At the Interface Between Reader and Text:  
Devices in Children’s Picturebooks that Mediate Reader Expectations and Interpretations  

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Abstract  
This paper examines ways in which children’s picturebooks present themselves to their young readers. Presentation of a picturebook includes its covers, endpapers, title, author and illustrator identification, book blurbs, title pages, visual media, font styles, layout and the like. These features make up the interface of a picturebook. This paper demonstrates that these features – called ‘paratextual’ features (Genette, 1997) – can be as important as the text itself in how they mediate between the reader and the text. Examples of contemporary children’s picturebooks are explored to demonstrate the many ways that paratextual features impact the reader. This exploration includes instances of picturebooks that show how children’s authors are increasingly blurring the boundaries between the text and its surrounding paratext. Implications for readers and classroom practices are discussed in the context of the early school years, where some of these paratextual features often form a routinised focus for inviting children’s predictions about the text ahead. This paper explores ways in which such practices can be augmented to work with dissent as well as consensus among readers, and engage children in higher levels of reflection and interrogation of texts.

Problem and Purpose  
Contemporary children’s picturebooks present themselves to their young readers through many and varied devices. These devices include book covers, title pages, endpapers, font size and styles, text layout, visual media, to name but a few. These devices provide readers with points of entry into the text inside a picturebook, and play a significant role in mediating reader engagement and interpretation. Authors and illustrators of contemporary picturebooks are increasingly blurring boundaries between these devices and the text-in-hand. In some instances, the line between the text and its surrounding presentation devices appears almost seamless. In other instances, the devices for presenting the text deliberately intrude into the text itself. It stands to reason, then, that reader interpretation is also becoming a matter of increasing complexity.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine paratextual devices used in contemporary children’s picturebooks, their impact on readers and their relevance in early grade classrooms. It is hoped that such study will provide teachers with tools for building on existing classroom practices and engaging children in reflection on and interrogation of picturebooks. The paper is organised around the following three questions:
  - How do paratextual devices in children’s picturebooks mediate the reader?
  - What reading practices are called on for readers to engage with this mediation?
What implications for classroom talk around texts are suggested by this paratextual analysis?

**Conceptual Framework and Related Research**

This paper derives its framework from a theory of paratextuality (Genette, 1997) that is embedded in broader theories that account for the inter-connected nature of texts. These broader theories explain that a text carries not one but many possible meanings that range across many texts that somehow touch the text-in-hand. Kristeva (1984) referred to the inter-connectedness of texts as ‘intertextuality’ and portrayed texts as mosaics of other texts.

As the study of intertextuality has grown, so too has an appreciation of the complexity of this phenomenon. Genette (1998) classified this phenomenon into a number of categories that he grouped under the umbrella term ‘transtextuality’ to refer to connections within and across texts.

One of these categories is paratextuality (Genette, 1997). Paratextuality refers to connections between the text-in-hand and presentation devices that surround it. Instances of these devices are identified in Figure 1.

These devices provide points of entry into the text that are like thresholds of interpretation (Genette, 1997). In the interface between reader and text, these devices contribute to framing a reader’s expectations, mould interpretations, establish a sense of purpose, and influence desire to step inside the text and read on. As such, these features can be as important as the text itself in how they mediate between the reader and the text. The importance of paratexts gives rise to this paper’s question, How do paratextual devices in children’s picturebooks mediate the reader?

A study of this question cannot confine itself to paratextuality alone. As will be seen, other categories of transtextuality (Genette, 1998) come into view in this mediation and so need to be accounted for in an examination of paratexts in children’s picturebooks. Briefly, these other categories are:

- Connections inside a text between its components, such as word/picture relationships (called intratextuality, Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992);
- Connections between the text-in-hand and other texts and experiences (called intertextuality in a more specific sense than Kristeva’s original coinage, from Genette, 1998);
- Connections between the text-in-hand and broader bodies of texts such as genres which frame the text (called architextuality, Genette, 1992);
- Connections between the text-in-hand and other texts on which it innovates (called hypotextuality, Genette, 1998).

A study of paratextuality in children’s picturebooks is useful in three ways. First, it provides a lens for exploring reader mediation in children’s picturebooks, as defined above.

A second way in which a study of paratextuality is important is that it contributes to an understanding of readers’ transactions with texts, in relation to the networks of texts that readers use to interpret the text-in-hand. The idea that reading of picturebooks is
mediated by their paratexts leads to an examination of what such mediation means for the reader – what are they called on to do in this mediation. Rosenblatt (1978, p. xvi) defined reading as ‘transaction between the reader and the signs on the page’. Situating these ‘signs’ in a study of paratextuality in picturebooks, these signs are mediated by how they are presented and what surrounds them in the book. Hence this paper further seeks to examine implications of the nature of paratexts in children’s picturebooks for readers. It does so by asking a second question, What reading practices are called on for readers to engage with this mediation?

Children’s picturebooks construct paratexts of varying complexity that shapes the nature of mediation between reader and text. This mediation calls on readers to reflect on their expectations, interpretations and uptake of the text-in-hand, with questions like, ‘What in this book, and in me, caused this response?’ (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 70). A study of paratextuality helps to understand how this question is mediated by paratexts that foreground and suggest pathways for preferred interpretations or actions with the text. Such understanding may be used to empower the reader to be an active partner in a text’s paratextual mediation. As Rosenblatt (2005) made clear, meaning is not made simply from texts, nor do readers make meaning independently of the text-in-hand. Rather, meaning is made with the text (Rosenblatt, 2005).

To inform an analysis of reading practices that are involved in this mediation, a sociocultural perspective of reading (Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000) is used. In this perspective, four reading practices are identified and defined as follows:
- Code-breaking practices for deciphering written and visual codes of texts
- Meaning-making practices for interpreting written and visual texts
- Text user practices for identifying purposes of texts and of reading
- Text analyst practices for detecting hidden messages and standpoints in written and visual texts.

A conceptual understanding of each of these practices is applied to readers working with the paratexts of picturebooks.

A third way in which a study of paratextuality is important is that it provides teachers with tools for building on existing classroom practices and engaging children in reflection on picturebooks. Hence, this study also explores the question, What implications for classroom talk around texts are suggested by this paratextual analysis?

This question is framed by a sociocultural perspective of classroom interactions and activities around texts. Classrooms research studies have shown that, in interactions amongst children, texts and the teacher, all three parties have a critical role to play in the construction of meaning (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). A common literacy practice in classrooms, for example, is talking about book covers. Such talk frames a lesson, focuses children’s attention and establishes expectation of what lies ahead in the text-in-hand (Harris, Trezise & Winser, 2002). However, in this talk, children not only read the text, they also read the authority structures at hand (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Children’s interpretations are mediated by both paratext and the teacher, with potential to build bridges between old knowledge and new learning and foster reader engagement (Cairney, 1990, 1995; Hartman, 1995; Kaser & Short, 1998; Oyler & Barry, 1996; Sipe, 2000, 2001).

In the mediation between children and texts, many and varied interpretations may arise, for there are ‘innumerable separate transactions between readers and texts’
As children make and share their interpretations of a text’s paratext, they do so in the light of texts, experiences and genres that they have known and experienced in their personal lives (Crawford & Hade, 2000; Oyler & Barry, 1996). These connections cut across various media of texts as well as lived experiences and are part of children’s funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). The challenge for teachers is to work with diverse and often unexpected interpretations from children while working towards desired learning outcomes (Harris et al., 2002).

Teachers’ uptake of children’s perspectives is mediated further from higher sources of authority, such as statutory authorities that mandate outcomes and standardised testing. Power in classrooms is a matter of relativity; and the instructional agendas, learning outcomes and direction of children’s thinking which teachers enact are shaped somewhat by what they are required to do by these higher authorities (Delpit, 1988). At a time when teachers are working in an outcomes-based paradigm underscored by Basic Skills Testing, the challenge of working with divergent perspectives can be difficult (Harris et al., 2002, 2004).

Against this backdrop of the importance of mediation by paratexts and teachers to children’s reading practices, paratextuality provides an informative lens for examining children’s picturebooks, reading practices and implications for classroom talk around texts.

**Paratextual Devices that Mediate Readers in Children’s Picturebooks**

A reader’s transaction with a text inside a picturebook is mediated in many and varied ways. The section below examines how paratexts mediate the reader in relation to access, interpretation, purpose and reader positioning.

**Mediating Access to the Text**

At the risk of stating the obvious, a text’s paratext is the means by which readers are given access to the text. This access is provided by the structural surrounds of the text (e.g., book covers, endpapers and title pages) as well as how the written and visual text is encoded in ways that are relatively straightforward or complicated.

For example, ‘Rosie’s Walk’ (Hutchins, 1968) tells the story of a hen called Rosie going for a walk around a farmyard. A fox follows her, apparently unbeknownst to Rosie. Words never mention the fox but the illustrations chronicle his pursuit and his repeated failed attempts to catch Rosie. The illustrations are rendered in a humorous way that is reminiscent of a silent movie or a villain’s play. While the text contains a complex set of internal relationships between words and pictures in terms of what each does and does not portray, its paratext is quite straightforward. The front cover shows both the hen and the fox, as does the title page, making it quite clear that the fox is stalking the hen. The hen appears oblivious. The second title page shows a double-page spread of the farmyard where the story is set. This simple mediation leads the reader into the text’s internal space where more complex meaning is found. There, the use of simple, stylised illustrations against an uncluttered background makes for a very direct mediation between reader and text. Words are used sparingly and are rendered in a clear and simple sans-serif font.

The layout of ‘Rosie’s Walk’ is also a significant part of mediating the reader to enter the game inside the text and make predictions about what might next happen. The
layout falls into a two-part pattern: a double page spread that tells where Rosie is walking (e.g., ‘across the yard’) and shows the fox ready to pounce and a farmyard feature (e.g., a rake, not mentioned in the words) incidentally part of the scene, followed by a double page spread with no words, showing the fox being brought down literally by the preceding incidental farmyard feature (e.g., landing on the rake that springs up and knocks the fox out) that on the next page proves to be the fox’s downfall, with Rosie walking on, apparently oblivious and unscathed.

Paratexts in children’s picturebooks, however, can themselves be labyrinthine affairs. Authors and illustrators sometimes build intricate relationships amongst book covers, title pages, endpapers, visual media and style, layout and the like. Readers need to decipher not only the devices **per se** but how they work together to mediate the reader. Internal relationships within a text are called ‘intratextuality’ (Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992), as previously identified, and are usually applied to the main text inside a picturebook. However, contemporary picturebooks warrant intratextual analysis of their paratexts, too.

For example, the reader of ‘Fox’ (Wild & Brooks, 2000) is confronted by a paratext that intertwines its elements with one another and breaks away from certain conventions. In so doing, reader access to the text is made a complicated and thought-provoking business. ‘Fox’ tells the story of a dog that rescues a magpie from a bushfire. The magpie, injured in the fire, is unable to fly, and the dog is left blinded in one eye. Together they make a new home where Dog is Magpie’s means of transport and she is his eyes. One day a fox invades their home and ingratiates his way into their lives. Fox takes Magpie on a trip, ostensibly to give her the pleasure of riding fast upon his back. However, Fox has tricked Magpie, and abandons her far from home. Magpie sees the error of her ways and begins the long journey home.

The book cover is dominated by the image of an orange fox in a stalking pose against a fiery background and gazing directly towards the reader/viewer. The front endpapers show a bush fire out of control that connects with the fiery background of the cover. The first title page not only frames the text but begins telling the text. As such, it provides an example of how a paratext may be used to intrude on the text itself. The title page shows an image of a dog carrying a magpie in its jaws. The ambiguity of this image mediates reader’s attention to these characters: Is the dog rescuing or attacking the magpie? The second title page shows the same image of dog and magpie is shown, only now the ‘camera’ has panned back to take in more of the burnt landscape. Readers might at this point find their interpretations and expectations of the text confirmed. With the recurrence of this image and its backdrop and ragged title, danger and threat are ever-present. Here, though, a question might linger for readers – where is the fox?

The next double-page spread is fragmented into sections, each contributing to the paratext’s purpose of providing bibliographic details, acknowledgements and dedication. At the same time, this double page brings into view the three characters – the fox on one page, running in the direction of the facing page where the dog and magpie are seen running as before. Again, the paratext and the text are blended: the story continues to be told while the tone is being set and bibliographic and publication data are being given. This double page underscores the sense of fragmentation that is to be found in the story. It also heightens both certainty and ambiguity simultaneously for the reader – certainty
that the fox is a threat to the dog and magpie; and ambiguity as to why this double page is presented in the way that it is.

Once the story begins, the text continues to be rendered in a roughly hewn, handwritten font. Conventions of directionality are violated as words wind around the page, requiring the reader to turn the book. Dark colours are used to mediate a sense of mood in the story. In constructing the paratext in this intricate and entwined way, the reader’s access to the text is complicated and provocative, and may see the reader consciously shuttle between the text and its paratext to access and monitor meaning.

**Mediating Interpretations**

In some picturebooks, the various features through which the text is presented work together to anchor preferred interpretations and call up other texts to corroborate interpretations. In other instances, the paratext may disrupt interpretations; create ambiguity; provide keys to resolving ambiguity; and give distance between the reader and difficult themes in the texts. Each of these impacts on reader interpretation is explored below.

**Anchoring interpretations**

In many children’s picturebooks, paratextual features work together in a way that confirms likely interpretations. For example, ‘Ruby’s Wish’ (Bridges, 2002) is a story about a Chinese woman’s wish to go to University. The dust jacket shows Ruby peeking around red double doors that are ever so slightly ajar. On reflection of the text inside, this image echoes Ruby’s struggle to go to University to follow her heart’s desire – a desire that went against the traditional grain of her society. A reader might also interpret the slightly open doors as an allusion to China’s Open Door Policy and the introduction of Western values that entered the country after the policy’s introduction. On the back of the dust jacket, a pair of red slippers is shown. A reader might interpret this as a reference to foot binding rituals in China. Might these empty slippers suggest that Ruby has broken away from such traditions, to walk her own path? On the book’s cover beneath its dust jacket, a small picture shows Ruby cradling a white rabbit. This image might be a hint that Ruby was born in the Year of the Rabbit. It might also suggest that her character is tied in with how people born in the Year of the Rabbit are culturally viewed – articulate, talented and ambitious, for instance.

The book blurb helps to anchor these interpretations: ‘If you walk down a certain road in a certain city in Old China…you will find a little girl named Ruby. Ruby is unlike most girls of her time. Instead of getting married, Ruby is determined to attend university when she grows up, just like the boys in her family.’ This blurb also tells the reader that the story is ‘inspired by the life of the author’s grandmother’. The endpapers continue to situate this story in China, with the repeated pattern of a Chinese motif. The first title page shows a traditional Chinese calligraphy set, alluding to tradition and to writing at which Ruby excelled and which was to prove her pathway to University. The second title page shows Ruby’s mother buttoning her jacket as Ruby holds red ribbons behind her back.

Together, all these paratextual features work in harmony to corroborate this text’s interpretation. Some of their meaning may be lost on the reader until the story is read (such as references to traditions and open door policies) – and so underscore the
relevance of returning to a book’s paratext to continue to reflect on its layers of meaning and how interpretations are shaped.

*Corroborating interpretations by calling up other texts*

The paratext of a picturebook is not only important for providing an interface between reader and text. It also provides an interface between reader and other texts beyond the text-in-hand which helps shapes the text’s interpretations. When readers read, they are plunged into a network of texts that are not present but which are evoked by the text-in-hand and brought to the text by the reader. As previously identified, this phenomenon is called intertextuality (Barthes, 1988; Genette, 1998; Kristeva, 1984); and is significant to the meanings a reader constructs with the text-in-hand.

‘Bamboozled’ (Legge, 1994) is a case in point. On the back cover, presented upside down, what appears at first to be a book blurb makes an explicit link to ‘Alice in Wonderland’ (Carroll, 1977): ‘When Alice follows a white rabbit in a smart waistcoat into a large hole, she tumbles into a world turned topsy-turvy: but that’s another story. This is Bamboozled.’ Not only is ‘Bamboozled’ the name of this story, it is also a description of the surreal visual text that is reminiscent of Carroll’s surreal characters and events in ‘Alice’ story. As well, ‘Bamboozled’ aptly describes the effect for the reader when mediated by a bedazzling array of surreal images and distorted angles.

To draw another example of paratexts foregrounding links to other texts, Anthony Browne’s ‘Into The Forest’ (2004) tells the story of a young boy anxious about his absent father. His mother asks the boy to take a cake to his sick Grandmother. Worried that he might be away from home when his father returns, the boy decides to take a short cut through the forest. The forest is filled with visual allusions to fairy tales that hold a key to this text’s interpretations. When the boy reaches his Grandmother’s house, he finds both her and his father there, safe and well.

The visual media of this story’s paratext is important to making links to other texts that help shape its interpretation. Images in the main are rendered in greyscale, with colour used selectively to mediate the reader’s attention to key elements such as fairy tale characters who have lost one or both parents, such as Hansel and Gretel and Jack in ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’. The use of red colour links the boy to ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ – red is the colour of his shoes and his coat and stand out strongly against the greyscale background. This intertextual link to ‘Red Riding Hood’ in turn mediates interpretations about the boy’s journey into the forest.

*Disrupting interpretations*

Many children’s authors and illustrators craft paratexts as a series of points and counterpoints. For example, the front cover of ‘The Waterhole’ (Base, 2001) uses three distinct kinds of visual media that bring different possible interpretations into play in an intriguing way. To begin, there is the use of a realistic visual orientation in the cover’s main image. This image shows a colourful, richly textured and real-to-life menagerie of animals gathered around a waterhole. The use of bright colours suggests that life is thriving. The realistic visual orientation (Kress & van Leeuwin, 1990) could suggest a factual element. However, this suggestion is counterpointed by the presence of animals that come from different countries– how could they be gathered at the one waterhole?
A sepia-coloured frame surrounds this image, introducing a medium distinct from that used for the main image. Faint sepia images of numerals alternating with animals are superimposed onto the frame – for example, e.g., ‘1’ followed by a pictured rhinoceros, followed by ‘2’, followed by a pictured tiger. The use of sepia and the frame mediate an alternative interpretation to that of a thriving life: these animals appear marginalised and relegated to a remote past – why are these animals thus situated?

Yet another artistic medium is used to render a cartoon-like frog leaping over the book’s title. The frog is bright green, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, with one eye gazing to the viewer. On the back, a similarly rendered frog is drawn, wearing a tropical shirt and sitting among the reeds. This image recurs on the second title page, while the leaping frog re-appears on both title pages.

The use of these three distinct visual media recur throughout the text and focus the reader’s attention to the intertwined nature of the text’s internal elements. Inside the book covers, other paratextual feature continue to focus this attention: the layout, the use of animal hides to render numerals, and the use of distant visuals to portray landmarks that indicate the habitat of the animal featured on each page. These different elements could have been rendered in the same media as one another; instead, they are rendered in distinct ways and so guide readers’ attention to these distinct yet inter-related parts of the text.

Sometimes, the paratext of a picturebook will itself be innovative and may signal to the reader that the text-at-hand might not conform with established conventions and expectations. The phenomenon of texts innovating on or transforming other texts is called hypotextuality (Genette, 1997), as previously identified. These changes may be wrought from retellings, adaptations, translations, parodies, and the like. Genres may be re-invented or blended with other genres. Character types may be recast and plotlines overturned. The use of paratextual devices such as unconventional layouts, distorted angles and surreal images may signal that all is not what it appears to be.

For example, Anthony Browne’s use of surreal images and separate voices rendered in distinct fonts mediates a sense of innovation and disruption in ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 1999). This narrative text is derived from Browne’s earlier ‘A Walk in the Park’ that is told in a more conventional narrative frame. In ‘Voices’, a non-linear narrative is used in which four different voices take their turn to recount a visit to a park from four different characters’ perspectives: a young boy called Charles and his oppressive upper class mother; and a young girl called Smudge and her blue-collar unemployed Dad. As their perspectives unfold, themes of perceived social class differences and relations emerge and are disrupted. Readers’ awareness of the four different voices is mediated by sub-headings ‘First Voice’, ‘Second Voice’, ‘Third Voice’ and ‘Fourth Voice’. As well, each voice is encoded in a distinct font that mediates awareness that a different voice is telling the story. Font style also mediates the reader’s sense of character behind each voice. The illustrations abound with surreal images imported from various sources of art, film, literature and popular culture, which underscore the text’s themes. Finally, the human characters in the story are rendered as gorillas. Together, these paratextual devices indicate a breakaway from conventional story form and story themes that might be associated with a children’s picturebook.

Creating and resolving ambiguity and dissonance
Ambiguity and dissonance may be both created and resolved by paratexts in children’s picturebooks. Returning to ‘Fox’, a sense of dissonance emerges from the construction of its paratext, as seen in the earlier discussion of reader access. The paratext provokes questions and raises possibilities. At story’s end, the reader is left wondering if Magpie made it back home to Dog. The back endpapers might be seen to provide a clue to this ambiguity – the shift form the devastated landscape shown on the front papers to the newly regenerated growth on the back papers, could signify hope and new beginnings.

Shaun Tan’s ‘The Lost Thing’ (2000) presents an ambiguous and thought provoking text. Its paratext serves to both confound and clarify this ambiguity. The text tells the tale of a boy coming across a ‘lost thing’. He tries to find out where it belongs, to no avail. His parents do not even notice this large thing that resembles a pot belly stove with six legs and a pair of wings. The simple language and minimal text, structured as a journal-like recount in present tense, mediates the telling of the text and provides a strong counterpoint to the perplexing illustrations and backdrops of highly technical scientific and bureaucratic documents. Images resemble a futuristic industrial landscape, in which characters are drawn in cartoon-style. Depending on the reader, this combination of artistic styles might either soften or sharpen the edge of apathy, attitudes, perceptions, bureaucracy, red tape and preoccupation that this text satirises.

Perplexing as this text is, a reader might be tempted to look for ‘answers’ in the fine small print of scientific and bureaucratic documents against which the words and pictures are set. However, such efforts may be futile, and indeed the point of this story: so overwhelmed and preoccupied are people living in an industrial society with such matters that they do not see what is right in front of them.

The bibliographic page offers a possible key to one way in which this text might be interpreted. Against an array of cogs and wheels and mathematical formulae, the book’s title and author are encoded as a passport document stamped by the Department of Immigrant and Ethnic Affairs. Next to this, publication information is carried on another passport page, with its passport number punched at the bottom. Next to this, an authorisation page bearing the insignia of The Federal Department of Information (with its motto reading ‘ignorare regulatum’) provides space for the book’s owner to write their name: This book is the legal property of…’ These visuals could be taken to suggest that the ‘lost thing’ is an immigrant or a refugee. The story reaches its resolution when the boy finds a place enclosed by high walls and a heavy locked door. There, the lost thing meets up with other lost things and there it stays. This scene is a vertical double-page spread that requires the reader to turn the book around. The reader’s attention to this image as one of significance is thus mediated. Linking this scene back to the bibliographic page, this place could be taken to be a ghetto or a refugee centre.

Providing distance between the reader and difficult themes in the text

Children’s picturebooks often deal with difficult themes relevant to children’s own lives. In some instances, authors and illustrators use devices to put some distance between the reader and the text so as to allow the child to reflect on the issues that are being portrayed (Burke, Copenhaver and Carpenter, 2004).

For example, ‘Jungle Drums’ (Base, 2004) presents a modern-day fable about self-esteem, seeing the good in others, and being careful about what one wishes for. The
story’s characters are rendered as African animals. The story revolves around Ngiri the Smallest Warthog in Africa. Faced with relentless teasing from the Bigger Warthogs, he wishes things could be different. He meets up with Nyumbu the Wildebeest who gives him a set of magical drums. When he plays the drums, he makes a wish. However the wish does not come to fruition in the way that Ngiri had hoped. It takes two more wishes to sort things out, by which time the Other Animals and the Bigger Warthogs in the jungle accept Ngiri for who he is, as well as accept and like one another.

The animals are drawn in a cartoon-like way with an exaggerated humour that becomes more absurd as the animals end up with one another’s physical features. This artistic choice lightens the message of the fable. The written text is rendered in Lemonade Bold font that likewise adds a light touch to the tale. This lightness allows readers space to reflect on similar issues in their own lives.

**Mediating Reader Expectations and Sense of Purpose**

A picturebook’s paratext may also prompt connections to genres with which the text-in-hand is associated. Thus the paratext not only mediates between the reader and the text, but between the text and other genres with which it might be associated. The text/genre connection has been referred to as ‘architextuality’ and is significant to framing a reader’s sense of text structure, purpose and pathways for reading (Genette, 1992).

Many children’s picturebooks do not fall into discrete genre categories, however. Rather, they combine two or more genres, sometimes seamlessly; and sometimes even distort and break established generic conventions.

Returning to ‘The Waterhole’, identification of Graeme Base as the author calls up other texts that he has written and which innovate on genres and invite readers in to solve puzzles. The back cover identifies a combination of genres with which the text is associated: ‘counting book, puzzle book, storybook and art book’. For the reader, this blurb might raise the question, How might this text proceed and what is its ultimate purpose/s? A riddle set for the reader on the title page cues an entry path into the text.

Inside the book’s covers, paratextual features mediate between the reader and other genres, specifically:
- counting book genre suggested by numerals and numbers and counting sequence
- geographic and travel books suggested by the distant landmark features
- atlases, world maps and globes suggested by the map of world that the rain puddle forms
- art books suggested by the richly detailed and evocative artwork through which the visual text is presented.

In such instances as ‘The Waterhole’, the reading task is made quite complex. The book’s paratext has a significant part in mediating the reader’s negotiation of this complexity.

**Mediating Reader Positioning**

Not only do paratexts mediate access to, meanings in and purposes of texts. Paratexts also mediate how a reader is positioned by a text, and the reader’s detection and uptake of that positioning. For the purposes of this paper, mediation is considered here in relation to construction of worldviews and construction of reader roles.
Construction of Worldviews and Reader Roles

The significance of the care and detail take by authors and illustrators to craft their texts goes beyond meaning and purpose, to positioning readers to aesthetically appreciate the text and the message beyond the text. Jeannie Baker’s picturebooks such as ‘Where the Forest Meets the Sea’ (1987) illustrate this point with their exquisitely crafted collage images of beautiful natural environments. These images strongly mediate reader transaction not only with the images but with the environmental messages underpinning the book.

Continuing with ‘The Waterhole’, the narrative’s climax is signalled by the disappearance of animals in an image that is coloured in sombre tones of grey. This colour anchors themes of hopelessness and despair. Likewise, the resolution is also signalled by colour – rain falls, the waterhole is replenished and the animals return in an image that s richly coloured once again. Readers might interpret these scenes in terms of life-giving renewal and hope for the future if we care for the environment. At this point, readers might detect another type of text at work here – the environmental text. At this point, readers might detect the hidden message of the text, into which they were drawn in a clever and rather obscure way. Playing on their curiosity and emotions, underscored by the scenes of desolation and devastation on the previous page, readers might now all the more appreciate the standpoint of this text: water conservation and environmental protection.

A picturebook’s presentation may mediate reader positioning by distorting established paratextual conventions and so disrupt themes or so-called ‘truths’ encountered in other texts. For example, ‘Sand Swimmers’ (Oliver, 1999) is an information book combined with snippets of historical recounts that together focus on Australia’s central desert. Layout and visual devices mediate the enlisting of reader’s alignment with an indigenous perspective of life in the desert. While historical recounts of early white explorers are located along the bottom of the page in small sepia images and snippets of words and dialogue, the description of the desert’s rich life takes an indigenous perspective and is rendered in vividly detailed linocut illustrations that are carefully accompanied by labels and captions. The use of these two distinctive paratexts signals the dualism of the text itself. This dualism is also flagged in the back cover’s blurb. The front cover shows a linocut of a small burrowing animal, while the title page shows a more remote sepia image of a boat in the desert – an allusion to the early white explorers’ quest for the so-called inland sea.

Through these devices of layout and presentation, the reader is positioned to accept the truthfulness of the indigenous perspective that is given validity and priority over historical recounts and foolhardy attempts.

Positioning the reader as the teller or the told

In the mediation between text and reader, reader roles are constructed as more or less interpretive, active and reflective – that is, positioned more or less as the ‘teller’ or the ‘told’ (Meek, 1988). Rather than draw and elaborate on additional examples, this point can be clarified by returning to the previous examples of children’s picturebooks. These examples show that paratexts help to mediate the construction of the reader role by:
- providing signposts for the reader to anchor their interpretations, e.g., making links to other texts in ‘Into the Forest’
- focusing and guiding reader’s attention, e.g., by using distinct media to render different parts of the text in ‘The Waterhole’
- providing space to reflect on deeper issue, e.g., by the use of animals in comic style to give readers space to reflect on personal issues in ‘Jungle Drums’
- stretching the reader to be reflective and interrogatory by disrupting interpretations and creating ambiguity that readers have to work at resolving, e.g., ‘The Lost Thing’.

The construction of these reader roles, as well as the rest of the foregoing analysis, has important implications for reading practices for engaging with the paratexts of picturebooks.

Reading Practices for Engaging with the Paratexts of Picturebooks

The previous analysis has highlighted various ways in which paratexts in children’s picturebooks mediate their young readers. To engage as an active and reflective partner in this mediation between reader and text, certain reading practices are implicated. The reading practices identified from this analysis are framed in this paper by a sociocultural view of reading (Luke & Freebody, 1999, 2000). This perspective identifies practices for deciphering codes of written and visual texts; practices for interpreting what the codes mean; practices for relating meaning of a text to its purpose; and practices for detecting hidden messages and standpoints. How these reading practices might be used by a reader standing on the threshold of a picture book is summarised below.

Code breaking practices involve deciphering devices (as shown in Figure 1) that mediate a reader’s access to the paratext. As well as deciphering these devices per se, decoding the paratext also involves identifying relationships among devices, such as among book covers, title pages and endpapers. As code breakers, readers need to not only decipher information that paratextual devices convey but also ways in which that information is constructed (e.g., through visual media, through font styles).

Meaning-making practices are mediated in various ways that have significant impact on reader interpretations. As readers engage in making interpretations, they might consider questions like: How do paratextual devices shape and confirm my interpretations of the text? Do I find that my interpretations are borne out? Contradicted or disrupted? Do I need to reconsider? Do aspects of the paratext highlight ambiguity? Do they suggest ways of resolving ambiguity?

Text user practices are impacted in so far as sense of purpose and the genre/s at hand are mediated by what is and is not said and shown in the paratext. Text users use paratexual devices to establish purpose/s of the text-in-hand and frame their reading focus. For example, they might consider questions like, What kind of text is this? How does the paratext help me know this? What information about genre is provided? How does this information frame my expectations of this text? Are these expectations borne out?

Text analyst practices involve attending to how the paratext foregrounds, obscures or challenges world views, interests and perspectives. Relevant questions include, What information is foregrounded by the paratext and how? How am I positioned by this presentation? Am I mediated towards a preferred point of view? How
Implications for Mediation in Classroom Talk Around Picturebooks

It might be considered paradoxical that at a time when primary school literacy is driven by outcomes-based paradigms and basic skills testing, children’s texts are becoming increasingly complex in ways that often defy preconceived conventions and constraints. As teachers seek to meet mandatory literacy requirements, finding time and resources to work with complex texts and mediate children’s reflection is a challenge. In the face of this challenge, teachers often resort to authority to streamline children’s thinking so as to meet desired outcomes (Harris et al., 2002).

A study of paratextuality in picturebooks, however, suggests a framework in which teachers might interrogate their mediation practices in classroom talk around picturebooks, while keeping in mind necessary outcomes. Such a framework deliberately steers away from prescription and works towards identifying priorities and pathways for reader engagement that may be mediated in teacher-class talk around texts.

One such question that a teacher might ask of their classroom practices is,

- To what extent do my practices allow opportunities for children to explore a book’s paratext in ways that the particular book-in-hand warrants such attention?

This question is important because strategies for talking about book covers with children can go beyond focusing attention and predicting the text ahead. For instance, exploring a book’s threshold might involve stopping a while to contemplate, even appreciate, the way in which that threshold is constructed. Reflections might focus on what is presented; how it is presented; what is included and what is not, and why. Reflections might also take stock of how the cover relates to other parts of the text’s threshold – is how a reader/viewer interprets the cover corroborated, challenged, extended, disrupted by what is seen on its title pages and blurbs?

Other questions that teachers might ask themselves are,

- Do I encourage children as code breakers to identify and decipher various aspects of paratexts and their construction? Do I provide opportunity to explore all aspects of a picturebook’s paratext and explore how they are constructed, labelled and shape possible interpretations, or do I tend to focus only on some parts such as the front cover? How might I extend my practices to include other paratextual features that are relevant to the particular picturebook-in-hand?

- Do I involve children as meaning-makers to go beyond talking about what they see as code-breakers on the cover, to engage in interpretation of possible meanings and reflect on how the paratext shapes their interpretations?

- Do I invite children as text users to explore how a book’s paratext frames their reading and sense of purpose, such as by suggesting or identifying genre/s with which the book is associated?

- Do I engage children as text analysts in talking about how they are positioned by the paratext and the kinds of reader roles the paratext constructs for them?
Re-visiting a picturebook’s covers, endpapers and title pages after a text has been read can reveal further possibilities for interpretation and appreciation of the text. Reflecting on classroom opportunities to make these re-visits, teachers might ask, Do children have opportunity to re-visit, talk about and respond to the paratext after they have read or heard the text?

Often in classrooms, it is all too easy for a teacher’s frame of reference for a picturebook to frame the discussion of how that picturebook is presented. Yet, a study of paratextuality – indeed, transtextuality – highlights that any one text can give rise to many varied interpretations by readers. Thus it is important for teachers to ask themselves questions like,

- When I engage children in talk and activity around a book’s paratext, do I give children opportunities to explore their own interpretations and to respond to one another’s ideas?
- To what extent do I acknowledge that a paratext, no matter how simple, can evoke different interpretations?
- Even if some interpretations are more likely than others, do children have opportunity to initiate, explore and revisit their interpretations?

Finally, a paratextual analysis of picturebooks indicates the usefulness of both the paratext and the reader to suggesting and guiding talk around texts. Considering questions that a paratext itself suggests as well as questions children initiate are important for they allow both the child and the text to suggest their own prompts for discussion as one transacts with the other.

References


Rosenblatt, L. (1978) *The reader, the text, the poem – the transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U.P.


**Children’s Books**


Figure 1. Examples of Mediating Devices in Children’s Picturebooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book covers</th>
<th>Dust jackets</th>
<th>Titles</th>
<th>Author names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illustrator names</td>
<td>Book summaries</td>
<td>Biographical blurbs</td>
<td>Endpapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography details</td>
<td>Publishers emblems</td>
<td>Title pages</td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedications</td>
<td>Forewords</td>
<td>Afterwords</td>
<td>Contents tables</td>
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<td>Glossaries</td>
<td>Promotional blurbs</td>
<td>Commercial logos</td>
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<td>Type of paper</td>
<td>Cut pages</td>
<td>Visual coding orientation</td>
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