding. Postmodern children's literature is, at the least, literature that we must consider.

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