

Megan Dowd Lambert

in association with The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

Reading Picture Books WITH ~~to~~ Children

HOW TO SHAKE UP STORYTIME
AND GET KIDS TALKING
ABOUT WHAT THEY SEE

TITLE PAGE

endpaper
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Foreword by Chris Raschka

To Anna Markus

dedication

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Foreword

Why do we love books so much? Why do some of us, when we’re children, drag around picture books just like stuffed animals? I had a brown monkey—straw-filled—whose hands and feet were many times mended and finally completely re-sewn by my mother. And I had *Die fröhlichen Steinzeitkinder* (*The Stone Age Children*) and *Die Steinzeit-kinder in Ägypten* (*The Stone Age Children in Egypt*) by Bertil Almqvist (published originally in Swedish). All three objects were essential to my young well-being.

The monkey is gone—I don’t remember when he was lost—but the two books by Mr. Almqvist still stand on my shelves in remarkably good shape. They are the most tangible connection to my childhood self that I have.

Books, like stuffed animals, are things. They’re very thingy. They have a size and a shape. They are more or less shiny, soft or hard, smooth or rough. The paper within them is glossy or matte, brilliant or warm, exciting or comforting.

Megan Dowd Lambert shows us how valuable all this thinginess of books is for students, teachers, and parents.

trim size
← 7 3/8" 9" ↑

There is a fundamental joy in it. In the classroom and in our homes a picture book is one corner of the triangle completed by the teacher (or parent, or sibling, or friend) and the child. Each is essential. A horror (to my mind) of a modern classroom is the illuminated SMART board in a darkened room. The Very Hungry Caterpillar may look marvelous and big and glowing, but two necessary elements of good education are quite literally left in the dark: the teacher and the student. Learning is best when it comes with a personality, whether that personality is in the line of a brush, the smile of a teacher, or the question of a child.

One way to judge the merit of a work of art is to ask whether it grows more beautiful as it grows older. *Reading Picture Books with Children* begins by looking at Ludwig Bemelmans's *Madeline*. I remember my first reaction to this book: I was thrilled by that loose-painted line, by the simplicity and perfection of the drawing of Madeline herself, and by the wit of the poetry. The line, the drawing, and the poetry have only increased in beauty for me since then.

And this idea of beauty growing over time can be true of the book, the thing itself, too. As an author, to be handed one of my own books that has been torn and taped, smudged and erased, bent and smoothed, the four corners of the cardboard cover separating like little paper pussy willows, is one of my greatest satisfactions. There, in my hand, is the story around the story, the tale of a book that has traveled from hand to hand, mind to mind, heart to heart.

—Chris Raschka

Reading ~~to~~ with Children

In 2001 I was a graduate student studying children's literature at Simmons College, and I heard that a new museum devoted to picture book art was slated to open a year later in Amherst, Massachusetts, right in my backyard. After some finagling, I managed to earn the final four credits toward my master's degree through an independent study in which I documented my work on behalf of the burgeoning education department of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. The museum was founded by the artist Eric Carle and his wife, Barbara, and remains the only full-scale museum in the United States focused on picture books and their art form. (For more information see the Carle's website: www.carlemuseum.org.) By the time the Carle's grand opening occurred on November 22, 2002, I'd laid the groundwork for the Whole Book Approach, a co-constructive (interactive) storytime model centered on the picture book as a visual art form, which I'd used with

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more than eight thousand children across Massachusetts in anticipation of that day.

Fast-forward eight years, and I'd worked with more than twenty-five thousand students and about three thousand professionals by leading hundreds of Whole Book Approach storytimes and professional development programs for the Carle. Meanwhile, I was also teaching at Simmons and other schools, raising my growing family, serving on book award committees, and making forays into speaking and writing about picture books and my experiences reading them with children.

The confluence of my family life as the mother of five children and my professional life in children's literature all felt pretty happily-ever-after, but as I shifted into full-time teaching at Simmons and less programming work at the Carle, I knew I wanted to round out my work on the Whole Book Approach with a book—with *this* book.

I set out to document what the Whole Book Approach is, how I developed it, how I've seen it work, and how I hope others will be able to use its techniques for understanding, reading, and sharing the picture book as a visual art form. I also wanted my book to tell the stories that have resulted from my purposeful decision to "shake up storytime" and use the Whole Book Approach to actively invite

kids to talk about what they see. The stories are just too good to keep to myself. Besides, amid what can seem like a chorus of voices tying shared reading to test scores, or linking certain titles to certain curricular objectives, or succumbing to a descent into some fuzzy platitudes about "the magic of reading," I wanted to reflect on and value specific moments of insight, delight, wonder, puzzlement, and pleasure that have arisen from the times when I've met children in the pages of picture books and have really listened to what they have to say about what they see and hear.

I started working toward these goals with support from Mass Literacy, which named me a 2009 Massachusetts Literacy Champion. This award provided funding to support my work reviewing pieces I'd previously written about my development of the Whole Book Approach. I then embarked on the process of writing, revising, and researching an early version of this book, while also compiling permissions contacts for a manuscript proposal. The Carle was supportive of my efforts—staff members nominated me for the award, provided early editorial support, and acted as both sounding boards and advocates as I started shopping the work-in-progress to various publishing houses. When Charlesbridge emerged as the ideal publisher, we were all excited to proceed.

The result is this overview of the Whole Book Approach,

The Whole Book Approach . . . is at its essence a means of reading picture books *with* children, as opposed to reading *to* them.

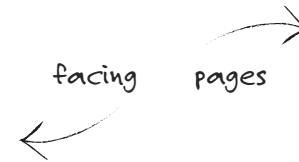
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The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

which is at its essence a means of reading picture books *with* children, as opposed to reading *to* them. During Whole Book Approach storytimes, children’s active participation in making meaning of all they see and hear during a picture book reading takes precedence over moving through the pages at the pace of the adult’s oral reading of the text. The word “approach” is crucial—this is not a prescriptive method that would have you asking specific questions about picture book illustration and design in a certain order as you read aloud. Instead, the Whole Book Approach simply stresses inviting children to react to the *whole* book—its art, design, production, paratextual and textual elements—in ways that feel natural and enriching to them and to you as the adult reader. This method requires that storytime leaders—be they teachers, librarians, parents, or other adults engaged in reading picture books with children—immerse themselves in understanding the picture book as a multimodal art form (one that uses both visual and verbal modes of communication) in order to consider how not only text and illustration but *all* design and production elements might contribute to the shared reading.

Such work seems all the more exciting amid ebook developments and other technological advances. Even as books leave the page and take root on the screens of myriad reading devices, I’m convinced that the simple codex design (separate sheets bound together at one side with a cover) of the objects we call books has staying power, particularly when it comes to shared reading transactions of



the sort that picture books invite, and I acknowledge a mixture of sentimentality and practicality in this statement. I found kinship in this position at the 2013 Horn Book at Simmons Colloquium, where I listened to Boston Globe–Horn Book Award judge Sarah Ellis remark that in her review of what seemed like an abundance of books about books, she’d noticed “a huge and possibly slightly melancholy affection for the printed book” amid the changes to publishing and reading in the digital age. Then Ellis went on to say, “What all these books reminded me of was the immense flexibility of the printed book as a medium . . . [and] we still seem to be testing those limits.”¹

Although Ellis was talking about artists, writers, and publishers testing the limits of the codex design, Whole Book Approach storytimes help children test these limits, too, by supporting their development into readers who are fully engaged with the physical, material codex picture book. This work anticipates, not the death of the book in the digital age, but rather rich opportunity for books that make the most of what might be called their bookness. Film critic James Monaco refers to this materiality of the book as “the ‘thing-ness of a book,’”² while children’s literature scholar Aidan Chambers refers to “the book-as-object,” continuing on to say that a book:

is a piece of sculpture which, like any piece of sculpture, can please or displease us, cause us to make this or that association. And this book-sculpture not only has shape and weight and texture as well as visual appeal, it also

← extracted quote

*has a smell and is mobile—it can be open and closed
(with more or less satisfaction in the way it does this)
and be carried easily about with us.³*

As a reader, a mother, and a teacher, I know that we carry picture books about with us, not just as physical objects in our hands with pages that we turn, but as remembered experiences with stories and art, and with each other. I pick up a single picture book, and I recall not only the specific story and art on its pages but also the myriad insights that it provoked through Whole Book Approach readings that invited children to read words, pictures, and design along with me.

“But doesn’t interrupting the reading to talk about art and design undermine getting lost in a story?”

“How do you keep it from devolving into chaos?”

“Co-constructive? Para-whats?”

As you read on to discover answers to these questions and to others that this preface may have provoked, my hope is that you’ll have even *more* questions and ideas as you reflect on how you might use the Whole Book Approach to shake up your storytimes, too.

—Megan Dowd Lambert
Amherst, MA

VERSO PAGE

How I Learned to Think with My Eyes

When I enrolled in my first graduate courses at Simmons College, I imagined myself reconnecting with novels I’d loved as a child, as well

as discovering new favorites—and learning new ways of thinking about all of them. I planned on getting up close and personal with the likes of Anne, Laura, Caddie, Cassie, Jo, Ramona, Dicey, and Harriet, and I couldn’t wait. I didn’t really know what I was going to do with the degree, but I knew it was the field I wanted to enter. So in the fall of 2000, I dutifully registered for a required literary theory course, an elective on folk and fairy tales, and finally, another required course on picture books. As we reviewed the syllabus for the picture book course on the first day, I had a revelation.



Simmons College

RECTO PAGE

Picture books.

Picture. Books.

I was going to have to think about pictures.

About art.

About design (whatever that was).

I was (and am) a word lover. A sucker for a good story. A shameless practitioner of marginalia. A devotee of character, voice, theme, and (to some extent) plot. And, most especially, a compulsive re-reader who thinks that criticism doesn't pull books apart so much as it opens them up to a multiplicity of possible meanings. I learn best through my ears and am a big talker, too. Lo and behold, this predilection for words and text had made me overlook the word "picture" in the course title, in the very name of the form, and I'd walked into class expecting to be reading and talking and writing about authors and texts, story themes, and implied audience, with perhaps a nod to how cute or lovely the illustrations were. Just reading the titles of the articles and critical texts listed on the syllabus showed me how very misguided I'd been:

Picture This: How Pictures Work by Molly Bang

Myth, Magic, and Mystery: One Hundred Years of American

Children's Book Illustration by Michael Patrick

Hearn, Trinkett Clark, and H. Nichols B. Clark

Looking at Pictures in Picture Books by Jane Doonan

"Introduction to Picturebook Codes" by William Moebius

And on, and on . . .

What was I going to do in a class that was pretty much all about art and design?

"I've never really studied art," I sheepishly told Susan Bloom, co-instructor of the course and director of the program at that time.

"Well," she said brightly, "now's your chance!"

It's not as though I grew up in a cultural vacuum without art. Both of my siblings are artists. The elementary school we attended had art-appreciation courses in addition to regular art classes. We took regular field trips to the magnificent Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and I'd visited art museums now and again throughout my life.

But art just wasn't my thing. Or so I thought. The picture book class showed me that actually, art *could* be my thing—even if I wasn't an artist. I'd just have to learn to think with my eyes.

Once I'd recognized the picture book as a multimodal form, I started to think visually by embracing what nineteenth-century illustrator Walter Crane had to say about the "architectural plan"⁴ of the book. Michael Patrick Hearn, co-instructor of the picture book course with Susan Bloom, lectured extensively on Crane as the father of the picture book form, drawing upon *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New*, in which Crane writes:

A book may be the home of both thought and vision.

Speaking figuratively, in regard to book decoration, some

knockout
type
↓

Art *could* be my thing—even if I wasn't an artist. I'd just have to learn to think with my eyes.

are content with a rough shanty in the woods, and care only to get as close to nature in her most superficial aspects as they can. Others would surround their house with a garden indeed, but they demand something like an architectural plan. They would look at a frontispiece like a façade; they would take hospitable encouragement from the title-page as from a friendly inscription over the porch; they would hang a votive wreath at the dedication, and so pass on into the hall of welcome, take the author by the hand and be led by him and his artist from room to room, as page after page is turned, fairly decked and adorned with picture and ornament and device.⁵

Part of the reason Crane's figurative words resonated so powerfully with me is that I love a good metaphor, and similes make me smile; reading Crane's likening of a picture book to a house unshuttered my eyes to the picture book as a visual art form. As much as I still wanted to sink my critical teeth into novels such as *Little House on the Prairie*, I quickly realized that I was no longer "content with a rough shanty" of a picture book. I wanted to learn all I could about picture book art and design—about the architecture of the book. After hearing my instructor read those words, I wanted to face the "frontispiece like a façade." I longed to "take hospitable encouragement from the title-page as from a friendly inscription over the porch." I committed to noting the dedication page's role as "votive wreath" to the book proper. This notion was exciting but also a bit daunting, since engaging critically with art and design was all new

to me. The architecture of the book had become my academic home, and although I wasn't quite sure how I'd settle into it with my particular background and lack of formal artistic study, I walked right inside and sat down to feast my eyes on all the picture book had to offer.

About a year later, in the summer of 2001, I was four credits shy of completing my degree. I'd spent the prior academic year traveling back and forth between my home in western Massachusetts and Simmons's campus in Boston to take classes. Although it tickled me that the bus line I used for traveling across the state was named for Peter Pan, and although I'd put those many hours on the turnpike to good use by completing course readings, I wanted to pursue an independent study closer to home to round out my degree and launch me onto a career path.

The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art was still more than a year away from its grand opening in Amherst, Massachusetts, but when I heard that the Carle had an information office close to my home in Northampton, I was intrigued. I took my then four-year-old son, Rory, to the office's weekly, volunteer-led storytime and decided to throw my hat in the ring to see how I could help the Carle while pursuing my academic and professional goals. Founding director Nick Clark (co-author, as H. Nichols B. Clark, of the picture book course's text *Myth, Magic, and Mystery*) offered me several possibilities: leading the weekly storytime in the office, compiling a bibliography to inform purchasing decisions for the Carle's future reading library, conducting interviews with teachers and librarians

throughout the region to see how the Carle might partner with them and support their work, and leading visiting storytimes in schools and libraries as thanks for their staffs' participation in the interviews. Taking my cue from a certain Very Busy Spider, I decided to tackle all these projects and to document the work, not only to finish up my degree but also to launch a not-so-covert effort to make myself indispensable to what I already knew would be a remarkable place.

I started off leading traditional storytimes of the sort I'd led as a volunteer in my son's preschool and in the public library where I worked part-time: I chose a theme to link the books, songs, finger play, and craft activity I'd planned for the day. Children sat and listened to the books and engaged in the other activities, and then we talked about the books when we were done reading them. It was all quite fun.

But as I set up my schedule for the visiting storytimes in regional schools and libraries, I started thinking more intentionally about the fact that I was representing an art museum, and I stopped and wondered why I was bother-

ing to structure storytimes around snow, or bunnies, or planes, or giraffes, or whatever theme I'd chosen. I thought about shifting from structuring storytime in a way that forced thematic connections between books and instead began envisioning an approach that would invite children to

engage with great picture book art on their own terms.

I took much inspiration from Abigail Housen and

Philip Yenawine's Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), an inquiry-based approach to looking at art that the Carle planned to implement in its galleries. VTS turns the traditional museum docent tour on its head by having the group leader ask visitors open-ended questions about the art on the wall instead of telling the group about the art they are viewing: "What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?"⁶ The ensuing discussions last about twenty minutes per picture, and there is compelling documentation of the approach's success in fostering not only engagement with art in the moment but also critical-thinking skills that last well beyond the discussion.

How could I adapt this approach to picture book readings? I knew that I couldn't, shouldn't, and wouldn't lead twenty-minute VTS discussions on every page of a picture book. That would be deadly. But I could take the inquiry-based essence of VTS and shift from what literacy experts call "performance story times"⁷ to leading "co-constructive"⁸ storytimes. In the performance approach, the children and teacher engage in conversation mostly *before* and *after* the reading, while in the co-constructive approach, there is a large amount of talk *during* the reading of the book. In the 1990s, Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst (now the Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy and an expert on reading, teacher quality, student assessment,

**What's going on in this picture?
What do you see that makes you say that?
What more can we find?**

I . . . began envisioning an approach that would invite children to engage with great picture book art on their own terms.

learning and instruction, education technology, and pre-school programs) developed a co-constructive model that he called dialogic reading, in which the adult reader asks a prescribed series of open-ended questions, engages children in interactive conversations about the book, and expands on children's comments. Its central technique is called the PEER sequence, in which the adult takes the following steps: **P**rompts the child to say something about the book; **E**valuates the child's response; **E**xpands the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it; and **R**epeats the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion.⁹ Studies have found that this approach substantially improves young children's emergent literacy skills and expressive vocabulary after only a few sessions.¹⁰

Indeed, the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children adopted dialogic reading as the foundation of their joint Every Child Ready to Read initiative, launched in 2001. As I learned more about VTS and dialogic reading, I was heartened by the research-based evidence that supported stopping and talking about a book *during* a reading as a way of enhancing comprehension, engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and literacy skills. Meanwhile, as I worked to develop my own co-constructive model, I was mindful of my goal of engaging children with the whole book: its text-based story, yes, but also its visual elements—its art and design, its Walter Cranian architecture.

Not only did this focus on the visual make sense for my work on behalf of an art museum, it was also consistent

with what had most excited me in my own study of the picture book at Simmons. Why shouldn't children be afforded the same opportunity as adults for critical engagement with the picture book as a visual art form? Whereas dialogic reading is often referred to as "hear and say reading,"¹¹ reflecting the fact that children hear something read aloud or hear a related question and say something in response, I began to craft the Whole Book Approach as what might be described as "*see, hear, and say reading*," by intentionally placing the emphasis of my questions and prompts on the illustration, design, and production elements of the picture book as an art form.

Furthermore, the focus of the burgeoning Whole Book Approach on the visual and physical elements of the picture book form also seemed to make good developmental sense. After all, we've all seen babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and emergent readers flip through the pages of a picture book and "read" it by examining pictures and design, so why not bring some of this early childhood "reading" right into story-time? And so, after leading one of my last themed story-times while dressed as a jack-o-lantern on Halloween, I

I began to craft the Whole Book Approach as what might be described as "*see, hear, and say reading*."



Megan Dowd Lambert and her son Stevie

turned my attention away from leading programs that were about particular holidays, animals, or other themes, and instead focused on making storytimes about the children who attended them.

This shifted focus, in turn, brought us deeply into the books we read together, proving the old adage that pictures are worth (at least) a thousand words—and the other one about kids saying the darndest things. When I started leading workshops on the Whole Book Approach at the Carle, teachers and librarians who were picture book aficionados and seasoned storytime leaders were delighted to have new ideas to incorporate into their work and told me time and again that the Whole Book Approach was a whole lot of fun, but also a whole lot more. I knew just what they meant: leading storytimes with this approach and intentionally allowing it to inform my reading at home with my own children ultimately enriched not just their experiences with picture books but my own as well. Storytimes became conversation times, and children made me see things I never would have discovered on my own as they brought questions and ideas to bear upon the picture books we read together—the *whole* books, including the paratexts.

Although he was not specifically referring to picture books, in his foreword to Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Richard Macksey lists specific parts of the book as he introduces Genette's examination of "the frame containing both the text itself and all the liminal devices—titles, signs of authorship, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, notes, intertitles, epilogues, and the

like—that mediate the relations between text and reader."¹² Genette's own titular adoption of the word "threshold" evokes, again, Walter Crane's notion of the architecture of the book. Since the multimodal picture book relies even more heavily on its visual elements and materiality than other types of books do, using the Whole Book Approach to invite children to notice the threshold before they enter the homey space of the book proper sets the stage for them to continue to make meaning of the visual elements of the picture book while its verbal text is read aloud. But in order to make the most of the interpretive possibilities provoked by this liminal space, the adult storytime leader needs to devote time to its consideration during a reading. The next chapters are devoted to supporting this consideration, deliberately ushering you, the reader of this book, across the paratextual thresholds of the picture book form and all it has to offer.