Fall 2018

A Thousand Words: Celebrating the Power of Visual Language in Picture Books

Emilie Gill
Western Kentucky University

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REFLECTIONS ON
A THOUSAND WORDS:
CELEBRATING THE POWER OF
VISUAL LANGUAGE IN PICTURE BOOKS

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts: Visual Studies
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By
Emilie T. Gill
December 2018

*****

CE/T Committee:
Professor Kristina Arnold, Chair
Professor Arden von Haeger
Dr. Christopher Keller
I dedicate this thesis to all my dear friends

who love good stories, good food, and good music.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my thanks first of all to my professors, Kristina Arnold and Arden von Haeger, for their constant support and guidance, even when none of us were entirely clear on what exactly I was doing. I cannot express how grateful I am for your wisdom and experience, and for your unrelenting faith in my abilities.

Thanks also to all my classmates and faculty in the WKU Art Department for their support and friendship, and thank you to friends and faculty in the WKU music department for their inspiration. Thanks also to Stephanie in the Art office for keeping my favorite printer stocked with that glorious Matte Black ink.

Many thanks to the faculty in the WKU Geography and Geology departments, especially Professors Scott Dobler and Amy Nemon, for helping me journey around the world and also for convincing me to add a geography minor.

Thanks to Carroll Sandman for being the best critique partner, moral support, travel companion, and fellow Starfleet crewman.

Many thanks to my dear friend and flatmate, Alexandria Knipp, for her loyalty and enthusiasm, for often being more in love with my artwork than I am, and for sharing her lovely family with me.

Thank you to the Mahurin Honors College for allowing this project to come to fruition, and special thanks to Sharon Leone for helping to start my journey.

Thank you to the Education Library and faculty at WKU for introducing me to the most amazing collection of Children’s literature I ever did lay eyes upon.

And special thanks to my friends and teachers back home and abroad in the United States and New Zealand and Austria and Germany and England, for your kindness
and for believing in me, and for ever strengthening my faith in our astonishing Lord through your existence.

Thanks most of all to my parents, Tyler and Sylvia Gill, for saying, “Okay!” Even when I said I wanted to be a cowgirl, a flight attendant, a park ranger, an adopted member of the Irwin family, and a book illustrator.
ABSTRACT

In a culture which depends heavily on verbal and written communication to satisfactorily interact with our peers, communicative formats such as picture books are often categorized as being accessible only for immature audiences who cannot understand text without the assistance of pictures. The assumption that these ‘children’s stories’ do not contain intellectually stimulating messages can result in many voices and perspectives going unrealized. On the contrary, successful picture books combine multiple language techniques through text, image, color, and style to portray often daunting themes and emotions to a range of audiences who might not have received them or accepted them solely through the written word. To explore the complexity of mediums through which book illustrators create accessible stories across age and language barriers, this project will culminate in the adaptation of text from an original short story into an illustrated picture book using techniques studied from existing published works. Example formats from the international picture book market will be discussed, including illustrated adaptations from Russell Hoban, Shaun Tan, and the fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde, which all address difficult issues of their time both whimsically and candidly. Selected documentation of my process from inspiration to sketches to final artwork will be provided.
VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY           December 2018
  B.A. in Art History; B.A. in Visual Studies –
  Mahurin Honors College Graduate
  Honors Capstone: *A Thousand Words: Celebrating the
  Power of Visual Language in Picture Books*

Russellville High School, Russellville, KY            May 2014

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Mammoth Cave National Park                        August 2018 - Present
  Environmental Education and Interpretation Intern

WKU Study Abroad and Global Learning August 2017 - Present
  Student Representative

SELECTED AWARDS & HONORS

WKU Ogden Foundation Scholar Award December 2018

WKU Potter College Outstanding Student May 2018

WKU International Year of Cuba Logo Contest Winner May 2018

Mentored FUSE Research Grant (Puppetry Arts Symposium) Spring 2018

WKU Student Juried Show (Best in Show) October 2017

Jarve Endowment Scholarship to Massey University Spring 2016

WKU 1906 Founders Scholarship Fall 2014 – Spring 2018

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI)
INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Student Assistant, WKU Faculty Led Study Abroad, Ireland         June 2018 - July 2018

WKU Faculty Led Study Abroad, Ireland                                      July 2017 - August 2017

KIIS Study Abroad, Bregenz, Austria                                            May 2017 – June 2017

Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand                                      Feb. 2016 - June 2016
College of Creative Arts

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE OF PROJECT

My motivation behind the design and construction of a 52-page illustrated short story over the course of a year originated with an excerpt from a letter by C.S. Lewis to his goddaughter which preceded the first chapter of his beloved The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe:

“I wrote this story for you, but when I began it I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But someday you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again…”

This last line caught me off guard not only because of the counterintuitive notion that one might reach an age where he or she would revert to pursuing the “juvenile” stories of one’s childhood, but because I realized I had reached that age. I read more picture books during my junior year of college than I had during the entire recommended picture book age range of three to eight years. Illustrated tales from the likes of Beatrix Potter, Margery Williams, and the Brothers Grimm were wedged in between collegiate geology textbooks and scholarly journals. Despite being fully capable of comprehending material well above a fourth grade level, I spent my evenings analyzing the subtle societal messages in Oscar Wilde’s Stories for Children and marveling at the genius in the wordless narratives of Shaun Tan and David Wiesner.

As my collegiate studies in art history and studio art exposed me to styles and art movements deemed sophisticated and culturally significant, I began to question my affinity toward what art critics might even consider “kitsch” or “a peasant’s art.” Is it
childish to study the picture book as literature? What could we ‘grown-ups’ possibly gain from what is considered a child’s genre? Why do stories such as *The Little Prince, The Velveteen Rabbit or Goodnight Moon*, which offer little instructional purpose even to young readers, continue to resonate with readers as adults? Reading Lewis’ quote prompted me to consider why the study of children’s literature and picture book illustration is not only intriguing but should be imperative.

One must first consider some elements which contribute to a story’s appearance as ‘childish.’ These elements are challenging to establish as concrete due to biases in taste and style among readers, but ultimately a book’s intended maturity level is affected by the technical skill of the artist and whether or not the author wrote the story with the explicit intention of ‘improving’ children.

Nonetheless, the picture book should not be dismissed as a crutch solely for those who cannot understand words without the assistance of images or who struggle to understand basic moral or social practices. Rather, the combination of text and image forms an enhanced media language capable of communicating information swiftly and with clarity. This form of communication thus imparts themes accessible to a range of audiences. Language barriers are weakened through relatable images, while cultural and ideological barriers are often breached by presenting messages in an engaging, approachable format.

Moreover, themes in children’s picture books may hold even more power in adulthood. In a genre where the overwhelming majority of picture books are written, edited, published, reviewed and sold by adults despite being marketed to children, these stories must at some point be found worthy of reading by the ‘grown-up.’ Literacy
educator Patricia Cianciolo states that the unique experience offered by picture books should cause an individual to “make better use of his imaginative faculty and will tend to see his reality in more fresh and vital ways.”1 Because childhood memories consist of core memories, stories associated with childhood can be revisited in adulthood to strengthen understanding of themes learned. While in childhood Margaret Wise Brown’s Goodnight Moon might simply be an intriguing and comforting combination of colors and easy-to-read words, an older reader may return to the story to realize the clever way Brown’s soothing rhythm of writing and gradually dimming room mimic the experience of drifting to sleep, providing a source of a constant evening ritual over which a parent and child may bond in a world of discomforts and uncertainties.2 In a similar way, the initial appeal of charming toys and cute bunnies found in Margery William’s The Velveteen Rabbit reveal upon closer inspection a deeper tale revering the power of true loyalty and the desire to matter struggled with by people of all ages, proving that stories do not have to be “real” to impart truth. A college psychology professor even described how he used picture books to explain psychology concepts and strengthen knowledge by associating terms with childhood, such as using Eric Carle’s The Very Hungry Caterpillar to explain the hierarchy of needs.3

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To demonstrate these truths regarding the power of picture books, I determined to design and construct a complete picture book of my own utilizing techniques common in popular stories which enhance visual communication. As I drew these conclusions, I settled on three main questions I wanted to explore regarding the successful aspects of the picture book:

- What caused the picture book genre to become associated solely with the children’s market?
- What techniques used in the international picture book market makes for communicating a story successfully?
- How can I use these techniques to create an illustrated story accessible to a range of audiences even beyond the children’s market?

A series of study abroad programs marked the beginning of my research. I perused bookshops in New Zealand, Austria, Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, collecting picture books from the bestseller and New Releases racks. I befriended locals who allowed me into their grandchildren’s nursery libraries and mailed me their favorite stories. By the end of my international expeditions, I had amassed a library of over fifty picture book examples from six countries from which to gain insight on what makes both children and adults value these stories.

With hundreds of pages of reference illustrations in hand, I began work on *The Murmuring*, an illustrated short story modeled after successful techniques used in fairytales and the international picture book market. The work is in essence an exploration of how text can be translated and enhanced through image to better connect with audiences emotionally. However, the work is also an homage to the fairytales we
treasure beyond childhood, the stories that exceed the 32-page count of the market standard in order to value story quality over cost and target age range, and the stories that show how daunting, mature truths can be addressed in gentle yet powerful illustrations.

The purpose of this reflection is to provide insight into the evolution of this endeavor from concept to final artwork and layout. My process began with research on key developments in the history of picture book illustration, followed by the collection of examples in both the national and international publishing markets. This resulted in the design and completion of the 52-page illustrated book modeled after publishing standards, beginning with text and sketches and ending with final artwork and a completed story with much of the text translated to image. My intent for the completed project and accompanying reflection is to reveal the complexity and power the picture book format influences on successful communication, thus providing engaging connections and accessible themes to a mature, global audience. Most importantly, the project exists to highlight the amount of work required to translate complex, mature content into such a simple, approachable format. Perhaps the reader of this reflection will then too find themselves old enough to read picture books again.
SECTION TWO: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

In order to design a picture book accessible to older audiences in addition to the traditional age range, it is important to first consider some key developments in the history of the picture book. Here I have provided a selection of important innovations in book illustration which I found crucial to properly understand and appreciate the format and which were influential to the format of my own project. After all, the first illustrated books were never intended solely for a child audience.

Medieval manuscripts such as the insular Book of Kells featured full pages of intricate illuminations and stylized figures; these manuscripts were used for special occasions where the general public, was largely illiterate, would often be able to recognize passages via the images. The illuminations in the Book of Kells in particular served less as representational illustrations, but as stylized patterns that evoke richness and emotional tension.4 Many manuscripts for the clergy also featured doodles and figures known as “marginalia” which often contained playful or satirical subject matter which would largely be associated with the modern children’s picture book. Within the pages of the Smithfield Decretals, a fourteenth century Italian manuscript illuminated in England, forest and farmyard animals adorned in clothing and participating in various human routines decorate the margins.5 Geese wielding swords and bows subdue a wily fox. A fox dressed in papal robes preaches to a congregation of birds. Another fox dressed as a pilgrim is held at bay by a rabbit archer. These illuminations were often


references to popular legends and folktales well known by European townsfolk and frequently included satirical jabs at authority. The juxtaposition of prey animals such as rabbits and birds overwhelming the predator provided subtle societal commentary.

The first record of a picture book specifically for children did not appear until after the invention of the printing press, which allowed images to be reproduced quickly and inexpensively. *Orbis Sensualium Pictus (Visible World in Pictures)* by the Czech author John Amos Comenius was published in 1658 and served as a child’s first encyclopedia, intended for instruction in language, literacy, and morality. Each page featured a printed image accompanied by a passage of text describing it. In the Preface, the author declares that *Instruction is the means to expel rudeness* and promises a little book to “entice witty children to it, that they may not conceit a torment to be in the school, but dainty fare. For it is apparent, that children (even from their infancy almost) are delighted with pictures, and willingly please their eyes with these lights.”

Small, cheaply-reproduced educational books soon became popular in Europe, with printers and booksellers advertising pocket-sized instructional alphabet books with intent similar to *Orbis Sensualium Pictus.* The widely held belief was that images enticed children to improve and expedite their learning. Then John Newbery, an English printer, became the Father of Children’s Literature when he revolutionized inexpensive color

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printing and published *A Pretty Little Pocketbook*, the first English storybook marketed for pleasure reading.⁹

The Victorian era of picture books became a Golden Age of illustration. Childhood was revered as a time of adventure and bliss, and it was customary for the nursery to amass a library of stories in which entire families could delight together. Formats ranged from illustrated novels to folktales and epics such as *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* and Wagner’s *The Ring Cycle*.¹⁰

Beatrix Potter’s works became nearly synonymous with the traditional nursery picture book. Her pocket-sized full-color animal tales were appealing, entertaining, and easily acquired. Potter was moreover an excellent businesswoman; she created the first patented merchandise to accompany her stories, making the first Peter Rabbit doll by hand. This helped solidify picture books, specifically the children’s picture book, as a popular and successful market.

American illustrator Wanda Gag contributed a major innovation to the picture book format when she pioneered the double-page spread. Whereas earlier picture books featured single-page images with a facing page of text, Gag’s 1928 book *Millions of Cats* was among the first stories to include illustrations rolling across both pages and blending with the territory of the text, revolutionizing the visual experience for readers. It is the oldest American picture book still in print.¹¹

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⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

While the children’s picture book has been developing as a distinct literary genre since the publication of John Amos Comenius’ *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, views on the intellectual value of the format seem to be gradually waning. While the Golden Age of Illustration revered the likes of Arthur Rackham and N.C. Wyeth as masters of visual storytelling who illustrated stunning tales to be enjoyed by young and old alike, the picture book genre now tends to appear polarized from any other audience. The popular mindset suggests the format is useful for the sole purpose of aiding in a child’s literacy skills through the assistance of visual cues; it should not be confused with ‘real’ literature and can be forsaken as soon as one graduates to the chapter book reading level.

No one event or scholarly declaration is responsible for the evolution and establishment of this mindset, though various events and changes in the publishing market have certainly contributed to the influence over time. One example that resonated with me is the creation of a separate Children’s Best-seller list with the New York Times Book Review. In the past the NYT ranked all its fiction under one chart, but the anticipated publication of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* series prompted a change in 2000. At that time the Harry Potter books had been on the fiction list for 79 weeks. Earlier in the year one third of the fiction titles chart were children’s books. Publishers of adult titles were not pleased. After concluding that these titles took up room on the chart from deserving adult books, the decision was made to form a Children’s Best-Seller list to “clear some room.”

On one hand, the separate list allows more publicity for children’s novels and picture books. Children’s literature now has its own space which guarantees representation each week. However, this change is evidence of the mindset that ‘children’s stories’ are not considered to have the same literary distinction as adult titles. To dismiss children’s literature - in particular the picture book - as a juvenile form of communication is folly, and there are a number of exemplary picture books on the market that prove otherwise.
SECTION THREE: COLLECTING EXAMPLE MATERIAL

To address my second question regarding how picture books communicate effectively, I searched for books demonstrating exemplary communication techniques in both the national and international markets. In particular, I selected books that diverted from traditional publishing standards or that utilized images and spreads in a distinctive fashion. A standard picture book on the market today consists of 32 pages of story with an average word count of under one thousand words. Graphic novels, which occasionally fall into the picture book category or exist in their own genre depending on the intended age range, possess no set page count but often consist solely of black-and-white spreads with a full-color cover.

These aspects have become the standard largely due to cost and target audience. A 32-page full-color book is cost-effective to print and sell compared to a 48-page or 64-page book, and 32 pages has been deemed to be sufficient length to tell a complete story. Color is more expensive to print than grayscale, so publishers are wary to print large amounts of full-color spreads. While picture books have in the past contained well over one thousand words, particularly fairytales or classics such as *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a number of publishers now lean toward brief text, arguing that shorter, simpler tales will hold a child’s attention for a longer amount of time, as longer text drives them away. Many publishers even prefer a manuscript to be under 300 words.

Growing up as a reader of picture books consisting of any length or style, I am disturbed that it is assumed children are unable to handle complex stories or more mature vocabulary, and in my research I strove to collect illustrated books with formats based on
the quality of the story and its ability to connect with an audience, regardless of length or standard budget. While technological improvements in communication have allowed publishers to more readily share ideas and publish successful books which deviate from the standard internationally, my time in Austria, Germany and Ireland revealed a market more openly eager to experiment with longer, unusual formats for the sake of a good story. Local bookstores displayed stands dedicated to large-format, full-color graphic novels. Many of these stories centered on turbulent events such as World War Two and the Holocaust, utilizing color and composition to express the heaviness of the subject matter in an approachable way. Picture books were generally marketed solely under the title of “Picture Books” or “Children’s Books” and rarely included a suggested age range. Many books had page counts of 48, 52, or even 64 pages, and word counts ranged from under 100 to well over 1000 words, especially those focusing on local myths and folktales. I also took note of an abundance of short stories which had been adapted into illustrated picture books. This included anthologies intended for younger audiences such as Oscar Wilde, but it also included short stories and poems originally marketed to an adult audience such as the works of William Butler Yeats and Neil Gaiman. I was drawn to the fact that classic stories published hundreds of years earlier were allowed fresh exposure to new generations through a new format, particularly when new stories are published posthumously. Meanwhile, Neil Gaiman, a contemporary author, seeks to broaden the accessibility of his tales to a wider audience by adapting his short stories into picture books and even having his novels illustrated with enticing images.

It should be noted that I do not intend to imply the United States does not provide unique and high quality story formats such as those previously mentioned. Longer,
classic stories are still in print, such as *The Velveteen Rabbit* and even a posthumously-published, full-color, 160-page short story for older readers by Mark Twain: *The Purloining of Prince Oleomargarine* (Doubleday, 2017). Additionally, a tightly connected global market allows stories on the international market to be readily available in American bookstores. As publishers around the world communicate and collaborate, new and engaging styles and formats continue to emerge. Contemporary illustration giants such as David Wiesner and Chris van Allsburg contribute wordless picture books and illustrated novels to the American market. That being said, I found longer, uniquely-formatted picture books intended for a wider age range more readily on the European market, while the majority of those located on American bookshelves were originally published abroad. Since one of the goals of my project is to explore the ways illustrations can enhance text rather than simply repeat it, I approached this goal with the intent to impart the knowledge that these innovative picture book formats are successful and can be produced more frequently on the American market as well.

After selecting a number of titles upon which to focus as examples, I settled on specific aspects and techniques each story possessed in order to highlight what made them a successful format for communication. The term that summarizes what makes these formats effective is *media language*. Media Language is simply the way in which a text is communicated to an audience through various techniques in media such as film, television, and picture books. Text can be ‘translated’ from one media language to another to accommodate and explore the most effective ways to tell a story. An example of media language at work is Australian author Shaun Tan’s picture book *The Lost Thing* (Lothian Books, 2000), in which much of the media text has been ‘translated’ purely into
image and thus text and illustration enhance one another in order to communicate. While the text in the story on its own nonchalantly narrates an ordinary day at the beach upon which the protagonist finds “a lost thing” and finds it a home, it is revealed only through the images that the “lost thing” is in fact a machine-like monster struggling to find its way in a city of steam, gears and cogs. The witty, dry tone of the narrative created by this combination of text and image not only engages the reader but also incites empathy through the protagonist’s relatable voice in a world entirely foreign to us. The complexity of media language in picture books is further revealed in the adaptation of Tan’s book into an animated short film, where the physical text must be translated entirely into image, and the story’s intended tone must be conveyed entirely through visual cues.13

The unique visual language in picture books is what enhances a story’s accessibility no matter how foreign, daunting, or heavy the subject matter. An illustration’s clarity, approachability, and ability to engage communicates messages an audience might not understand or even listen to in any other form. Graphic novels can invite readers to follow individual characters through their experience during times of war and political unrest. An illustrated adaptation of Siobhan Dowd’s Young Adult short story *The Pavee and the Buffer Girl* (The Bucket List, 2017) provides insight into the life of a nomadic family fighting discrimination in Ireland. Shaun Tan’s wordless picture book *The Arrival* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2006) shares the journey of immigrants and

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refugees in a haunting fantasy universe. And Russell Hoban’s Jim’s Lion (Walker Books, 2011) addresses the daunting subject of childhood illness with wordless dream sequences that convey the message of finding strength in adversity. The latter two stories are those I selected to more closely study specific techniques that contribute to the success of visual language.

Both stories rely heavily on visual symbolism, which can promote relatability and make frightening or abstract themes more concrete. Tan’s fantasy world in The Arrival places the reader, no matter his or her background, in a setting as foreign to us as it is to the protagonist. The only language is a set of fictional runes which simulate the stress of one’s inability to understand a culture. The hardships from which the protagonist flees are represented by literal monsters prowling his former city. Likewise, Jim’s Lion uses animals and monsters as stand-ins for Jim’s fears and strengths as he struggles with an unidentified medical issue in the hospital. Because animals have no official race or ethnicity, they often make for good symbols to relate to universally.

Color and style play some of the strongest roles in visual communication, setting the mood and evoking emotion. The Arrival makes use of limited color and realism to mimic a series of old photographs, as if the protagonist is an existing immigrant being documented. Meanwhile, Jim’s Lion frequently features angry and agitated reds and ochres accompanied by loose, often frantic line work, simulating the illness and disorientation in a fever dream. Even though a reader does not know Jim’s illness and has never experienced his situation, the discomfort and fright incited by the color schemes and indistinct imagery can be known worldwide.
Manipulations to perspective and scale further draw an audience into a story. Flashbacks of a character’s flight from his ravaged former city in *The Arrival* feature machine-like giants vacuuming people from the streets. While the giants’ armor and massive scale compared to the speck-like people is enough to incite terror, the sharp tilt of the horizon shifts the direction of gravity toward the giants, inducing a sense that the situation is inescapable as everything must slide toward the enormous vacuums. In a similar manner, Jim’s character is often dwarfed by the monsters that pursue him in his dreams, magnifying his overwhelming adversity.
SECTION FOUR: WORLD-BUILDING

With my selected stories on hand for reference and effective visual storytelling techniques documented, I began the main process of designing and executing my own picture book. Inspired by the success of the adapted short stories in connecting to audiences beyond the traditional picture book age range, I chose to adapt an original short story into an illustrated book, translating part of the text into images that enhance the theme rather than merely echo it. Additionally, I established that the story would be written in the style of a legend or folktale, due to the genre’s timelessness and universal appeal. While I focus largely on the American and European publishing market simply because the picture book market originated and developed in these main locations, folktales remain a popular storytelling format worldwide that endures for generations. These tales were traditionally told only verbally to both child and adult audiences, making them accessible and appealing to a wide age range. I was intrigued by the information that some oral folktales which were nearly lost were recovered because of images of characters recorded in the margins of manuscripts. The French tales of Reynard the Fox, for example, have been identified in the Smithfield Decretals.14

Folktales moreover have the ability to be adapted to cultures and situations, emphasizing global connections. Even if a tale does not address a specific moral or societal issue, the plot is often intriguing and flexible enough to be applied to multiple situations and settings. As an example, there is an innumerable amount of Cinderella

14 Varty, "Reynard the Fox and the Smithfield Decretals," 347-50.
tales internationally, with many continents possessing their own version based on their own culture. The tale is easily adapted for a wide audience. Adaptations range from the beloved Charles Perrault version to the Irish Cinderlad, Cowboy Cinderella, and even Hawai’ian sumo wrestler Cinderella. Even though there may not be a universal demand nor understanding for a story of a cowboy who is not allowed to attend a wild ranch hoedown, the demand for a tale about a compassionate individual who overcomes bullies with kindness is a widely universal theme.

In a similar way, I designed my short story not to address any particular pressing issue; rather, I intended to demonstrate how the visual language techniques studied can be adapted to explore various themes through one story in a fantasy setting. Story structure and voice were modeled after selected books and short stories, namely fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde’s *Stories for Children*, which addressed difficult societal and familial issues of their time both whimsically and candidly. *The Little Prince* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* served as example structures for a balance between longer text and engaging spot illustrations. Also referenced was John Steptoe’s celebrated retelling of *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* (Lothrop 1987), an African Cinderella story set in Zimbabwe about the kind Nyasha’s triumph over the bad-tempered Manyara on a journey through the forest to marry a king. This tale contributes not only breathtaking imagery and robust characterization, but it also demonstrates the value of this form of storytelling in regions beyond Europe.

After accumulating numerous legends during my research abroad, I concluded that to thoroughly explore media language translation in picture books, my short story premise would focus on music in order to explore the translation of sound into image as
The beginning of my design stage consisted of gathering existing landscapes and legends for reference to ground my fictional tale in reality and connect with audiences more readily.

My world design research began with tone poems including Smetana’s *Die Moldau* and Debussy’s *The Engulfed Cathedral*. Tone poems achieve in song much of what I intended to achieve with my illustrated short story; each motif in the composition describes an event through sound much like an image would text. *Die Moldau* is an orchestral composition evoking the flow of the namesake river from the mountains until it drains into Prague’s city center. *The Engulfed Cathedral* is based on the legendary French island of Ys, which sank beneath the ocean, although organ pipes could still be heard beneath the waves. Organ pipe legends are in fact existent in many areas of the globe, with basalt ‘organ pipe’ columns adorning cliffs in countries such as New Zealand, Ireland, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The notion that pipes might grow as naturally as trees from the ground and become petrified in stone fascinated me, and my research soon expanded to creation legends crediting music as the inciting event, including the Maori story that the earth was void until it was sung into being by God. A visit to the Haus der Musik museum in Vienna, Austria provided insight into the science of sound, including its fascinating ability to physically lift particles or shatter glass at the correct frequency. At the same time, I took reference photos of landscapes and features I visited that might aid in the formation of coherent illustrations.

With these legends and landscapes in mind, I composed a brief, one-sentence summary of my proposed short story that would guide my storytelling and image-making...
and would provide a prompt allowing for the translation of text into intriguing images using the techniques studied:

*On an island made entirely from music, one child is the only being left who can hear the song barely keeping it all afloat.*

This summary promised a story told in the style of a folktale as well as the opportunity for whimsical illustrations to strengthen and enhance the tale. With that, the time to physically design and build the book arrived.
Figure 4. Reference photo of the island Skellig Michael
SECTION FIVE: THE PICTURE BOOK PROCESS

Using the standard steps used by professional illustrators and publishers to create a picture book as a guideline, I made a list of the elements to consider in my design, including audience, style, color, and visual symbolism. As an additional guide, I referenced a list by literacy expert Patricia Cianciolo used to appraise successful picture book illustrations: *Something of Significance is Said; Audience is Understood and Respected; Artistic Talent Prevails; Illustration Goes Beyond the Text; Color and Shading May Be a Goal; Sizes and Shapes Should Vary.*

The first order of business was to finalize a layout and page count. To achieve this, my intended audience had to be taken into account. While my format and story would likely be marketed to a younger audience, I intended the tale to be accessible to all ages. The language and vocabulary in the text are intended not to assist in an early reader’s literacy skills, but to either be read aloud by a mature reader or enjoyed personally by any advanced reader. Because of this, size, word count, and maturity of imagery must be taken into account. The book dimensions must be large enough to accommodate full-page spreads, but not so large that an older reader would feel “juvenile” as standard picture books are so closely associated with immature audiences. 8 by 10 inch dimensions echo the size of a large novella or a small novelty book, and thus makes for an inviting read without the feeling of shame that is unfairly accompanied by reading below one’s supposed age range. As an example, while in Ireland I purchased two different editions of the same story, *The Fox and the Star* by Coralie Beckford-Smith

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(Penguin Books, 2015). The larger format featured bold colors and was sold in the children’s section. The smaller edition features a velvet cover with embossed letters, resembling a classic novella. This was sold in a section for older readers as well as gift books for all ages.

Figure 5. Two editions of *The Fox and the Star*

Likewise, longer word count with more complex vocabulary invites older audiences who might be deterred by overly simple large-print lines associated with the inexperienced reader to open a short story with voice that promises to be intellectually stimulating and does not “talk down” or “preach” to the reader. Nor should picture book text overwhelm the reader with a gargantuan word count that competes with the imagery. My original text exceeded 10,000 words, which I reduced to under 4,000 as I developed illustrations that would “translate” much of the tale into visual information, allowing readers to explore the story and world at their discretion rather than be literally told every detail. Particularly important or intriguing phrases would be set apart and enlarged to allow for visual emphasis, a common and effective trademark in children’s picture books.
In developing size and format I referenced adaptations of Oscar Wilde and Hans Christian Andersen as well as contemporary illustrated short stories, whose tales do not sacrifice language when addressing younger readers, but whose length is manageable to a range of ages as well as readers in a hurry in search of a good story. Moreover, the illustrations accompanying these tales are not designed to convince young readers to pick them up with bold colors or cartoons; rather, they are sophisticated images meant to set the mood, evoke a sense of wonder and prompt quiet exploration into the world of both text and image.

Concept art and thumbnail sketches followed initial layout design. I first constructed a “book map” which consists of thumbnails of every page in the proposed book, accompanied by notes and sketches over the events of each page. Characters and setting must then be sketched multiple times to ensure consistency and to solidify the sequence of events in the story. I gathered reference photos of landscapes, birds, and people, often using myself as a model to make sure composition was appealing and coherent over 52 pages, at times constructing small models of faces to achieve better contours and lighting.
Figure 6. Concept sketch

Figure 7. Maquette reference for facial anatomy
Figure 8. Character sketches and expression board

Figure 9. Character concept art
After sketches were finalized, work began on final art. I chose to first render all artwork in graphite and proceeded to add washes of color digitally. This method helped ensure that despite my limited experience with the process, color schemes looked appealing and relatively consistent, especially on a tight deadline. I strove to make my work appear as traditionally rendered as possible; the texture of graphite accompanied by washes of digital watercolor brushes helps to suggest the rustic, traditional atmosphere often attributed to folktales. Variations between spot illustrations and full bleed illustrations also assist with keeping the story’s pace and emphasizing the most important information. Spot illustrations are smaller images with no background or border, intended to break up text blocks and can provide nuances in the story that were not as emphasized in the text. I designed most of my spot illustrations to call to mind the sketches of naturalists or explorers, as if someone had witnessed the events of the tale and recorded them in images. Full bleed illustrations take up an entire page or spread and are useful for communicating particularly powerful or significant events in the story.

The central objective during the completion of final artwork was to implement the selected visual language techniques previously discussed. My first point of exploration and experimentation centered on manipulation of color and how this might simulate mood as well as sound and music. Differences in saturation between the first and second island spreads strive to evoke a sense of loss and dysfunction after a catastrophic inciting event. Whereas the opening spread teems with saturated blue and green, with rolling splotches of glowing blue emulating strains of harmonic sound, the following spread features the island in ruins, devoid of benevolent sound and thus bleached and drained of
rich color. Vibrancy levels vary based on events throughout the remainder of the tale, with the most vibrant washes of blue occurring during the climax of events.

In addition to color, I selected animals to serve as representatives for entities or events which were largely abstract or contained subject matter I felt was too heavy and personal to portray literally in this story. The subject of death is present in a number of spreads, and instead of listing particular details leading to death graphically simply to evoke shock, I chose to allow the reader to interpret how the event played out by portraying a riderless horse, panicked hounds or a sleeping rat rather than narrating men literally dropping dead. In this way, the event of death is not sugar-coated or provided with an alternative; we know it definitely occurred. However, the reader has the freedom to visualize a catastrophic event and deal with it based on their own experience.

Advanced readers can appreciate the occasional acknowledgement that they are smart enough to understand what occurred without being preached to through text alone.

Additionally, the frequent presence of a large cat companion serves as a bridge between the realm of wild, unattainable, or spiritual sound and the realm of ordinary people. The only creature who can be present with the protagonist in both scopes, the cat is a silent reminder that the protagonist is never truly isolated by her predicament and that the outcome of her choices will affect all beings on the island, even those who seem to matter least.

I relied heavily on scale to evoke a sense of awe and wonder in my illustrations. Megafauna and ancient ruins have always provided me with a source of fascination, and I composed my spreads to feature gargantuan birds looming over dwarfed humans to suggest a tangible incarnation of an ancient, unfathomable sound. Likewise, the ancient,
ruined organ pipes sprouting from forests and cliff sides are a nod to those existing basalt formations as well as the notion that sound can be not only tangible but physically destructive, thus causing them to be regarded with reverence.

Figure 10. Graphite drawing for spot illustration
Figure 11. Graphite drawing for full-bleed spread

Figure 12. A Riderless Horse
SECTION SIX: UPON FURTHER REFLECTION

Now that all of my text and final artwork is compiled into a coherent narrative and is ready to be printed into a physical picture book, it is time to consider what the creation of this book has actually accomplished regarding my declaration that picture books should be for all ages.

It must be acknowledged that a picture book of this size and length might struggle to find a home in the traditional publishing market, as printing it would be considered expensive and risky to bet its success on a first-time illustrator. If it were indeed published, it would most likely end up in the children’s section regardless of its accessibility to older readers. That is simply the way the market works at this time. However, the purpose of this endeavor was not to hit it big in the publishing world nor to simply eliminate the “Children’s Book” designation. I set out to develop a widely accessible picture book to demonstrate the subtle complexity in the art of children’s literature and spread awareness for the power and effectiveness this storytelling format contains. The printing and sharing of this book is intended to incite further steps for both myself and readers.

My next steps include further improving my illustrations and studying what techniques people most readily respond to so that my storytelling may continue to effectively connect to an even wider range of ages and global audiences. Researching new picture books that challenge the standard format will also be key, as well as researching how producing these books may become more affordable to the public, as cost is yet another challenge to accessibility.
As for the readers of this book project, my hope is that they will now more easily recognize the aspects of their childhood picture books that make their communication powerful and use such knowledge to strengthen their own storytelling abilities. Perhaps they will now enter a bookstore in search of stories on the market not intended to teach a lesson or “make better children,” but which make successful narratives and aid in supporting the genre as a sophisticated form of storytelling.
SELECTED PROCESS DOCUMENTATION AND FINAL SPREADS

Figure 13. Preliminary book map

Figure 14. Thumbnail sketches

Figure 15. A final spread layout in Adobe InDesign
Figure 16. An example of final artwork

Figure 17. Graphite Concept Sketch

Figure 18. Concept artwork for environment
Figure 19. Graphite layer and final artwork for environment
Figure 20. Final character artwork
Figure 21. Final artwork created from modeling reference
Figure 22. Thumbnail sketch versus final graphite layer
Figure 23. Graphite layer versus final artwork
Figure 24. Final character artwork used in story and for cover artwork
WORKS CITED


The following is a selection of works consulted during the completion of this project. Books were selected based on aspects such unique length and format to accommodate richer storytelling, as well as illustrations containing remarkable techniques for visual communication. The list includes traditional children’s picture books with sophisticated storytelling material exceeding the marketed age range, longer short stories for older audiences adapted into picture books, graphic novels and picture books intended specifically for an older audience, and richly illustrated novels. Also included is a list of works providing discussions on innovations of the picture book.

**Remarkable Picture Books**


An adaptation of a French tale told from the perspective of a troupe of traveling players, Beckert tells the story through highly detailed illustrations and sophisticated rhythmic verse that would delight and challenge the intellect and imagination for readers of any age.


An original tale with intriguing, limited-color illustrations, this gentle story about overcoming grief is formatted both as a children’s picture book and as an elegant keepsake novella, complete with sophisticated graphics and typography, as well as an illuminated velvet hardcover.


This beloved classic intended to be read predominately by adults to children contains a simple, straightforward narrative that cleverly celebrates the ritual of falling asleep through a combination of subtle cadence in text and gradually-dimming visuals.


The oldest American picture book still in print, this tale pioneered the use of the double-page spread in illustration.

Chronicling the hardships of immigration through the lens of an innovative mouse, this harrowing tale is communicated through rich, sophisticated watercolor illustrations and text that far exceeds the length of a traditional picture book.


Titled after the sound of a ringing bell, this story addresses the burdens and fears of war refugees and anyone experiencing crisis through haunting, raw imagery.


A rhyming narrative enhanced by grotesque, captivating illustrations and rich, advanced vocabulary that does not pander to a younger audience, this story about vices is an example of successful rhyme that achieves whimsy and dark humor rather than an air of ‘cuteness’ or childishness.


A collection of fresh and original fables which offer a tongue-in-cheek nod to the traditionally moralistic tales offered to young readers.


This is a gentle tale of a boy who longs to be a mermaid, tactfully celebrating the importance of people who support our dreams, even if the aspirations are unusual.


This tale is a powerful re-telling of the beloved Irish legend, accompanied by fantastic imagery and language.


Told largely through wordless imagery, this story of a boy’s evening on an island of magical fish and cats offers to expand any reader’s imagination to the extreme.

This beloved illustrated novella is an ideal example of a successful relationship between words and images, as the spot illustrations by the author add charm, humor and clarity to the story.


A Cinderella-tale from Africa, this story follows two sisters, one bad-tempered and the other kind, as they go before the king who seeks a wife. The tale is strengthened by powerful illustrations and supports the power of the Cinderella folktale to bridge cultures.


This story explores the power of visual imagery through depictions of an average boy in a world of gears and machines and a narrative that has been translated from text to image to animated short film.


A classic tale far exceeding the length of an average picture book chronicling the life of a toy rabbit experiencing the power of love and loyalty to make things ‘real.’


This 64-page story addresses the struggles of overcoming war and disunity through candid watercolor illustrations.

**Illustrated Short Stories, Graphic Novels, and Picture Books for Older Readers**


This full-color watercolor graphic novel was originally published in France and is among a number of large, full-color graphic novels appearing more frequently on the U.S. market.

An example of an illustrated short story anthology.


An illustrated novella intended for young adults, this story addresses struggles with prejudice and racism faced by nomadic groups in Ireland.


Originally published in a short story anthology for older readers, this picture book adaptation about the further adventures of a Snow White character exceeds 10,000 words and is enhanced by haunting pen and ink illustrations.


A large collection of Irish folk-tales accompanied on each page by watercolor imagery visualizing tales both dark and heroic.


An example of a novella enhanced by sophisticated illustrations in each chapter.


This short story re-imagined as a short graphic novel features daunting wordless dream sequences in this narrative about overcoming fears of death and illness.


This longer picture book chronicles a Native American coming-of-age tale of adventure and survival.

An original fairy tale romance, this picture book was intended for a young adult audience.


An example of a longer, full-color graphic novel utilizing color and style to simulate the dry and desperate atmosphere of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s U.S.


This beloved illustrated novella is an ideal example of a successful relationship between words and images, as the spot illustrations by the author add charm, humor and clarity to the story.


A sophisticated example of a longer short story in the style of a folktale adapted for the picture book format.


A wordless fantasy graphic novel about immigrants chronicling the wonder, uncertainty, and confusion experienced by any person fleeing war and hardship in an unfamiliar land. Illustrations resemble sepia photographs.


Published posthumously and completed by Philip Stead, this short story adapted for the picture book begun by Mark Twain spans nearly 200 pages and is assisted by charming illustrations which emphasize the most significant lines of text.


An anthology of illustrated short stories with narratives and imagery addressing societal issues and human flaws in a manner that is definitely *not* for children.
Illustrated Novels


This fantasy tale echoing the style of Charles Dickens is accompanied by raw pencil illustrations of characters and monsters which mimic sketches taken from a naturalists’ journal.


In this sequel to the internationally acclaimed *Dragon Rider*, each page features pen and ink illuminations by the author.


This story is one of many Neil Gaiman adult novels being re-released as illustrated editions.


The delicate images accompanying this tale sets the mood and establishes a sense of timelessness in the setting.


This fully-illustrated edition of the best-selling novel is one of many in the series being adapted into an unabridged picture book exceeding 300 pages. The publication of these editions paves the way for more book series to be released in the same formats.

Writing on the Picture Book


Literacy expert Patricia Cianciolo appraises the aspects of successful picture book illustrations.

A celebration of David Wiesner’s silent picture books.


An exploration of Potter’s life and work, including her role as a visionary artist and businesswoman, her subtle jabs at societal quirks through innocent illustrations, and her insistence on color imagery during a time where color printing was a great expense.


A selection of great picture book illustrators accompanied by a history of the development of the picture book in recent history.


Children’s literature expert Leonard S. Marcus interviews a selection of prominent children’s illustrators on what makes the picture book format so effective.


Discussions on the purpose of illustration in books.


A collection of bizarre and charming spreads from forgotten picture books.


A collection of illustrations from Rackham’s most beloved adaptations, including *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* and Wagner’s *The Ring Cycle*. 