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PICTUREBOOKS AND PAGE LAYOUT

Megan Dowd Lambert

Picturebook scholar Barbara Bader’s oft-quoted assertion that the success of the picturebook “as an art form [. . .] 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” (1976: 1) invites consideration of multimodality, the impact of page-layout decisions, and pacing. When one also attends to the materiality of the picturebook codex, these components attain greater complexity as the reader engages with the physical nature of the book and perhaps even comes to value the unique potentials of the codex in the digital age. Film critic James Monaco refers to this materiality as “the ‘thing-ness of a book’” (1977: 15), while children’s literature scholar Aidan Chambers refers to “the book-as-object” (1983: 174). We thus arrive at the intersection of the picturebook as form and as object, with page layout emerging as an especially rich area of inquiry since the “simultaneous display of two facing pages” must accommodate, and can even exploit, the three-dimensional space of the physical, material book.

About facing pages

This physical space is defined in part by the sequential facing pages of the picturebook codex – verso on the left, recto on the right, with the gutter dipping down in between – which hold myriad page layout possibilities. Each of these, in turn, provides fodder for critical assessment and interpretation of the multimodal text and its material presentation. First, artists must choose whether to illustrate single- or doublespreads; in other words, they decide whether or not their art will cross the gutter at a particular page opening. The most traditional layout places text on the verso with art on the facing recto, as in Virginia Hamilton and Leo and Diane Dillon’s The Girl Who Spun Gold (2000). Other picturebooks reverse this design, positioning illustration on the verso and text on the facing recto – see, for example, the first seven page openings in Jon Klassen’s I Want My Hat Back (2011) – but this is a less common occurrence. Whether words or pictures appear on the verso or recto, the dual modes of communication are kept neatly apart in their visual presentation and in the physical space of the book-as-object, with the gutter acting like a part of a frame delineating halves of the whole spread. Both layouts offer formal arrangements of words and pictures, and Doonan describes “[t]he resulting visual rhythm” as “a series of strong beats” (1993: 85).

The display of facing, single-page pictures with text accompanying each one is another, less formal layout choice, with each page presenting a distinct moment in the multimodal text. In the fifth page opening of George Shannon and Laura Dronzek’s Tippy-Toe Chick, Go! (2003), Big Chick
confronts Dog, and this layout has an undeniable impact on pacing as a spread presents not one but two distinct moments in a story. Big Chick first musters up the courage to challenge Dog on the verso, and then he chickens out, so to speak, and hides under Hen’s wing when Dog barks and lunges at him. This spread is a fine example of what Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott describe when they write that “quite often the verso establishes a situation, while the recto disrupts it; the verso creates a sense of security, while the recto brings danger and excitement” (2006: 151). Furthermore, the close causal and temporal relationship between the two facing images is underscored by their physical proximity in the material picturebook codex (the pictures face each other across the gutter instead of being separated by a page turn), even as the gutter firmly separates the two moments in time.

Likewise, picturebooks such as Brian Pinkney’s The Adventures of Sparrowboy (1997) or Joseph Bruchac and Wendy Anderson Halperin’s My Father Is Taller Than a Tree (2010) borrow from comic conventions to incorporate sequences of panel illustrations. This allows the art to compress the depicted temporal space of a narrative within the material space of the codex by showing a series of moments over time in individual spreads. While Pinkney’s use of this layout overtly supports his story’s grounding in superhero comics, in the case of Bruchac and Halperin’s work, panel illustrations enable the picturebook to deepen the slice-of-life depictions of a diverse array of fathers and sons since each spread includes not just one shared moment in each relationship but several. Another technique that achieves such a compression of time is simultaneous succession, which one can observe in the penultimate spread of Wanda Gág’s Millions of Cats (1928). Reflecting on how such a layout speeds up the pacing in a spread from her Emma and Julia Love Ballet (2016), author-illustrator Barbara McClintock states, “Viewing several small images in quick succession can be like looking at a flip-book that gives the impression of fast, fluid motion” (qtd. in Bircher 2016).

Although not all picturebooks follow explicitly linear plots in which every image progresses chronologically from one event to the next, most do. Furthermore, Nikolajeva and Scott note that various deviations from straight, chronological order, the so-called anachronies, are traditionally regarded as unsuitable for children, and have only recently become prominent in children’s novels. Complex temporality is often limited in picturebooks because of their compact nature, which excludes long time spans. The vast majority of picturebooks have a short story time, often just one day or less.

Regardless of the degree of complexity that a narrative employs, artists must decide whether to compress time (as in the preceding examples from Pinkney, Bruchac and Halperin, Gág, and McClintock) or to expand it in a given spread as the reader moves toward the turn of the page. Depicting at least one moment on the verso and one on the facing recto compresses the progression of time so that the reader moves along from one moment to the next in the space of one doublespread.

On the other hand, art that crosses the gutter creates the perception of expanding a given moment in time as it invites the reader to linger on the larger picture. If space equals time, it is as though the picture is taking a long time (occupying a lot of space) to convey what it needs to say. McClintock notes,

> Broad, dramatic scenes create a sense of mood and establish place; and fuller, detailed pictures slow the reader down at significant moments by creating an environment that invites investigation. That lingering pause can give majesty to a scene or narrative concept.

qtd. in Bircher 2016, n. pag.

In my debut picturebook illustrated by David Hyde Costello, A Crow of His Own (2015b), Clyde the rooster clears his throat as he perches atop the chicken coop on the secure verso page of a full-bleed spread depicting the sunrise (Figure 3.1).
This creates a sense of anticipation for the triumphant, climactic scene in which Clyde finally crows a crow of his own in the subsequent full-bleed spread featuring an intraiconic “COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!”

The expansion of time created by a full-bleed spread is enhanced when a wordless double-page picture occurs at the climax of a story, evoking a contemplative moment for the reader to reflect upon the scene and relate it back to the words and images that preceded it. Brian Selznick frequently includes this pacing and layout choice in picturebooks he illustrates. See, for example, his wordless doublespread toward the end of *When Marian Sang* (2002) by Pam Muñoz Ryan, which depicts Marian Anderson’s 1939 Easter Sunday concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The prior spread is a powerful close-up of Anderson’s face, and this subsequent wordless spread shifts perspective to position the reader within the massive crowd assembled to bear witness to her triumph and to participate in her defiance against bigotry.

**Mind the gutter!**

One way that Selznick invites allegiance with the crowd in this illustration is by positioning a child facing out at the reader to act as what Nikolajeva and Scott call an “‘intrusive’ visual narrator” (2006: 119). The eye is drawn to her figure because she is positioned in an empty space on the recto that extends from the gutter. Though rarely acknowledged in critical discussion of picturebook art, the gutter – the vertical seam between the verso and recto, where the pages are bound together – plays a tremendously important role in informing page layout and in helping the reader progress toward, or resist the pull of, Bader’s “drama of the turning of the page.” This production element of the codex impacts the success of each page opening’s layout because it creates an interruption of the picture space. Picturebook artists therefore must, at the very least, accommodate the gutter in their compositions to avoid having important details obscured. In the case of Selznick’s wordless picture of the crowd at Anderson’s concert, the gutter is artfully accommodated as he depicts a space in the crowd assembled to hear the famed contralto and draws the eye away from the center of the picture at the gutter to focus on the little girl, her eyes closed in a contemplative, rapturous mood that guides the reader to experience a similar state.

Likewise, in her commentary on Uri Shulevitz’s achievement in *The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship* (1968), Lyn Ellen Lacy notes that “he demonstrates absolute control in avoiding the annoying
slice of the gutter” (1986: 189). And yet, artists may push beyond mere avoidance of the gutter to enhance a visual separation between the verso and recto and exploit the gutter as a visual or physical barrier in a composition created for the material picturebook codex. The title page of Marla Frazee’s *Hush, Little Baby: A Folk Song with Pictures* (1999) does just this (Figure 3.2).

“Those parents are like a circle of love around the baby, and the sister is all the way over there on the other page,” remarked a preschooler when I read this book with her class a few years ago. I was using the Whole Book Approach, a co-constructive storytime model I developed as an educator at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art (www.carlemuseum.org) and which I write about in *Reading Picture Books with Children: How to Shake Up Storytime and Get Kids Talking about What They See* (2015a). Whole Book Approach storytimes ask children to make meaning of picturebook para-texts, art, and design during a reading, and the child who made these observations about Frazee’s title page composition was clearly experiencing what Doonan refers to as the “crucial role in the psychological effect” (1993: 85) that layout plays.

Indeed, by placing the jealous girl on the verso and the other characters on the recto, with the gutter between them in this doublespread illustration, Frazee heightens the dramatic tension of the picture to a degree that merely separating them in a single-page picture would not achieve. This is just one instance where the gutter is not merely the physical site of the binding, or a facet of book production that must be accommodated to avoid having it interrupt the visual continuity of a doublespread; instead, it is another physical and visual component of the book for readers to consider as they engage with the picturebook as a visual art form.

In Koen Van Biesen’s *Roger Is Reading a Book* (2015), the gutter is explicitly used as a division between the verso and recto because the artist makes this element of book production read as the wall separating two apartments. A little girl named Emily is noisily playing on the verso, while “Roger is reading a book” on the recto. She disturbs him when she bounces a ball against the wall—that-is-the-gutter, and then he strides purposefully over to it and pounds his fist to get her attention. “KNOCK/Roger knocks” reads the text, and the illustration employs the comic convention of depicting multiple, fading forms to convey the repeated motion of his hand knocking against the wall—that-is-the-gutter. A series of small curved lines emanates from the place where he knocks and onto the verso to represent the sound of that knocking, and small Emily stands still, looking up in their direction.

Other examples of such purposeful layout in consideration of the gutter as a part of the materiality of the picturebook codex abound. Although he does not make the gutter into a wall separating his characters, Chris Raschka isolates two boys in *Yo! Yes?* (1993) on facing pages with the gutter between them. In the front matter pages, the boy on the recto even acts as what Nikolajeva and
Scott call a “pageturner” (2006: 152) with his dogged progression to the right, but the other boy’s salutation “Yo!” stops him in his tracks and prompts the reader to consider the dynamic between the boys instead of simply moving on to the next page. The boys remain on facing pages until the story’s resolution, when the shy child on the recto accepts the other boy’s gestures of friendship and crosses the gutter to join him on the verso. In a feat of perfect pacing that starts with a single recto title page, the book ends with a single verso-page illustration depicting the now united boys jumping hand in hand in an exuberant celebration of their new friendship.

The impact of frames, borders, and bleeds

Illustrator Barbara McClintock notes, “The size and shape of the illustrations is all about creating a sense of time, movement, emotion, and place” (qtd. in Bircher 2016, n. pag.), and Raschka underscores the boys’ emotional bond on the final page by merging the shapes of the white spaces that had acted as separate spotlights amid expressive washes of color on previous pages. The resulting shape of the picture in the culminating layout visually asserts a heartwarming resolution to the story, but it still keeps the viewer at a distance; even now, the merged white space around the characters acts as a visual reminder of the separation between the world of the book and the world of the reader. Ultimately, using a frame or border to enclose an image, or defining it by negative space (as in Yo! Yes?), impacts the viewer’s perception. For example, like the animals depicted before her in the picturebook, the teacher in Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle’s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1967) is not enclosed by a frame or by defined negative space. Carle simply situates the figures in this book against the empty white space of the page (or, in the case of the white dog, empty black space) to create a presentation of the art that is free of visual barriers between the viewer and the pictures. The impact is one of welcoming viewers into the world of the picturebook to make them feel like participants in the scene rather than spectators on the outside looking in. As Nikolajeva and Scott write, “Frames normally create a sense of detachment between the picture and the reader, while the absence of frames (that is, a picture that covers the whole area of a page or a doublespread) invites the reader into the picture” (2006: 62).

This effect is even more pronounced when fully detailed backgrounds (as opposed to empty pages like those noted in Carle’s work) bleed off the page without a frame or border to enclose them within the picture plane. Full-bleed page designs can result in a dynamic, inviting presentation that obscures awareness of the perceptual line between the reader’s reality and the world of the book, thus creating a greater sense of intimacy in the reading. Illustrator Aaron Becker uses this technique to great advantage in his Caldecott Honor Book, *Journey* (2013), immersing the reader in full-bleed, fantastic landscapes at key points in his protagonist’s adventure as she moves from one setting to another and brings the reader along with her. When he visited a course I teach on the picturebook at Simmons College, Becker acknowledged that his framing choices were inspired by his study of Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), which famously uses diminishing and expanding air frames (white space around the picture, without any lines or decorative embellishments to define the frame). This influence is quite apparent in Becker’s enclosed, small picture of the forlorn protagonist in her bedroom before she embarks on her fantastic adventures.

When she does set out on the eponymous journey, a key visual pageturner helps guide the reader from one spread to the next, and from reality and into the realm of fantasy. On an empty, white recto page, a series of three pictures moving from the top left to the lower right shows the girl using her red pencil to draw a doorway. The third image shows that door opened with the girl partway through it as she enters a partially visible, lush, green world beyond the doorway. Positioned behind and above the girl, the reader can only see part of her body as she exits through the doorway, and this helps provoke the dramatic page-turn to see where it leads.

Megan Dowd Lambert
In her essay, “Verbal and Visual Pageturners in Picturebooks,” Eva Gressnich notes that the layout of words and pictures is intentional and purposeful. A text sequence is related to a picture or a set of pictures and the arrangement of both on the page or the double spread is never coincidental. The page is thus not only a means to carrying the text and the pictures, but an element that influences the way we read the story.

Her ensuing analysis of the various kinds of pageturners in picturebooks emphasizes their potential impact on the pacing of a reading and underscores how they can support children in their engagement with sequential narratives. With regard to verbal pageturners (or PTs as she calls them), Gressnich emphasizes their efficacy for very young readers and notes that “Two kinds of verbal PTs are used frequently in the corpus books: split question-answer sequences and split sentences. In several books, the answer to a question asked on a spread is given on the subsequent spread” (169).

The example of Becker’s work exemplifies how a visual rather than a verbal pageturner can heighten anticipation and create dramatic movement from one spread to the next by obscuring part of a character’s body as she leaves one setting and one moment in time and enters another. The eighth spread in Rukhsana Khan and Sophie Blackall’s *Big Red Lollipop* (2010) functions similarly, but without depicting a shift from reality to fantasy; indeed, the story’s portrayal of sibling rivalry may seem all too real to anyone who’s been a sibling or has parented them. On the verso, an outraged big sister Rubina holds her mostly eaten, no-longer-so-big red lollipop and glares across the gutter at the culprit who ate it, her little sister Sana on the recto. Instead of showing Sana in full, Blackall picks up on the text’s first-person narration, reading, “When she sees me, she runs away,” and illustrates only Sana’s pajama-clad legs and bare feet as she flees her big sister’s wrath.

The rest of her body is unseen in this picture, which renders her as a visual pageturner that provokes quick progression to the next spread, where an aerial perspective shows Rubina in hot pursuit of her lollipop-stealing sister as they race through the rooms of their house.

**Typography**

The outrage that Rubina expresses before taking off after Sana is conveyed not only by her facial expression and rigid stance, but also in her cry of “SANA!” The force of this utterance is communicated to the reader with its exclamation point, the use of all capital letters, and also through the following typographic choices: the little sister’s name is dropped halfway down the page, isolated from the block of narrative text above it, the letters are in a larger size than the rest of the text on the page, and they adopt a bold typeface. These elements combine to fix the reader’s attention on this single bit of text, and to cue a reading in a loud voice to express Rubina’s anger and the blame she places on Sana.

Placement of text and typographic features such as size and weight are indeed an important part of layout, and scholars Frank Serafini and Jennifer Clausen note that “the typography of written language not only serves as a conduit of verbal narrative [. . .] it serves as a visual element and semiotic resource with its own meaning potentials” (2012: 23). This latter point heralds exciting possibilities for inquiry into typography as a bearer of meaning unto itself. Illustrator Laura Vaccaro Seeger has reflected on how children respond to typography in *Bully* (2013), her picturebook about friendship between animals overcoming a young bull’s bullying behavior. Borrowing from comic art conventions, the spare text is presented as speech-balloon dialogue between the protagonist bully of a bull and other animals. The bully’s words grow larger as the bull ramps up his cruelty, until a determined goat speaks up against him. At a dinner hosted by her publisher at the American Library Association’s annual conference in 2013, Seeger recounted how she invites children to read the text aloud: “The great thing is that kids know that the bigger the word is, the louder their voices should be, and vice
versa,” she said. But the insights into typography and its impact on verbal expression do not stop there. When the heroic goat shames the bully of a bull and he apologizes, Seeger said that she asks the children if they believe that the bull is truly sorry. And they do. They read sincerity into his apology because of the small tear rolling from his eye in the picture, yes, but also because the single word of text, “Sorry . . .,” appears small on the page, especially compared to the larger words bursting with bullish bravado that precede it in the text.

Typography choices can indicate or convey other elements of characterization, as well. In their essay about Fox (2000) by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer write,

Brooks has handwritten the whole text in block letters, using a penholder with a thick black pen. He created spiky capitals and shaky letters by writing the text with his left hand. In this manner, Brooks gives the impression that the handcrafted lettering was made by a child or somebody who is not used or able to write regular letters and to keep to the line.

This analysis underscores how typographic decisions can reinforce character development achieved through illustration and narrative text. In a similar example, Yuyi Morales concludes Just a Minute: A Trickster Counting Book (2003) with a farewell letter ostensibly penned by Señor Calavera. It appears as an epistolary moment of intraiconic text, with black hand-lettering on a white sheet of paper illustrated against a dark background. The lettering itself looks as if it were written with a shaky hand and stands in stark contrast with the Barcelona and Posada typefaces used for the display type and narrative text throughout the picturebook. This appearance reinforces the conceit that Señor Calavera wrote the letter and left it for Grandma Beetle, while also recalling his bony hands (calavera translates to “skull” in English and the character is depicted as a skeleton). The letters themselves have long ascenders and descenders (the parts of the letters that slope down or reach up in characters like d or y) that mimic the long, thin limbs of the skeleton.

Other picturebooks use varying typographic choices to denote different levels of text simultaneously at work. Douglas Martin discusses Shirley Hughes’s foray into incorporating comic conventions into her picturebooks in his analysis of Chips and Jessie (1985), which includes a story within a story as Jessie regales Chips. Martin writes, “The text of the story which she’s telling appears above. Chips’s interjections as he gets more and more gripped by the story are given in speech balloons” (1989: 159). The typefaces for these two different levels of text differ, with the main text in a serif font and the speech balloon text in a faint type that looks closer to hand-lettering. Melissa Stewart, Allen Young, and Nicole Wong’s No Monkeys, No Chocolate (2013) uses three different typefaces to help the reader navigate the three kinds of text in this nonfiction picturebook about chocolate. The concise main text is the largest type on the page and is bolded to highlight its dominance. The more in-depth supplemental nonfiction content appears to be the same serif type, but it is smaller in size and lighter in weight, which indicates its secondary status. Finally, humorous asides are delivered in a small, sans-serif, full-caps font in speech-balloons that are attributed to anthropomorphic worms who comment on the other levels of text while munching a chocolate bar.

A more traditional approach to typography does not regard it as a ‘semiotic resource,’ but as an element that should avoid drawing attention to itself. In his cleverly titled Horn Book Magazine essay, “Give ’Em Helvetica,” Leonard S. Marcus asserts that “harmoniousness and understatement are clearly among the watchwords in picture-book type selection and design” (2012: 42). In other words, typography should not be a distraction from the art that conveys its own meaning, and it should seamlessly integrate into the visual layout of the page. How to achieve this? In Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are and in many other picturebooks, white space outside of the pictures, also known as air frames, provides room on the page for text. In the case of full-bleed art that extends out to all sides, the type must be especially well-integrated into the design of the page. Jerry Pinkney’s nearly
wordless Caldecott Medalist, *The Lion and the Mouse* (2009), incorporates intraiconic, onomatopoetic sounds in various images (owl hoots, the sounds of a jeep driving through the African savannah, and of course, squeaking mice and a lion’s roar). This creates a text that functions something like a soundtrack, with sounds that seem to emanate from the world of the animals and that allow readers to immerse themselves into the wild, natural setting he has created.

Another excellent example of such seamless integration of text arises not from intraiconic text, but from the artful accommodation of narrative text in Trina Schart Hyman’s version of *The Sleeping Beauty* (1977). This old fairy tale about a girl crossing the metaphorical threshold to womanhood has archways, windows, doors, mirrors, and patches of sky that seamlessly provide open spaces in illustrations for blocks of text. In his very different fairy tale retelling of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (1988), James Marshall similarly uses a mirror to hold the text in one of the crowded interior scenes set in the house of the Three Bears.

Such layout decisions eschew having typography take center stage as a site of meaning, but in order for text to convey any meaning at all, its words must be legible. Martin and Carle’s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1967) includes a spread with a white dog, set against a black background. All the other spreads in the picturebook use the plain white of the page as a background, which would not work for this image since, in the words of Molly Bang, “contrast enables us to see” (2000: 80). And yet, the achievement of color contrast with this illustration change creates a new typographical challenge, since all other pages have text printed in black type, which would disappear against the dog’s black background. The solution? White lettering on the dark background, which is also called reverse type or knockout type, provides contrast to allow readers to decode the “White dog, white dog” refrain.

The use of color with typography is handled differently in my second picturebook, *Real Sisters Pretend* (2016), illustrated by Nicole Tadgell (Figure 3.3). The text is entirely comprised of dialogue spoken between two sisters, which is delivered in speech balloons.

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Figure 3.3 Illustration by Nicole Tadgell from Megan Dowd Lambert’s *Real Sisters Pretend*. Lewiston, MA: Tilbury House Publishers, 2016.

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Taking a cue from Mo Willems’s Elephant and Piggie beginning reader books (see for example, *Today I Will Fly!* (2007)), Tadgell embedded the hand-lettered text into color-coded speech balloons that correspond with the respective colors of each girl’s clothing – purple for one sister and green for another.

**Conclusion**

While we might be inclined to think of children opening their ears to picturebook texts read aloud at storytime, guiding them to open their eyes to see the expressive nature of the visible text on the page, and perhaps to consider how typographic choices can even convey voice or character, affords additional opportunities for engagement. Indeed, any reader, whether engaging in a shared or an independent reading transaction with a picturebook, has much to gain from considering typography and many other design choices in page layout that can and do provide them with occasions to make meaning of all they behold in the picturebook codex as form and object. As books leave the page and take root on various kinds of screen readers, critics, artists, readers, designers, and others will doubtlessly ask new questions about what constitutes successful design on these platforms; meanwhile, the picturebook codex affords ongoing, rich opportunities for experimentation and interpretation of the layout possibilities created by the meeting of verso and recto at the gutter of the book, and, more importantly, created by the meeting of the reader with the book in hand.

**References**