2015

We'll Eat You Up We Love You So: The Narratological Implications of Bodily Harm in the Picture Book

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We’ll Eat You Up, We Love You So: The Narrative Implications of Bodily Transformation in the Picturebook

An Honors Thesis
presented by
Abigail Spencer Woodward
to
The Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
May 2015
Acknowledgements

i. I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Courtney Baker, without whom I would still be grappling with Freud. May there never be a monster at the end of your book.

ii. To my readers, Professor Denis Ferhatovic and Professor Julie Rivkin, whose enthusiasm was so warmly welcomed.

iii. For my mother, who might say that this was very well played indeed.
Abstract

In this thesis, I examine picturebook narratives of bodily transformation from a narratological lens, analyzing existing criticisms and arguing for a serious study of the picturebook. Through these texts of bodily transformation, I explore the picturebook’s nonlinear, often recursive structure, as well as the narratological impact(s) of metafiction upon these texts. I conclude these analyses by examining where each of these two narrative elements push against and/or build upon the other. These texts, I argue, can get away with murder, bodily harm, transformation, etc. because of the ways linearity and metafiction both confine and release these narratives to/from the pages of their respective books.
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Introduction

“Not too many bad things happen in picturebooks. If they do, they usually find their way to a happy resolution at the end… When I feel the morbid need for unpleasantness and despair, I can read the newspaper or watch the news… Picturebooks are a sanctuary from all of that” (Lobel 75)

“As soon as she saw him, Princess Justina Albertina ran over and said, ‘He’s perfect. He’s exactly the pet I want.’ The gryphon opened his eagle beak and swallowed Princess Justina Albertina in one gulp.” (Davidson 29-30)

The word “picturebook,” though not a misnomer, is perhaps deceptively simple. Though this form of literature is indeed a book that employs pictures, picturebook scholar Lawrence Sipe offers us a richer understanding of these thirty-two pages of image and word. The picturebook, he writes, is a “highly sophisticated aesthetic object, worthy of study and research by readers and viewers of all ages” (Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 4). In my research for this project, I have discovered this to be true. These texts are in fact complex and sophisticated forms of literature that offer much in the way of interpretation and meaning-making possibilities. These possibilities form the backbone for my own research into this much-misunderstood form.

In approaching the picturebook as an object to be studied, I discovered what I least expected of a literary form intended, in order, “for children, adults who read with children, and adults who simply enjoy children’s books” (Barnett 1). The picturebook is often filled with horrifying things. Or, rather, horrifying things often happen to the characters in the picturebook. More specifically, the bodies of these characters either undergo or are threatened with bodily
transformation. These transformation texts are sometimes framed as wholly positive, though usually the characters who endure these bodily transformations actively seek a return to their original bodily state. Whatever the case, what remains is that the bodies in these texts are subject to frequent changes. Sometimes these bodily transformations “find their way to a happy resolution at the end,” and sometimes this resolution never comes to fruition within the text (Lobel 75). But, more often than not, this happy resolution is temporary at best, and the happy ending achieved within the text does not last.

In navigating this form, I kept returning to these transformation texts, questioning their prevalence as well as their narratological aspects. My aim for this project is to develop a narrative understanding of the broader picturebook form that will work towards explaining why the bodily transformations described above are an acceptable—perhaps even inherent—part of the picturebook. What I want to establish in this work is a new narrative theory of picturebooks, one that determines what is making a picturebook a picturebook—how they work and what narrative aspects are at work within them—without putting the focus on child development or psychoanalysis, while at the same time taking the texts seriously as literature worthy of being studied not despite nor because of its intended audience of children. Only then can we give picturebooks the full credit they deserve as a unique form of literature and begin to understand why these narratives are getting away with murder, disfigurement, pain, and threats to the body.

The time for a critical discussion of the picturebook is now. So much of our current conversations regarding the picturebook stops short of an in-depth narratological analysis, calling into question instead the value of such a study, and whether or not anything stands to be gained from such an analysis. Those who do take this form seriously study the form for its unique location in and between the fields of both literature and art. This work utilizes and builds upon
existing studies to develop an understanding of the form that can be used in turn to understand these transformation narratives. Because of its insistence that this form of literature absolutely can withstand these questions, I turn to the “Picturebook Manifesto,” a document produced and signed by twenty-two picturebook authors and illustrators who “are tired of hearing [that] the picturebook is in trouble, and tired of pretending it is not” (Barnett 1). By attending to narratives of bodily transformation, this project reflects the manifesto’s aims and proves that “children’s books merit grown-up conversation[s]… [that] the tidy ending is often dishonest,” and what is perhaps the manifesto’s most-exquisite declaration, that “even books meant to put kids to sleep should give them strange dreams” (1).

This has always been a field worth studying; now, more than ever, this is still the case. In the last few years, picturebook publishers have reported a sharp decline in picturebook sales, noting that “parents have begun pressing their kindergartners and first graders to leave the picturebook behind and move on to more text-heavy chapter books, [with] publishers cit[ing] pressures from parents who are mindful of increasingly rigorous standardized testing in schools” (Bosman 1). The picturebook is at a crossroads. With limited scholarly interest and rapidly-diminishing public acceptance, the time for the picturebook to not only embrace but assert its radicalness is now.

In this work, I have drawn on comic theory, film theory, and narratology to develop an understanding of the picturebook as a standalone literary form. Eminent scholars of the form all offer differing and thus conflicting definitions of the picturebook, a fact that reflects the picturebook’s low ranking (perhaps even lowest ranking) in the hierarchy of the literary world. Unlike other literary forms that are either text-exclusive or text-preferential, the picturebook is still only in the stage of being understood. Picturebook author and illustrator Celia Berridge
claims that the “reason picturebooks get such cursory treatment is not that they are seriously evaluated and found wanting, but that they are all regarded as being the least important part of the book world” (Hunt 175).

Building on the work of critics studying the picturebook, as well as those working with related literary forms, I develop a more complete definition of the picturebook. In constructing this definition, I draw heavily upon the works of other Children’s Literature scholars, notably Maria Nikolajeva from whom I have adopted the portmanteau “picturebook” rather than “picture book” to “distinguish [them from] from picture books, or books with pictures” (Nikolajeva 8). For the purpose of this study, I define the picturebook as follows: A picturebook is a narrative conveyed though the juxtaposition of words and pictures with a deliberate though flexible sequence of events “that unfolds over thirty-two or so printed pages,” and whose images and words “necessarily have a combative relationship” so that both image and text “would be incomplete without the other” (McCloud 9, Johnston 1, Nodelman 221, Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 98). This definition is a far cry from the Oxford English Dictionary’s “a book consisting wholly or partly of pictures, especially one written for children” (“Picturebook”). To say that this form consists of pictures says nothing of what the pictures and words individually and together contribute to the narrative.

Narratology has proven an important tool for this study as this critical discipline attempts to understand the inherent structures of the picturebook as they relate to the narrative themes that formed my initial question. I am not the first to works towards understanding these transformation texts, though scholars who have asked these same questions have taken very different approaches. On the whole, critics seem to be relying too heavily on enduring insights, namely that the picturebook must be approached as a didactic object, when what we need, in the
words of one picturebook scholar, “is a more robust criticism to keep us original” (Barnett 1). In particular, critics of children’s literature have relied too heavily on child psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim’s *Uses of Enchantment* as the ultimate authority in all of children’s literary criticism. In the almost forty years since the book’s publication, scholars engaging in conversation with children’s literature, specifically the picturebook, have relied too heavily on his approach to the classic fairy tale (see Griswold 2006, Tatar 1992, Lurie 1990, Reynolds 2007). Bettelheim’s work is indeed seductive in that it offers answers to the questions raised by these transformation texts, but to consistently invoke his work is inappropriate for several reasons. For one thing, to focus exclusively on what the form can offer its child readers is to ignore completely the narratological aspects of these texts. Secondly, Bettelheim is explicitly not interested in the picturebook. His preference for the fairy tale is clear

The overwhelming bulk of… so-called “children’s literature” attempts to entertain or inform, or both. But most of these books are so shallow in substance that little of significance can be gained from them. The acquisition of skills, including the ability to read, becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one’s life… The idea that learning to read may enable one later to enrich one’s life is experienced as an empty promise when the stories the child listens to, or is reading at the moment, are vacuous. The worst features of these children’s books is that they cheat the child of what he ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to deeper meaning, and that which is meaningful to him at his stage of development… In all these and many other respects, of the entire “children’s literature”—with rare exceptions—nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale. (Bettelheim 5)

Bettelheim makes no effort to hide his disfavor as is demonstrated by the quotation marks around the phrase “children’s literature”. Critics of children’s literature, citing similarities between fairy tales and children’s fiction, have consistently turned to Bettelheim’s analysis in presenting their own critiques. Reading the criticisms of contemporary and classic children’s picturebooks, one notices that the majority of these studies rely heavily on this work, especially studies that directly or indirectly address the transformation texts that initially informed this project. This is
problematic in that the project of child development is not one and the same as the project of children’s literature. Bettelheim, drawing heavily on the work of Freud, cites fairy tales as the way children learn to master their fears.

The more I tried to understand why these stories are so successful at enriching the inner life of the child, the more I realized that these tales, in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being. They speak about his severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and—without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails—offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties. (6)

Throughout his analysis, Bettelheim insists that the fairy tale be told and not read in order to access all of its “consoling properties” (150). One of the “greatest merits” of the fairy tale, he explains, is “reaching the child’s unconscious directly” (154). Yet to critique picturebooks in this way—to think of them only as developmental tools or as stepping stones to “real” (read, adult) literature—is to do the form a grave disservice. What I am arguing for is a new theory of picturebooks, one that draws upon the current and limited theories of the picturebook without restricting the form’s value only to what it can offer the developing child reader.

While contemporary critics of the picturebook are privileging this particular standpoint in consistently invoking Bettelheim, their mistake is not in blindly adhering to his one concept but in adhering to it at all. While Bettelheim was highly critical of literature intended for children, he was even more so critical of the “illustrated storybook.”

Illustrated storybooks, so much preferred by both modern adults and children, do not serve the child’s best needs. The illustrations are distracting rather than helpful… the illustrations direct the child’s imagination away from how he, on his own, would experience the story. The illustrated story is robbed of much content of personal meaning which it could bring to the child who applied only his own visual associations to the story, instead of those of the illustrator. (58-59).

His arguing against the illustrated storybook is reason alone to question the constant application of his work to picturebook analyses. In arguing against the illustrated storybook, Bettelheim is
not allowing for image to contain any sort of narrative possibility; this work, then, unlike many projects concerning bodily harm in the picturebook, will *not* be invoking Bettelheim’s work. As this is primarily a narratological work, I have made a point to reference authors who are self-consciously identifying not as psychoanalysts but as scholars of children’s literature, the first two of whom provide the underlying basis for my own definition of the picturebook, as well as scholars pursuing related forms of literature.

Children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman has the following to say about the picturebook’s inherent relationship between images and words:

> Because they communicate different kinds of information, and because they work together by limiting each other’s meanings, words and pictures necessarily have a combative relationship; their complementarity is a matter of opposites completing each other by virtue of their differences. As a result, the relationships between pictures and texts in picturebooks tend to be ironic: each speaks about matters on which the other is silent. (Nodelman 221)

Sipe echoes this point, mentioning what is also true of the picturebook—the existence of a third narrative comprised of the dual narratives of text and image.

> In a picturebook, both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other. They have a synergistic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations, but also on the perceived interactions of transactions between these two parts. (Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 98-99)

My definition also draws and distinguishes from what is perhaps the picturebook’s most related form—the comic. Eminent comic theorist Scott McCloud recognizes this relationship in *Understanding Comics*, in which he references picturebooks by Maurice Sendak and Raymond Briggs. Like comics, picturebooks occupy a unique space between the literary and artistic realm, combining image and text in one literary object that requires the reader to “join in a silent dance of the seen and unseen” (McCloud 92). Because of this, I have engaged comics theory in developing my own understanding of the picturebook as a genre. But McCloud also tells us that
“this dance is unique to comics [and that] no other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well” (92.) He also lists Maurice Sendak’s *In the Night Kitchen* (1970) and Raymond Briggs’ *The Snowman* (1978) as “some of the most inspired and innovative comics of our century [that] have never received recognition as comics” (18). Because of this, I have been cautious in my applications of comic theory to this work, utilizing it when applicable while remaining consistently aware that to privilege comic theory over picturebook theory would be to continue to silence the latter form.

Despite my objections to parts of McCloud’s analysis, what I have found useful is his approach to the synergetic relationship between image and text. Narrative possibilities of forms that approach this particular relationship are far-reaching. We see this synergy in comic books and we see this in the picturebook. With images running alongside and directly negotiating with their word companions, narratives are opened to the possibilities of interactions unseen within the novel. Perhaps the picturebook is seen as the “least important part of the book world” not only because it has not been seriously evaluated, but because it is a form whose narrative gaps are difficult to understand and are therefore reviled. In “all prejudices…” the “manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable” (Batchelor 24). Because the picturebook is so far removed from other forms of literature, literary scholars are not equipped with what it takes to understand the narrative structure of the picturebook. The comic, then, faces this prejudice as well, though it must only confront a single bias; all the comic must prove is that its existence alone warrants criticism. The picturebook, however, must contend with a double bias. Not only does it contain images, but it is also something that is written for children. Although children’s literature incorporates elements from other literary forms, “there is one genre that it has contributed to the
field of literature: the picturebook” (Hunt 175). Comics are assumed to supply a sophisticated reading of adult culture that a picturebook cannot. Therefore, though an understanding of comic theory is useful to an understanding of the picturebook, comic theory cannot fully replace a separate picturebook theory. And yet, the two literary forms are related in that they convey meaning through their image and text. How do we account for the differences in the two?

McCloud defines the comic as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,” a definition that could work for picturebooks on a cursory level, and one that I have indeed used in the formation of my own definition (McCloud 9). Because both picturebooks and comics are indeed juxtaposed pictorial and other images (namely words) that exist in a deliberate sequence thanks to the nature of a book as a bound object, this definition could work for both—but only if we limit our appreciation of the picturebook to its linear narrative. In doing so we do disfavor to the narrative possibilities of the picturebook form. Part of what makes the picturebook a distinct literary form—distinct even from comics—is that its narrative is not bound to the same rules of linearity as its more traditional counterparts. Rather, I suggest that the picturebook differs from the comic in that its sequence of images and text is deliberate yet flexible—deliberate in that the pages are bound, and flexible in that the narrative is not limited to this arrangement—a point I will argue in more depth further on.

A picturebook is a form utilizing image and text that is related to but quite different from the comic, and is consistently misinterpreted as a developmental tool, if it is being taken seriously at all. Though this is the common consensus amongst literary critics, there are some contemporary narrative theorists who respect the integrity of the picturebook. Much has been written about the “postmodern picturebook,” which scholar of education Pamela Hellman claims has only developed in the last 25 years. To understand what it is about the postmodern
picturebook that makes it a form worth studying, it is important to understand what is so “traditional” about the traditional picturebook. Picturebook scholar Bette Goldstone classifies a traditional text as follows:

Among these books, a pattern of structural commonalities emerges in both art and text. Illustrations are clearly focused and imaginitive, with uncluttered page design and vigorous left-to-right linear movement across the page. Texts reflect the structure found in oral tradtiion, with a fast action oriented journey. The text, like the illustrations, is linear, with a clearly articulated beginning, middle, and end. Appealing characters struggle and eventually resolve a conflict and return to the safe confines of home. (Goldstone 1)

Postmodern picturebooks, on the other hand, “do not follow a linear pattern, are self-referential [or self-aware] (the characters of a story may refer to the physical presence of the book or the process of making a book), are cynical or sarcastic in tone, and actively invite the reader to coauthor the text. Not all of these characteristics are always found in one story, but the presence of even one will significantly change the reader’s… way of interpreting the text” (Goldstone “Whaz Up” 363).

What Goldstone identifies as characteristics of the postmodern picturebook—namely nonlinearity, self-referential, and metafictive elements—are important and critical to my research. But it is a critical mistake to apply these characteristics only to the handful of texts that have been designated as “postmodern picturebooks”. Much of the analyses of these texts is limited to the few books that literary theorists have deemed postmodern, leaving books that have not been thusly classified (perhaps because of subtler uses of postmodernism) without a place in the world of literary theory. In limiting our understanding of these books to the most conspicuous examples, we are creating a false dichotomy between traditional texts and those that have been identified as postmodern.

Instead, I offer, what makes the picturebook a picturebook is that it has at least one, if not all of the characteristics found in the more-obvious examples of postmodern picturebook. There
may have been a rise in appearance of postmodern picturebooks in the past twenty-five years, but the foundational elements have always existed between the covers (and on the covers) of picturebooks. If postmodern aspects were occurring in picturebooks in the 1960s, clearly the “postmodern picturebook” designation needs to either be expanded to include all picturebooks or dropped entirely in recognition of the fact that these characteristics have always existed within the modern picturebook, not only in the two or three texts consistently classified as postmodern.

Ultimately, I want this project to enter the conversation currently surrounding the picturebook. Children’s and Young Adult Literature scholar Michelle Abate has already identified what she calls “the homicide tradition in children’s literature” (Abate 32). In her book, Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children’s Literature, she writes extensively of the presence of homicide in children’s literature but comes up short regarding the picturebook. Children’s Literature scholar Jerry Griswold, in his thematic understanding of children’s literature, claims that one of the five recurring themes in this literature is “scariness,” arguing that “the world of children’s literature is not the sunny and trouble-free place that grown-ups often remember it to be” (Griswold 31). “Instead,” he says, “it is a frightening realm where witches lure children, a wolf chats up little red riding hood, Mr. McGregor hunts Peter Rabbit, Max encounters the wild things, and Voldemort stalks Harry Potter” (Griswold 2). Though he, like Abate, is not focusing exclusively on the picturebook, he does offer some valuable insights into the picturebook form, mentioning the story of Babar as an oft-remembered “happy” text that “introduces trauma” (Griswold 32).

Adults, it seems to me, remember what they wish. They melt in nostalgia at the mention of The Story of Babar. They forget that six sentences into the book Jean De Brunhoff introduces trauma: “Babar is riding on his mother’s back when a wicked hunter, hidden by some bushes, shoots at them. The hunter has killed Babar’s mother.” (32)
While Griswold’s insight into “scariness” as a very present aspect of children’s literature is valid, and one on which I base part of my analyses, his psychoanalytic approach is limiting (Griswold 35). Invoking Sendak, he explains:

> What is too often overlooked is the fact that from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, that fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, that they continually cope with frustration as best they can… It is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming the wild things. (44)

Griswold does what many critics have done when it comes to these occasions of “scariness” in children’s literature, by claiming that the “proximate encounter with pain in the fiction of a scary story evokes a more intense feeling of being alive and [a] heightened recognition of being an individual” (Griswold 49). In so doing, he uses the convention of Bettelheim as a crutch, ignoring the principles of the Manifesto in sticking to the convention of psychoanalytic approach.

What I am arguing for in this project is criticism of the picturebook that respects rather than rejects related forms of literature and art and is open to the possibility of expanding current terminology. We cannot have a criticism that is stagnant. As the Manifesto says, “we should know our history,” but “let us also make new picturebooks” (Barnett 1).

To this end, the present study strives towards creating new and stronger narrative understandings. In Chapter One, I explore linearity as it relates to bodily transformation in the picturebook. Books that contribute to this discussion include David Shannon’s *A Bad Case of Stripes* (1998), and Robert Munsch’s *Look At Me!* (2008), two texts whose linear structures question the notion of traditional forward-moving linearity. Chapter Two will build upon existing explorations into metafiction, again relating back towards my original insights into bodily transformation and harm. In this section, I discuss texts with both obvious and less distinct instances of metafiction, as well as a return to some of the texts in the previous section.
Chapter Three will relate the findings of the previous two chapters conclusively back towards these initial questions, focusing specifically on how linearity and metafiction together work both to increase horrific aspects of these texts as well as ultimately allowing for a reader-based interaction with the text that enables for reader control over the direction and interpretation of the story.
Chapter 1: Nonlinearity of the Picturebook

The picturebook, in its standard thirty-two pages of image and text, looks deceptively uncomplicated. To physically hold a picturebook is to hold something that is flat, almost always larger in dimension than adult trade publications, and almost always containing a balance of image and word that skews heavily towards image in relation to space occupied on the page. Here, one would not expect to find traditional narrative linearity challenged, and yet the picturebook is exactly where this is happening. This chapter explores how the unexpected occurrences of bodily transformation and harm are interconnected with the unexpected departures from linearity. As we shall see, the nonlinear aspects of the picturebook are working to reinforce the narrative implications I have drawn into focus. This chapter theorizes nonlinearity in relation to bodily transformation, focusing specifically on narrative structures that have elements of repetition. This intervention is first and foremost in the interest of narrative.

Though I focus here primarily on linearity of the picturebook, the analysis I provide holds great implications for the study of other forms of narrative. In light of the following discoveries, for instance, we might ask what if would mean for other forms of literature if the picturebook as an accepted literary form could be read from multiple directionalities.

In comparison to other forms of literature wherein the project of reading involves working towards an endpoint, picturebooks do not present a linear, A to B, narrative journey. The familiar opening “Once upon a time” does not necessarily lead the reader down a structured path towards “happily ever after,” and “happily ever after” is not necessarily the end of the story. Sometimes a happy ending is merely a return to the beginning of the text. Characters who in other narratives might have reached a definitive endpoint are instead delivered to their original position within the text. The narratives contained within these books are thus circular. These
circular aspects of narrative are occurring in several different ways. In this chapter, I examine in
depth each of these linear possibilities, as well as their narrative repercussions. I am conscious
of reader-response theory as it relates to my analyses, particularly where it relates to reader
interaction with the text. Central to my argument is Nikolajeva’s notion that the reader has great
power in negotiating narrative gaps, a power that can ultimately serve as the primary navigation
system for the reading experience.

Both word and images leave room for the readers/viewers to fill with their
previous knowledge, experience, and expectations, and we may find infinite
possibilities for word-image interaction. The verbal text has its gaps, and the
visual text has its own gaps. Words and images can fill each other’s gaps, wholly
or partially. But they can also leave gaps for the reader/viewer to fill. (Nikolajeva
2).

Before diving further into my own analysis of picturebook nonlinearity, I would like to
delve a little bit further into what narrative theorists have already contributed to this topic, as I
have also in part based my analyses upon these preexisting theories. Though nonlinearity has
already been flagged as a hallmark of the postmodern picturebook, narrative theorists are
tentatively exploring what these characteristics mean for picturebooks outside of the postmodern
realm. Children’s literature scholar Magdalena Sikorska explores the “multistranded narrative”
of the picturebook and makes some fascinating points about multiple strands of narrative within
one such text.

[The] picturebook is built on a curious temporal and spatial frame… Only the
book’s point of departure “from” and return to the frame show more than one
narrative story line, the first page reveals the coexistence of the verbal and one of
the visual layers and two elements of foreshadowing toward the other pictorial
story… while the concluding page includes elements of both pictorial stories but
lacks the verbal one. All other pages of the book split into three ostensibly
independent stories elaborately composed within the aforementioned frames… To
signal a further plot complication, there is hardly any thematic correspondence
between [one] story line and [the separate] visual narrative. (Sikorska 87-88)
Through her analysis of the text, Sikorska offers a valuable insight to narrative theory of picturebooks. In claiming that the multi-stranded narrative is “innovative in its challenge to conventional causality,” she addresses an aspect of picturebooks that is important to this study—linearity. Though she falls back into the traditional picturebooks rhetoric, when discussing this “problematic causality,” her observations are nonetheless perceptive (89).

Traditional picturebooks addressing younger readers frequently exhibit high fidelity toward the cause-effect structure of the story, which can be checked using a simple test of jumbling the sentences or pictures in a given picturebook and then restoring the previous order. The task usually proves to be an easy one, as many clues are present to help the attentive reader-viewer recapture the book’s original story and layout. (89-90)

This jumbling test is quite useful to an analysis of picturebook narrative; as a visual model, the jumbling of pages is a tangible representation of the potential for reordering scenes that is gestured towards later in this work.

Sikorska concludes her analysis by saying that her “interpretive suggestions lead to the conclusion that [the nonlinear picturebook is] implicitly an adult book” (98). She acquiesces that a book of this nature “can be of much interest to a younger audience,” but asks if such a book, though “highly original and thought provoking… [is] enjoyable” (98). What she hits upon—the nonlinearity of the picturebook without defining it as postmodern—is important to my research, though her conclusions are disheartening. These texts are first and foremost for children and surely can be enjoyed by them, not despite of, but because of their nonlinearity. A central argument of this study is, after all, that picturebooks are written “for children, adults who read with children, and adults who simply enjoy children’s books—in that order” (Barnett 1).

Sikorska is not alone in her explorations of nonlinearity in the picturebook. In “Travelling in New Directions,” Bette Goldstone identifies the non-linear picturebook as a “new
form in the picturebook genre,” claiming that this form has what she calls a “non-linear presentation” (Goldstone “Travelling” 1).

Non-linearity affects the rhythm of reading and the degree of co-authoring needed… In non-linear books, however, the story may not flow from beginning to end. The reading rhythm changes. The reader may be backtracked or enticed to linger on the page longer than usual. (1-2)

Goldstone specifically calls out Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) as the ultimate “traditional storybook… [because it is] read sequentially from beginning to end (Goldstone “Travelling” 1). Citing *Caterpillar* as an example of a linear narrative, she claims that “read[ing] sequentially from beginning to end” creates “an expectation of an orderly procession of events and actions” (qtd. in Goldstone 1). On a surface level, this is correct, the premise being quite simple. The caterpillar is hungry (very hungry, Carle would add) and eats his way through different types of food until he grows into a “big fat caterpillar,” constructs a cocoon, and becomes a butterfly (Carle 20). There is the clear beginning and end that Goldstone cites, and an orderly procession of events (“On Monday, he ate through one apple… on Tuesday, he ate through two pears…” (Carle 10-12). But the linearity is not as straightforward as Goldstone would claim.

Though the week moves forward on each page, the narrative action is the same on each day. The caterpillar is hungry and so he eats. What Goldstone claims to be a straightforwardly linear narrative is more of a series of narrative loops. Take away the days of the week and the gradually-increasing number of foodstuffs, and the book’s interior pages would fail to pass Sikorska’s “jumbling” test. The caterpillar is hungry and so he eats. He eats again on the next page. And again on the next. While he eventually metamorphoses into a butterfly, what happens before this is the same action repeated over and over and over again. Though the beginning and
end pages are indeed a clear-cut beginning and end, what is happening in the middle is less obviously-structured.

If Goldstone is citing Caterpillar and books like this as a linear text, what does she count as a nonlinear picturebook? “Nonlinear picturebooks,” she explains, “fall into two categories—ones that contain integral intertwined narratives and others that contain multiple non-essential story lines” (Goldstone 2). By this definition, in order for a book to be considered nonlinear, it has to either contain “story lines [that] have multiple stories that all must be used to create a cohesive meaningful whole” or “contain non-essential multiple story lines” (Goldstone 2). But this definition would also make *Caterpillar* wholly linear and, as we have seen above, its linearity is far more complicated than this would allow. What I have taken from her analyses is her acceptance of books that have not been ubiquitously deemed examples of the postmodern picturebook. Her taking linearity seriously allows me additional authority to do the same, though picturebooks as a literary form exhibit nonlinearity in ways that go above and beyond the non-essential multiple story lines and intertwined narratives. Part of what makes the picturebook a picturebook is that there are instances of nonlinearity even in the most straightforward-seeming texts.

In the rest of the chapter, I will examine the circular narratives of the picturebook, primarily focusing on the idea of recursivity. In his study of recursive texts, literary critic and deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller makes several claims that can be applied directly to the picturebooks to be discussed, namely that these works are “interpreted in part through the
noticing of such recurrences,” these recurrences “work to generate meaning,” and that the reader can be “fairly safe in assuming that it is significant” (Miller “Repetition” 2). In these works, scenes occurring internally in the text (that is, the scenes that are bookended by the beginning and end) either repeat themselves or can be rearranged with no disruption to the text. At the same time, the endings can also gesture back towards the beginning, the end scene mirroring the first, or trigger the start of a similar, even identical narrative. I am not interested in a strictly hermeneutic consideration of the following texts, but instead am interested in providing concrete examples for broader narrative concepts. Where Bettelheim and students of his work might consider these repetitions from a psychoanalytic perspective, I am not interested in what all of this means for the development of readers’ selfhood. I am interested in what this all means for narrative. Narrative is, after all, “the principle way in which our species organizes its understandings of time” (Abbott 3). In the following texts, I explore what the above repetitions mean for time as it relates to narrative, as well as reader-derived meaning-making. I open my textual analyses with an examination of two books that highlights the interior recursiveness that exists in the most outwardly linear-seeming of texts. I will follow this with an investigation of alternate recursive linear formats.

**On Recursiveness: Bootsie Barker Bites and There’s A Witch Under the Stairs**

So what kind of linearity is at work within the pages of these ostensibly traditional texts? As stated above, these texts’ “traditional” linear formats can—and should—be reexamined. Though these texts do have a clear-cut beginning and end, the events that occur between the last and first pages can be shuffled and reshuffled without any real damage to the overall narrative. This is a recurring structural possibility happening in the picturebook, one that I have observed operating in some way in a wide variety of books classified as this form.
Bootsie Barker Bites (1997) is structurally similar to Caterpillar in regards to this type of linearity. By Goldstone’s standards, Bootsie is a linear narrative in that it contains a “cause-effect” structure, the cause here being that Bootsie Barker terrorizes the unnamed narrator (by/with the threat of biting) to the point where the narrative achieves the desired effect—namely, that Bootsie herself is terrorized and the narrator finally freed of her tormenter.

Throughout the narrative, Bootsie is shown as a little girl with a wicked grin whose frequent appearances at playdates are the source of nightmares for her playmate. As the book progresses, the narrator is either actively tortured by Bootsie or dreaming about Bootsie “fall[ing] off the edge of the world” (Bottner 18). The book, at first glance, seems structurally more complex than Caterpillar’s Monday through Friday narrative structure, but, on the most basic level, the two are essentially the same. Like Caterpillar, Bootsie has a clear beginning that drives forward to an end; Bootsie arrives for a playdate that the narrator dreads and by the end of the text, several playdates later, “Bootsie runs out the front door,” the narrator having been catalyzed into action by the threat of a sleepover (29). Our narrator is safe; the threat of bodily harm is gone.

What deserves to be noted, however, is that Bootsie is driven out several playdates later. This is important in that it is indicative of the recursive nature of the text. Multiple playdates are happening; the main actions that make up the majority of the text are variations of the same scenario. Because of this, although part of the narrative remains in place—specifically the actions taken by the narrator that bring about the end—everything else is flexible, even the first page where the narrative begins. Each event is a repetition of something that has already occurred or will occur. An illustration of the structure of such a narrative follows:
The only part of the narrative that must align with traditional linearity is the actions that bring about the conclusion. The rest of the events are flexible within the text because they are repeated within the text. The first play date that opens the book can easily be replaced by the second; all that changes are minor details, such as where a salamander is exchanged for turtle.

First, we have a tea party. Then, my mother tells Bootsie and me to play in my room. I try to get Bootsie interested in my book about turtles, but Bootsie hates turtles. “You’re a turtle!” howls Bootsie. “And I’m a TURTLE-EATING DINOSAUR!” (6-8)


The pattern of playdate, nightfall, playdate, etc. is poised to repeat itself a third time. As Bootsie promises within the text, she will return the next day as a different sort of dinosaur.

Mrs. Barker knocks on the bedroom door. It’s time for Bootsie to go home. “Tomorrow,” says Bootsie, “you get to be a worm.” (17)

Had the narrator not intervened, Bootsie would have succeeded in her effort to become a “WORM-EATING DINOSAUR” the following day, a safe assumption to make based on the success of her carrying out similar sentences the previous two days. Had the narrator not been spurred into action the second day, Bootsie surely would have continued into the next, assigning a different animal-eating dinosaur to herself and a different eatable animal to the narrator. As is the case with the first two types of animal-eating dinosaurs, the addition of a “worm-eating dinosaur” could easily replace either of the first two dinosaurs. The pattern “salamander, turtle, worm” could easily be changed into “turtle, worm, salamander” or “worm, salamander, turtle,” and the basic narrative structure of the text would be unaffected. Bootsie would still terrorize just as the caterpillar would still eat and eat.
Though these events—the main points of conflict within the text—are inherently the same, and thus could be swapped out for one another with no change to the narrative, they are not the only scenes within the text for which this is true. Consider the dreams that placate the narrator on the eve of each playdate, either of which could replace the other with no change to the narrative.

I go to bed and dream that Mrs. Barker moves far away and takes Bootsie with her. (12)

That night, I dream that Bootsie accidentally falls off the edge of the world. I try to save her, but it’s too late. (18)

Like Caterpillar, this book would hardly pass Sikorska’s “jumbling test.” Even if the conclusive end scenes could be sorted out correctly, the repetition of events with only minor detail changes would make sorting out the rest of the pages an impossible task. Because of this, any straightforward linearity of the text is disrupted, and the overarching linear pattern looks more like a series of repetitive loops than a typical linear approach to conflict and conclusion, or cause and effect.

So why does this matter? Because of this repetition, it is all-too easy to picture a fourth, fifth, sixth playdate or an additional week of the caterpillar eating its way to engorgement through various snacks—it would simply be a matter of the narrative repeating its loop a few more times before heading towards the destiny of the conclusion. The bodily harm is thus magnified by this recursivity. What we see in the text may only be a few repeated instances, but because these repetitions so closely mirror one another, we are able to construct a backstory. The text picks up in a specific moment in the timeline of this torture but it is not the beginning of this torture. Because the narrator has been terrorized by Bootsie almost three times within the text, the torture seems—and is—recurring. The “salamander-eating dinosaur” act has probably
happened many times before, and would have happened many more times had our heroine not been incited to action.

This same sort of amplified horror is occurring in *There’s a Witch Under the Stairs* (1991) in which the narrator, Frances, describes the various things she has done to get rid of the titular enemy.

Once I got a book from the library called *Getting Rid of Ghosts and Other Problems*. I followed the direction carefully… but I guess witches weren’t included. (Smith 12-13)

I’ve tried dressing up like my mom, and my dad, and even my weird Aunt Sophie. But the witch always knows it’s me. (16-17)

I tried luring her out with a brand-new broom. She said hers was just fine. (18)

The entirety of the text, aside from the introductory “there’s a witch under my stairs and I know it” and the *Bootsie*-like conclusion catalyzed by Frances losing her beloved stuffed elephant, is comprised of events like the above three (5). Some start with “and” or end with “that didn’t work either” to indicate that there were other events before it, but because these indicators occur frequently, reconstructing a jumbled narrative would be impossible. This repetition again serves as an indicator that Frances has been tormented by the witch for much longer than the duration of the events in her text. Because the text does not start with the witch’s arrival or the narrator noticing the witch’s presence, instead opening with a world in which the witch already exists and has already been noticed, we have no way of knowing if it has been weeks, months, or even years that she has been living in fear of her basement.

Without a known timeline of events, the image on page eight is particularly horrific. In it, we are shown a cross-section of Frances’ house. This view gives us a glimpse into her psyche. Her father, mother, and little brother are shown looking for their daughter in her bedroom and under the cupboard, but Frances is in the basement, tied to a pole with tape wound
around her mouth while a witch’s cauldron brews in front of her (Figure I). We have no way of knowing how long Frances has been enduring this torture, either real or imagined, and because of this her torture is magnified. In making the narrative an assortment of similar events instead of a more clear-cut linearity, Frances’ torment seems unending. The fact that it does end finally—a point driven home by Frances baking a “raspberry party cake” on the last page—is comforting, but in a modest way (32). Without a cap to the levels of mental anguish Frances faced before this conclusion, we are left with a troubling narrative that takes up much more space in time than is acknowledged in thirty-two pages.

Though the repetition in these two texts amplifies the horrors faced by the narrators, there is at least a conclusion to be reached, as seen in Figure 1. The tortures, though prolonged, will not last, and we eventually see our two protagonists asserting their respective agency.

I stand up and look Bootsie in the eye. “Pardon me, Bootsie! I am not a worm. I am a PALEONTOLOGIST! Do you know what they do? They hunt for DINOSAUR bones. Would you like to play?” (Bottner 26)

HOBLEDYGLOBBUM and HOBLEDYGOO! Witch, here I come. I’m gonna get you!... and there’s nothing you can do. (Smith 29)

But what of narratives without the conclusions of Bootsie and Witch, narratives whose recursive interior events carry through the entire text so that the entirety of the book fails to pass the jumbling test, the books whose endings and beginnings can be swapped just as easily as the events contained by the two? In these texts, we shall see, linearity is doing a funny thing. The endings, though just as seemingly conclusive as the two discussed here, are in actuality not as conclusive as they appear, even if what looks like a “happily ever after” is reached.
External Circumnnarrative: A Bad Case of Stripes

David Shannon’s A Bad Case of Stripes supplies one instance of the unsettled conclusion. It tells the story of Camilla, a girl who wakes up one morning covered in rainbow stripes. The book opens with Camilla (not yet transformed) standing in her closet “fretting even more than usual… [because it was] the first day of school and she couldn’t decide what to wear” (Shannon 3). On the following page, “Camilla [is] striped from head to toe” (4). This, we find out, is some sort of karmic punishment.

Camilla Cream loved lima beans. But she never ate them. All of her friends hated lima beans, and she wanted to fit in. Camilla was always worried about what other people thought of her (3).

This anxiety is punished when she wakes up, “look[s] in the mirror… [and] scream[s]” (Shannon 3). As the narrative continues, Camilla’s rainbow stripes unremittingly change to match her environment.

When the class said the Pledge of Allegiance, her stripes turned red, white, and blue, and she broke out in stars! The other kids thought this was great. One yelled out, “Let’s see some purple polka dots!” Sure enough, Camilla turned purple polka-dotty.” (8-10).

And so on. Camilla’s stripes keep changing as we turn the pages, eventually transcending her skin and changing the actual shape of her body. At her worst, Camilla “melt[s] into the walls of her room” (24). By the end of the book, thanks to an old woman “just as plump and sweet as a strawberry,” Camilla is returned via lima beans to her original bodily state (26). What happens in between this metamorphosis and conclusion is what we have seen with Bootsie and Witch: a series of events that differ only slightly from the ones before and after it. This happens in several instances throughout the text, the repeated intrusion of medical and scientific professionals being an obvious example.
That afternoon, Dr. Bumble came to examine Camilla. “Most extraordinary!” he exclaimed. “I’ve never seen anything like it… Here’s some ointment that should help clear up those stripes in a few days.” (6)

…the Specialists went to work on Camilla. They squeezed and jabbed, tapped and tested… “Try these,” said the Specialists. They each handed her a bottle filled with different colored pills” (14)

Dr. Gourd and Mr. Mellon were the finest scientific minds in the land. Once again, Camilla was poked and prodded, looked at and listened to. (18)

Though these scenes repeat themselves three times (four if we count the “woman who called herself an Environmental Therapist”), they are not the only scenes to be recursive. Camilla’s transformations follow this model as well. To show just a few:

Camilla was striped from head to toe. She looked like a rainbow. (4)

Someone else shouted, “Checkerboard!” and a pattern of squares covered her skin. (10)

She looked in the mirror, and there, staring back at her, was a giant, multi-colored pill with her face on it. (16)

She sprouted roots and berries and crystals and feathers and long furry tail. (23)

While we can see that *Stripes* is indeed recursive, and would certainly fail any test for linearity, something else is occurring here alongside the same repetition of events that we have seen in previous texts. In the last two pages, “everything [is returned] back to normal.” Camilla is cured of her stripes, and a happy ending is reached (30). Yet this ending differs from *Bootsie Barker* in that it too is a repetition, this time of her bodily state at the beginning of the text. Rather than progress from A—a playmate who bites (or a witch living under the stairs) —to B—getting rid of the playmate—this narrative flows less linearly. Instead it progresses from A to A, from untransformed bodily state to untransformed bodily state. The narrative is thus circular; it ends as it begins, not in the same moment in time but in the same moment in space.
This sort of narrative nonlinearity is both literal and figurative. From a material standpoint, we can physically bend back the book’s spine so that the first and last pages touch. In doing this, we create a tangible circular narrative. We do not have to engage in the theoretical to envision a beginning and end that abut and engage with one another; it is there in our hands, the first and last pages side by side in a two-page scene that we can process as one. This type of circular narrative occurs so frequently that it warrants recognition as a valid linear format. For these reasons, I will refer to the linear possibility of this type of circularity as a circumnarrative.

If we were to engage in the figurative, the narrative would appears as follows:

![Figure 2 Circumnarrative](image)

That is, the narrative, if depicted as a forward-moving line, would eventually make it back to the start of the line, doubling back upon its position in space to create an overarching narrative circle. Narrative then, I would argue, while it does concern organizing our understandings of time, is primarily concerned with our organization of space as it relates to time. We are permitted to traverse across space in a way that time does not permit. We start and end at the depicted point. Stories such as these, then, are not so much about transformation as they are about returning to the untransformed.

Because the circular structuring of such a narrative fully encompasses the entirety of the narrative, this type of linearity differs from the above-named recursive picturebooks; there are no static beginnings and/or endings bookending otherwise repositionable middle scenes. Because
this recursivity is occurring outside of the text—that is, it is literally occurring when the book’s beginning physically touches the book’s end—this form of circumnarrativity is external, the key factor being these parallel beginning and end scenes. Though the internal (not the beginning and end) scenes can be shuffled along the linear circle, what is ultimately bending the narrative into this circular form are the external scenes that encompass the internal. We can bend back the covers of *Stripes* to see Camilla unaltered on the first and the last page. Though the scenes where she develops stripes, spots, etc. can also be shifted around, their shifting is a matter of forward-moving linearity alone. When we provide for this circularity, the repositionality of the internal scenes is unchanged, just occurring instead in a circular motion. Yet, this internal recursiveness is crucial to my understanding of this narrative possibility. For all of the middle scenes to be mobile means the overall narrative is not affected by the reformatting from the linear to the circular. We shall see why this is important as this discussion moves towards the narrative implications of this format, namely the ability we then have for a reverse reading of a circular text.

Though the circumnarrative can most readily and tangibly be achieved through the flexing of the spine I have described above, the same effect would be achieved if we were to lay the pages out in a line on the floor, following the last page with another copy of the first. To read *Stripes* in this formation would progress as follows: Camilla is shown in her original state, undergoes physical transformation, continues to transform throughout the text, returns back to her original state, wakes up covered in stripes, and so on and so forth. Because this is a distinct narrative possibility, we thus have a narrative that is nonlinear, and, more importantly, unending. If we accept this circular reading, the implications are vast. What this means for the overall narrative is not only a lack of closure but an *impossibility of closure*. 
Before delving into these implications quite yet, I feel it is important to explore an argument against the circumnarrative form. It would be possible to argue that the text is, in fact, quite linear, given the fact that Camilla is only transformed in the first place because she “worrie[s] about what other people [think] of her” (3). Once she learns her lesson (“some of the kids at school said she was weird, but she didn’t care a bit”), Camilla returns to normal, and the text explicitly states that “she never had even a touch of stripes again” (32). The beginning and ending are thus not repetitions of the other and therefore the narrative is not circular. This argument would be valid—but only if the picturebook was not a picturebook. If we were to privilege words alone, the circumnarrative possibilities of the book no longer exist, the book clearly stating in words that the narrative does not repeat itself. If we go back to Nodelman’s description of the relationship between word and image in the picturebook, however, with “each speak[ing] about matters on which the other is silent,” then the conclusive declaration of the words is compromised (Nodelman 221). Considering the book’s images without text would support the circumnarrative claim as it shows a girl undergoing a transformation only to be brought back to her original state. But, again, “both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other” (Sipe 98-99). How can we reconcile the two—text and image—with the word shutting down a narrative possibility that the image promotes?

To do this, we must look at where the two converge. On the book’s final page we see Camilla, happily returned to her original state, save for one difference. The pink hair bow she wears in every incarnation is now shown to be rainbow-striped, something the words obliquely acknowledge (“Afterward, Camilla wasn’t quite the same”) (32). What can we make of this? Though the words have effectively eliminated all circumnarrative potential, the irony Nodelman speaks to is at full force in this final combination of image and text. Despite being told in words
that Camilla “never had even a touch of stripes again,” the image directly below this line shows Camilla looking directly at the viewer with a “touch of stripes” in her hair accessory. The force of these final words is then diminished, reopening the possibility for the narrative to repeat itself. The words may say that Camilla will never have a “touch of stripes again” on the book’s final page, but her hair bow shows that she already does. In the third narrative created by the amalgamation of word and image, recursivity is indeed possible. Since a picturebook is the “juxtaposition of words and pictures,” the narrative we should most pay attention to is the one influenced by both of these aspects.

What this means for the picturebook is a radical departure from literary tradition. We are being asked not to take either word or image at face value, but to work as a reader to engage the two. Though the picturebook is most commonly seen as a tri-narrative space, perhaps we should consider a second possibility. Suppose the picturebook contains just one narrative space, the catch being that it is a narrative we must create for ourselves. Would not the picturebook then contain no unified narrative, but instead building blocks and gaps for the reader to manipulate towards a level of understanding? What is commonly seen as the most simplistic of literary forms then joins the ranks of the most complex.

If we allow for this singular and reader-centric narrative thread, then a circumnarrative reading of these books becomes a very real narrative possibility. As readers, we must work towards the completion of the narrative; we must interact with the text to fill in the gaps; we must overread. In doing so, readers are “importing into a text material that is not signified within it” (Abbott 239). The nature of literary works are that they do not have any “inherent, internal qualities independent of their interpretation,” as it is “only by interpretation that we can point them out” (Davis 178). This aligns quite nicely with reader-response theory, in which “the
structure of the reader’s experience” is substituted for “the formal structures of the text on the grounds that [the text]… acquire[s] significance only in the context” of the reader’s experience (Fish 2). This theory is crucial to my development of a theory of circumnarrative; it makes reader involvement in the developing of meaning an essential component. With this reader-response theory in mind, the circumnarrative gives the reader “joint responsibility for the production of… meaning” (Fish 3). As literary theorist Stanley Fish writes:

One [can] not point to this meaning as one could if it were the property of the text; rather, one could observe or follow its gradual emergence in the interaction between the text, conceived of as a succession of words, and the developing response of the reader. (Fish 3)

With this in mind, an argument for strict traditional linearity cannot coexist with reader-derived meaning in the picturebook model I am suggesting. Because the narrative meanings of these texts are reader-derived, there is nothing binding us to a traditional reading. We must fill in the gaps ourselves; we have the agency to do this. We are then free to interpret Stripes as a circumnarrative. The first and last scenes, if we engage word and image to formulate a complete narrative, are parallel to one another.

What this means for the text is that the narratives encompassed by a circumnarrative are unbounded. Because these texts can be read in this circular way, their first and last pages no longer hold their temporal designations. There is, after all, no beginning and end to a circle. Rather, the beginning is the end. This has two narrative implications. If this beginning and endpoint is a singular moment in narrative space, then we lose the signifiers of beginning and end. We cannot simultaneously stop and start the narrative. What happens then, without the signal to stop or start is not only that the narrative simply continues on its projected path, but that this beginning/endpoint becomes just a point on the narrative circle; it has lost the signifiers that position it in a specific narrative space. The narrative circle is thus unending.
The implications this has for these narratives of transformation—and all narratives constructed this way—is that these stories do not end. We then not only lack closure; closure becomes an impossibility. Miller points towards this impossibility of narrative closure.

It is impossible ever to tell whether a given narrative is complete. If the ending is thought of as a tying up in a careful knot, this knot could always be untied again by the narrator or by further events, disentangled or explicated again. If the ending is thought of as an unraveling, a straightening of threads, this act clearly leaves not one loose thread but a multitude, side by side, all capable of being knotted once more. (Miller 5)

If this is indeed the case, then characters like Camilla are trapped within their ever-cycling fates. But the effects of the circumnarrative are not limited to this interminability.

With the first and last pages thus the same point on this perpetually-moving narrative circle, we are not bound to a forward motion by designated narrative caps. If this is the case, and the beginning and end have lost their designations as separate, then we can also read these stories backwards, going from clockwise to counterclockwise in the narrative circle. With the beginning and end one and the same, we can read in either direction, as seen in Figure 3.

![Figure 3 Circumnarrativity with a possibility for reading backwards](image)

I am not suggesting that a circumnarrative text can be picked up as a physical object and read with the same meaning from the last page to the first, but rather that fundamentally the basic units that are making up these narratives are inherently recursive. Since the first and last pages are essentially the same scene, they occupy the same space in the narrative circle. After all, in the case of the circumnarrative, reading from beginning to end to beginning to end is no different
than reading from end to beginning to end to beginning. The narrative’s infinite loop allows for this.

The implications of this theory for our understanding of narrative and of the act of reading are quite drastic. According to reader-response theory, meaning is formed by the reader. As Fish says, “the reader’s response is not to the meaning; it is the meaning” (Fish 3). If we are the one’s responsible for this meaning-making in the picturebook, and the meaning we achieve with a circumnarrative is more or less the same with a backwards reading, the reader can then radically decide in which direction to read the text. No other form of literature allows for this possibility.

To apply this argument to a counter-clockwise readings to a specific narrative, I return to Stripes. Stripes, if read as a circumnarrative, has a basic narrative circle that flows as follows: Camilla is in her normal bodily state, she undergoes several bodily transformations, and is returned to her normal bodily state. To read this as a circumnarrative, as stated above, this structure becomes a cycle of transformation. If we were to read the text in a counterclockwise circle, the narrative, again at its most essential form, would be the same. Camilla is in her normal bodily state, she undergoes several bodily transformations, and is returned to her normal bodily state, again allowing for a cycle of transformation. Though the specifics of the narrative would differ in that the lima beans that save her in a clockwise reading would lead to her transformation in a counterclockwise reading, the narrative at its most basic level will still be the same. Read from either direction, Camilla is in her original bodily state, is transformed, and is returned. Though the story is counting on the reader’s unspoken recognition that a lesson is learned through this process of transformation, the story at its most fundamental level is a transformation text that leaves open the possibility for a repetition of events.
Though I recognize that *Stripes* cannot literally be picked up and read from last page to first without accruing some sort of loss in meaning, what I am arguing is that this loss of meaning affects only the word or image-only lines of narrative; it cannot affect the amalgamation of the two because this amalgamation is reader-created. Additionally, the preexisting lines of narrative within the text do still contain the narrative possibility of parts of the text being read backwards in a way that does not incur a loss in meaning. In fact, so can *Bootsie*, whose narrative is decidedly more linear than *Stripes*. Because the events occurring within the text—or within the first part of the text, as is the case with *Bootsie*—are similar enough where a rearrangement of scenes does little to influence the overarching narrative, we can move backwards and forwards within the text without a loss in meaning. As noted above, Bootsie could easily have become a “salamander-eating dinosaur” before she becomes a “turtle-eating dinosaur.” Camilla’s bodily transformation as described above can quite easily be reversed, with no changes to the narrative accruing.

She sprouted roots and berries and crystals and feathers and long furry tail. (23)

She looked in the mirror, and there, staring back at her, was a giant, multi-colored pill with her face on it. (16)

…when the class said the Pledge of Allegiance, her stripes turned red, white, and blue, and she broke out in stars. (8)

Camilla was striped from head to toe. She looked like a rainbow. (4)

Combined with the nature of the text as a circumnarrative, the narrative possibilities of *Stripes* are endless.

If we read picturebooks with the possibility for an external circumnarrative and/or internal recursive structure that allows for a multidirectional reading, some interesting narrative possibilities start to occur. *Otto Grows Down* (2009), like *Stripes*, is the story of basic bodily
transformation. When faced with a new baby sister who gets “all the attention,” Otto makes a
wish (Sussman 2).

“Come on, Otto,” said his dad. “Make a wish!” I’ll make a wish, all right! Thought Otto, as he shook the rattle with all his might. I wish Anna was never born! (4)

His wish comes true… eventually.

Otto noticed his new birthday watch. The second hand was ticking in the wrong direction. When Otto started rewrapping his presents and giving them back to his friend, he really knew something crazy was happening. Time was going backwards! (6-7)

After a week’s worth of “wiping the paint off a perfectly good painting” and “sliding up the slide,” Anna is finally “returned…to the hospital” (8-9). But Otto keeps aging backward, “growing down” as the title suggests. Eventually on his first birthday, Otto realizes that his “first birthday would be his last. He [will] never grow up” (25). Otto recognizes that his original wish came true because he had been holding what had once been his baby rattle that “sounded like underwater bells” and had been given to Anna when she was born, and so he wishes again, rattle in hand, “with all his heart” (3, 27). He is returned to his original age, time moves forward again, and he—and Anna—are safe.

On a fundamental level, this story is structurally the same as Stripes. Otto is shown in his original bodily state, he undergoes a transformation, and is returned to his original state. Because the narrative ends where it begins, with Otto and Anna in their original bodily states, the first and last pages occupy the same space on the narrative circle. True to the circumnarrative form, we could again fold back the book’s spine to create an infinite narrative loop. Otto and Anna both exist and time is moving forward, Anna disappears and time moves backwards, Otto and Anna exist in real time again, she disappears again…. When we read the text backwards, as I have suggested is possible at a fundamental level with previous texts, the basic narrative
structure remains the same—Otto and Anna will still exist together in forward-moving time, she will disappear from the text, and they will exist together again in real time. And again, we are able to navigate *Otto* in a multidirectional way because the book’s interior scenes (that is, the scenes not designated as beginning or end) are a series of similar repeated events instead of a series of new actions. Though the book’s beginning takes us straight from Otto’s wish to when Anna is taken back to the hospital, and its conclusion counts us down from his fifth to first birthday, the narrative events in the middle have no permanent location in time. Three consecutive pages read as follows:

Otto took baths when he was clean—and they made him dirty. (Sussman 16)
Going to the bathroom was downright disgusting. (17)
One summer day, a van arrived and Otto’s best friend Bob moved back to the neighborhood. (18)

This is best illustrated in Figure 4.

But this figure only partially represents the narrative structure of the text. Though the interior recursiveness of *Otto* does occur between two traditional forward-moving linear moments, as described above, the entirety of the text is still a circumnarrative—the beginning and end of the narrative occupy the same space on the narrative circle.
The same narrative structure that we see in *Otto* is also the same for *Stripes*—external circumnarrative encompassing internal recursivity. Thus *Otto* can be read in a multidirectional way internally as well as backwards and forwards externally on a fundamental level. As meaning-makers, we have this choice. As the meaning of these multidirectional readings is essentially the same, we can choose to achieve meaning by navigating the text in one of multiple different ways.

This ability to navigate these texts at will provides for some interesting narrative possibilities. Despite this essential sameness of clockwise and counterclockwise readings, as described above, a counterclockwise close reading of the text offers an interesting, perhaps more horrifying alternative. Otto and Anna will exist in real time, Anna will disappear and Otto will transform suddenly and drastically into an infant, he will age—forward this time—until he and Anna exist together in real time again. This backwards reading, made possible because of the book’s internal recursiveness and external circumnarrativity, offers a dynamic narrative alternative that is still structurally the same as its clockwise-moving counterpart, a literary palindrome if you will (I cannot resist pointing out the fact that all of the named characters in this book are palindromes as well). It does not matter that specific details of a forward-moving reading do not quite match up with its backwards counterpart. Since meaning is produced by the
reader’s interactions with the two incomplete narrative threads of image and text there is no one “correct” meaning to achieve.

In these books, there is no one meaning to strive towards. Again, this follows reader-response theory. Since meaning is not embedded in the text, the activity of developing meaning falls to the reader. Thus, if the essential narrative of a picturebook is something that needs to be developed by the reader, then the essential meaning must also be developed. Without reader interaction with image and text, the narrative combination of the two does not exist.

This destabilization of meaning combined with multi-directional readability directly affects these narratives of bodily transformation and harm. Because the internal recursivity of these texts allow for a constant backwards and forwards motion within the body of the text, and because the circumnarratives described in the above books disrupt the happily ever after logic of the text by trapping the characters in an endless narrative loop, the horrifying aspects of the narrative are magnified. A backwards reading can just as easily be disrupted for a forwards reading, and vice versa. What this means is that we can read from any direction at all; we have the interpretive power to decide this. Camilla can be transformed from striped to polka-dotted and back towards striped. Her location in narrative space is never secure; she is potentially subject to an eternity of transformation.

By this same token, however, if we can read such a circumnarrative from any point at all, we can also stop reading at any point at all. Without a beginning or endpoint, we can choose where we wish to end. We can stop reading Camilla where we wish to stop, but what good will this do? To stop reading on page fifteen leaves her in a state of bodily transformation. Thus we are left with either a character still transformed or a character perpetually on the brink of being transformed again. Though we have the power to make this choice, it is not a choice particularly
worth making; and that, paradoxically, is why we have the power to make such an interpretive decision.

The circumnarrative picturebook is a narrative of which every aspect of its interpretation is in the reader’s hands. In these texts, we can decide where we wish to begin and end our reading experience. To approach a novel in this regard would result in a momentous loss in meaning, but here, with meaning-making so heavily dependent on the reader, such a loss is quite unlikely. What this means for the form is quite astonishing; within the picturebook world there are texts such as these that not only can be read from any direction and from any point, but texts that, in doing this, incur no significant loss in meaning.

This particular meaning-making possibility is limited strictly to these texts whose beginning and endpoints occupy the same space in narrative time. For the recursive texts of the above-section, we can go back and forth between recursive scenes, but the endpoint is set in stone. But what occurs when the circumnarrative is internal, when there is a full circumnarrative structure as well as an additional set endpoint? These texts occur when the narrative begins to repeat itself before the covers are closed, without a physical manipulation of the text on the part of the reader. What would it have meant for the narrative if Camilla’s stripes were transferred to another character, marking a strict differentiation between beginning and end in the main narrative, and starting, but not finishing, a second, repeating narrative? This particular type of narrative possibility is common in the picturebook, particularly within the books that informed my initial investigation of bodily harm.
Internal Circumnarrative: Look at Me!

Robert Munsch’s *Look at Me!* is one such narrative, and opens with Madison shown in her original bodily state, excited to have “found a ticket… for free face painting at the park” (Munsch 2).

“I want,” said Madison, “just on my cheek, a small, perfect rose that looks really real.”

“Really real?” said the face painter.

“Really real!” said Madison, and the face painter spent a long, long time painting a small, perfect rose that looked really real. (6)

What follows is a repetition of the same basic scene, just as we seen in all of the above texts.

At the hardware store, when her father was looking at drills and saws, Madison whispered, “Daddy! I think my flower is growing.”

“That’s nice,” said her father.

“Daddy,” whispered Madison. “Look! Look! Look! Please really LOOK at me. My flower is growing! There was just one rose, and now there are two.”

Madison’s father looked very closely at Madison’s face and said, “Why, there really are two roses, one on each cheek! But I think it was that way already.” (8-12)

Immediately following this interaction, this scene occurs again, kitchen store swapped for hardware store, mother for father, and three roses for two.

At the kitchen store, when her mother was looking at pots and pans, Madison said, “Mommy! My flower is growing.”

“That’s nice,” said Madison’s mother.

“Mommy,” said Madison. “Look! Look! Look! Please really LOOK at me! My flower is growing! There was just one rose and now there are three.”

Madison’s mother looked very closely at Madison’s face and said, “Why there are three roses!” (14-16)

On the next page, we see this dialogue for a third time (Figure II).

At the ice cream shop, Madison said, “Grandma! My flower is growing.”
“That’s nice,” said Madison’s grandma.

“Grandma!” said Madison. “Look! Look! Look! Please really LOOK at me! My flower is growing! There was one rose, and now there are twenty-four…” (18)

This repetition of essentially-identical scenes is common in the picturebook. Despite the specific details of each scene differing, these scenes are fundamentally the same in that they share the same dialogue and actions. Though they cannot be shuffled as easily as the scenes in Stripes, for example, because the rose keeps growing in size, they do have a similarly unfixed place in narrative time. This is where the recursivity and circumnarrativity I have described both conflict and consent forces in what might be the most interesting linear possibility of all—a progressing narrative whose individual scenes are twins to one original scene, and whose narrative is, as we shall see, self-reviving. Where psychoanalytically-focused scholars might have concluded their more hermeneutic analysis of such a text with the symbolic interpretation of this growing rose, I am instead concerned with what it means to the narrative that the three scenes of bodily transformation are essentially one scene repeated three times. Because each of these scenes starts with “at the hardware store/kitchen store/ice cream shop” without a transition from one place to the next—there is no, “next, Madison went to the ice cream shop”—their position in the narrative structure becomes flexible. Had it not been for the increasing number of roses, each scene could be substituted for another just as easily as the scenes in Otto and Stripes. Their positionality is then more like that of Caterpillar, whose scenes are essentially the same but with a quantity (food in Caterpillar, roses in Look), increasing.

In Caterpillar, the number of food items consumed by the character increase gradually by one quantity over the course of one week—until Saturday when the amount grows suddenly and unexpectedly in size.
On Saturday, he ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon. (Carle 18-19)

In *Look*, as we see above, the rose increases in a similar way, straying from a previous numerical order—one, two, three roses—to “there was one rose and now there are twenty-four” (18). We watch as “another rose grew on the end of each stem” (18). “One rose was nice,” said Madison. “Twenty-six is too many” (20). Like the food in *Caterpillar*, the number of roses in *Look* suddenly increases, leaping over the possibility of four, five, six, etc. roses. Yet because the scenes in the hardware store, kitchen store, and ice cream shop are not linked together by a conjunctive adverb, these scenes—specifically the kitchen store and the ice cream shop—are not explicitly linked. In between the two we could have an additional scene, in which Madison finds a fourth rose in a different store with a different relative. Theoretically speaking, we could have 23 scenes likes this, the breakdown being as follows: the second rose grows at the hardware store, the third at the kitchen store, the fourth through twenty-third roses in various other settings, and the twenty-fourth through twenty-sixth roses appearing in the ice cream shop. The existing narrative as Munsch wrote it is just as easily a truncated version of this 23-scened story as it is a 3-scene story.

![Numerical linearity of roses depicted by original text compared to extended numerical sequence suggested by the text](image)
Because the only thing ordering these scenes is numerical in significance (versus the grammatical significance of conjunctive adverbs), we are bound only to the order of scenes, not the number of scenes.

Hence, if Madison’s roses are indeed growing singularly in different shops and with different witnesses, then the narrative has some disturbing implications. As it stands, with three versus twenty-three scenes, the implications are already disturbing, with Madison’s mother, father, and grandmother failing to notice Madison’s physical transformation, and, perhaps more disturbingly, her father and mother refusing to believe that the rose is multiplying. If we expand the narrative to include the appearance of each individual flower, however, these implications are magnified. Madison would be ignored by twenty-three family members, twenty-two of whom would not believe her rose was growing at all (her grandmother, forced to bear witness, would still be the only one to believe her). Psychologically this is tremendously disturbing, Madison’s agony prolonged considerably with twenty-four roses growing one at a time page after page after page. From a narratological standpoint, this disrupts the narrative we see on the page, extending it into a new narrative space that is an implied extension of the preexisting space. The creation of this space is through interpretation; again, the reader is the meaning-maker. In expanding this narrative space through the act of overreading, we are seeking meaning from narrative gaps—interpreting a space that exists both outside of the narrative and outside of our own worlds. We are entering a third space, a space of interpretation, the same interpretive space where we work to interpret picturebook word and image into one complete narrative. And once we are comfortably in this third space, we can observe the narrative’s effects on the story.

While the noticeable gap in Look’s numbered scenes does indeed contribute to the horror by providing a new sort of linear truncation, there is a second linear aspect at play that in turn
contributes to the overall narrative. This is the self-reviving narrative that originally drew me to these texts, the next level of recursivity in terms of linearity. After Madison is taken to a doctor who “‘know[s] a lot about people, but not a lot about plants,’” she suggests trying the garden store (20).

At the garden store, the man behind the counter said, “Weed poison! Check out our Wonderful Weed Whomper!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH” yelled Madison. “No Weed Whomper.” (22-23)

Madison comes up with a safer alternative.

“I know,” said Madison. “Let’s be nice to the rose. I will go home and take a nap with a large flower pot beside my bed, and maybe the rose will go and live in the flower pot.” (24)

When she wakes up, “there was a huge rose bush in the flower pot, and just one perfect rose on her cheek,” bringing Madison back to her original albeit face-painted bodily state (26). If this were Stripes, this is where the text would end, rendering the possibility for the text to be read backwards, and the rose bush to leap back onto Madison’s skin. However, the text does not end here. The last page shows an image of the man from the plant store covered from head to toe in the rose (Figure III). Unlike Camilla, whose book’s narrative structure places her at risk for further bodily harm, Madison is safe. Her book’s narrative structure is as follows:

![Figure 7 Narrative structure of Look At Me!](image)
Note that this is essentially the same image as Figure 4, which shows the internal recursivity of *Otto*, with one major exception. In *Otto*, this figure is part of a larger figure; its ends are boundless because they are actually part of a larger encompassing circular narrative (see Figure 5). Here, the ends are bound. There is the beginning linear section of *Look*, in which Madison finds the ticket and gets her face painted, the scenes where the rose multiplies that are essentially one scene repeated three (or arguably, twenty-three) times, and, because the rose is shown to have moved onto the Weed Whomper man, the ending is again linear and bound.

Because this narrative structure is essentially a circumnarrative (Figure 2) imposed upon what is an otherwise linear, and thus bounded, narrative, this particular type of circumnarrativity is internal. Where *Stripes*, as an external circumnarrative, can be physically manipulated to create a circular narrative, *Look* cannot. The parts of the text that are a circumnarrative exist solely within the interior pages of the text, that is, the pages that make up the midsection of the overarching narrative. One could not physically manipulate the book’s covers to create a tangible representation of the text’s circumnarrativity.

If we combine this internal circumnarrativity with the ability to expand the narrative beyond its existing space, we have a structure that is bounded by this internal circumnarrativity—X happens to person A, is resolved, and happens to person B—as well as simultaneously unbounded by allowing for ellipsis. Just as we can imagine the three-scene repetition expanding into four, five, twenty scenes, we can expand the narrative in space to include X happening to person B, being resolved, and happening again to person C, and so on and so forth. As readers, we have the agency to fill in the narrative gaps as we develop our interpretations. The Weed Whomper man will be cured; the postman will be next.
What this means in terms of narratology is that closure achieved by the narrative is not only impermanent; it is not a closure at all. These narratives, built on repetition, can never truly end because they are built on this repetition. Miller writes that no text “can be unequivocally finished, or for that matter unequivocally unfinished,” and that “analysis of endings leads always, if carried far enough, to the paralysis of this inability to decide” (Miller “Ending” 7). This is the crux of picturebook structure; by being structured this way these thirty-two page forms expand theoretically into an infinite number of pages and scenes. The texts that look so simple become, then, the most structurally complex—a complexity that derives from the fact that both the meaning, as we have seen above, and the expanded narrative space do not exist in any way except through interpretation.

With these potentials opened for narrative, we can again concentrate on what such structuring can do to story. We can turn to Imogene’s Antlers (1985), a text that is essentially the same basic narrative as Look, to address some of these concerns. “On Thursday, when Imogene [wakes] up, she [finds] she had grown antlers,” her family spends the internal scenes of the text reacting accordingly, and by the end “on Friday, when Imogene [wakes] up, the antlers had disappeared” (1, 30). The text then ends in the same way as Look, that is, it ends with the narrative effectively starting over (Figure IV).

When she came down to breakfast, the family was overjoyed to see her back to normal… until she came into the room. (31-32)

Sure enough, her antlers are gone… only to be replaced with peacock feathers. We are left wondering what will happen on Saturday morning, and Sunday, and Monday, and so on. There is no bending back of the book’s cover on the reader’s part to force Camilla into a never-ending cycle of transformation—Imogene is doomed and the text knows it, just as the text of Look recognizes the unending cyclical nature of the rose bush.
Though this internal circumnarrativity is common to the picturebook, in these texts of bodily disfigurement the effects of this particular type of narrative are amplified. The internal circumnarrative achieves the happy ending of a recursive narrative while simultaneously dooming the narrative to the never-ending cycle of an external circumnarrative. Though Madison is spared the fate of Camilla in that the narrative moves her body away from the source of transformation, the bodily transformation itself lives on, presumably forever. We see the Weed Whomper man covered in roses and we can guess that they will eventually leave him too, occupying the skin of another person who crosses paths with the rose bush (perhaps the rhetorical postman mentioned earlier). This juxtaposition of recursive narrative and external circumnarrative has the potential for horror that the two forms of linearity on their own do not. Though the rose bush has left Madison’s body (via the happy ending of recursivity) to move to the Weed Whomper man (triggering the narrative again, à la external circumnarrative), what we are left with in this particular text is the knowledge that the rose bush is mobile. It could indeed make its way back to Madison’s skin. Or her grandmother’s or parents’ or ice cream-eating little brother’s. Or, as the text coyly suggests, the reader’s, if we were to anger it with Weed Whompers of our own. And why should the ever-interpreting reader assume safety from a text whose narrative is not contained by the pages upon which it is occurring? If the narrative universe is indeed ever-expanding, would it not at one point seep into our own narrative space? In contrast, though Camilla is trapped in a never-ending cycle of stripes, the text does nothing to suggest that the stripes will move onto another unwilling body. Bootsie, similarly, does not inflict Bootsie onto anyone else, just as the witch under the stairs terrorizes only Frances. Imogene, though also an example of a character in a circumnarrative, is still the only body in her cycle of transformation. Look then, is doubly horrifying; the rose lives on and it could live on in
us. This particular aspect of an internal circumnarrative is a disturbing one. If the reader is threatened by the text, then the text has, in some way, become a part of the reader’s world. In other words, the narrative has left the story world to enter our own.

These picturebooks for which linearity is not only contested but actively fought against are radically affecting the implications of their narratives. Recursive scenes, in their refusal to be orderly with any level of permanence, prolong the bodily harm occurring within these texts. A text that opens with or contains a series of these flexible events opens the door to there being five, ten, or even an infinite number of additional scenes interspersed throughout the existing scenes without interrupting the existing text. If a character is transformed in four separate moments, none of which would pass the jumbling test, then we as readers can fill in the narrative gaps with another four moments of transformation. An overall recursive narrative like the circumnarrative theory described above, though not necessarily providing narrative gaps that allow for this insertion of additional scenes, allows instead for us to imagine the entire narrative repeated again and again and again. When achieving a “happy ending” means a return to the beginning of the text, the happy ending is not permanent. The beginning and end paradoxically occupy the same narrative space. To be untouched by transformation is to also have already been transformed. Furthermore, the narratives that begin again of their own accord implicate the reader in ways that the other two do not. If the bodily transformation is not contained in one character, it is also not contained in a singular space or time or, as I will approach again in the following chapter, world separate from our own. The internal circumnarrative, then, has much to do with a narrative gap that I will explore further on—the gap between real and story world, and how we navigate the two.
Chapter Two: Metafiction in the Picturebook

If the narrative structures at work in *Look At Me!* are operating in a place outside of both the story world and the real world—the gap between the two—then there must also be a transitional zone. To leap from the pages of the text towards a narrative interpretation requires a movement across some sort of transitional space. But what does this space mean for the reader’s project of interpretation? In approaching these transformation texts, it became increasingly evident that metafictional devices were involved in an important demarcation between story world and real world, specifically how the two differ and where they overlap. Metafiction, it seems, is thus a natural place for our discussion to turn.

For this project, I refer to historical scholar Alan Palmer and literary theorist Lubomír Doležel for their understandings of the story world, the latter of which claims that “fictional worlds are accessed through semiotic channels and by means of information processing” that readers access “by crossing somehow the world boundary between the realms of the actual and the possible” (Doležel qtd. in Palmer 34). I have found the most succinct definition of this term to stem from a combination of both scholars’ works within the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* “More than reconstructed timelines and inventories of existents,” the story world is the “mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response” (“Storyworld” 570). Interpreters of a narrative must “imaginatively… inhabit a world in which things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief… both for narrative participants and interpreters of the story” (570).

Unlike the linear structures observed in the first chapter, this dual nature of metafiction is doing two differing things for these picturebooks concerning bodily harm. Most notably in its
difference from the previous chapter, metafiction can work to lessen the impact of transformation on both the characters and the readers. In constantly asserting the narrative’s location within a book, the narrative—and thus the horror—is bound to the pages. However, like linearity in the previous chapter, metafictive elements can also question the distinctions being made between story and real worlds, perhaps even more so. Without a clear delineation between real and story worlds, the threats of bodily harm and realized bodily transformations are thus less tied to the narratives and books they appear in. So we are both bounded and unbounded from the books that contain these narratives. What does this mean for these instances of bodily harm, and for whom does nontraditional linearity only increase the horror of the text? To develop an understanding of this, a deeper understanding of metafiction and how it works in the picturebook is called for.

Postmodern theorist Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as the “term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). This supports my own assertion of the duality of this term. In these picturebooks, as we shall see, our attention is constantly drawn to these books “status[es] as… artefact[s]” while we simultaneously are questioning the story world’s relationship to our own world. In essence, these types of texts contain some element or elements that delineate the text’s story world from the reader’s real world as well as opening up the possibility of the juxtaposition of these delineated spaces.

Though my observations back Waugh’s definition, I also observed in these books elements of narrative that essentially add layers to what is presented as a single narrative, specifically the “multiple non-essential storylines” Goldstone discusses in her own insights into linearity of the picturebook. These “multiple nonessential story lines,” however, are not only
disrupting the linearity of the text by diverting one’s attention from what is designated as the main element of the page; they are disrupting the reading of the text by forcing the reader into and out of the main narrative. This perpetual entering and exiting of the narrative serves as a constant reminder of the existence of the narrative in the first place as something to be entered into and left from. Or, in essence, it is “drawing attention to the book’s status as an artefact” by forcing the reader to examine, rather than read, each page.

Given these observations, I would thus like to redefine metafiction as it relates to the picturebook as follows: metafiction is any element or elements of a text that momentarily force us to leave the story world, either by pointing to the picturebook’s status as an artefact or by presenting a second narrative to distract from the first, while also blurring the relationship between the story world and the real world.

Though metafiction has been identified as a characteristic of the postmodern picturebook, Sikorska is right to bring metafictive devices into her generalized analysis of the picturebook. Although she ultimately returns to Bettelheim’s psychoanalytic approach in her own conclusions about the presence of metafictive aspects in the picturebook, her recognition of this particular quality of the picturebook outside of the postmodern picturebook is important. To build further upon her approach, I argue that picturebooks are frequently aware that they are books—and make no effort to hide this awareness from the reader. Though the postmodern picturebook can take this to the extreme in frequently directly addressing the viewer and/or being aware of the structural components of the book, other picturebooks are doing similar, if subtler things.

In the following section, I categorize and differentiate the multiple metafictive elements used in the picturebook before applying my analyses to books that deal in bodily
transformation, working all the while towards an understanding of the narrative implications of these elements.

**Metafictive Devices in the Picturebook**

Metafiction in the picturebook can be split into two main subtypes: metafiction that concerns the actual construction of the book and metafiction within the image and/or text. This first type, metafiction relating to the physicality of the book itself, can be literally touched, and can thus be considered tangible metafiction. These are books that incorporate holes, rips, pockets, ephemera, etc. As mentioned above, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*’s pages are riddled with physical holes, and many of Carle’s other books include some feature similar to the holes in *Caterpillar* (flashing lightbulbs, cricket noises…). Oliver Jeffer’s *The Incredible Book-Eating Boy* (2006) has a bite-shaped hole taken out of its cover, and *The Jolly Postman* (1986) series of pop-up books offer removable postcards and letters for the reader. *Pat the Bunny* (1940) is considered a multimedia experience for its texture-covered pages. By name alone, all pop-up books fall into this category, their pop-up pages forcing the reader to acknowledge the structure of the book alongside its narrative. This type of metafiction is certainly unique to the picturebook (how many other forms of literature incorporate electronics?). The second type of metafiction is less literal, relying on elements within, instead of external to, the words and images that work to “systematically draw attention to [the text’s] status as an artefact” (Waugh 2). This second type is so common as to be an integral part of the form and not, as has become the fate of the pop-up, a form within a form. Though I am hesitant to exclude any literary format given the picturebook’s history of such exclusionary criticism, I do also recognize that the experience of consuming a book with electricity or ephemera, for example, is something in between reading and playing. As I am focused exclusively on reading, and, as we shall see later,
the act of play as it pertains specifically to image and text, I focus solely on this second group of texts, for whom the elements of word and image “draw attention to [their] status as… artefacts” without the incorporation of additional novelty elements.

The metafictive elements of this second group of texts are still operating in dynamic ways even without actual holes taken out of the pages. Though certain stories are often held up as the definitive examples of a metafictive picturebook, I argue that any book that contains a visual or verbal reminder of its existence as a book is a metafictive text. In *The Ant Bully* (1999), for example, a book that contains these elements and that triggered my initial research question regarding bodily harm, the main character (a boy named Lucas) takes to bullying ants when he himself is bullied. In retaliation, the ants capture Lucas, shrink him down to ant size, and force him to work with the other ants. By the end of the story, he has befriended the ants, is returned to human size, and is no longer tormented by his own bully (the bully, Sid, having also been turned ant-sized.) The book contains both recursive elements (scenes within the story could easily be rearranged) as well as a circumnarrative (the book ends with the ants having restored Lucas only to have shrunken Sid). These elements combined, as we see in the preceding chapter, make *The Ant Bully* an example of internal circumnarrative. Returning to this second type of metafiction, a quick glance through the pages shows us that the characters are fully contained within image borders. There are no characters who acknowledge the reader’s presence and no mention of the narrative taking place within a book. And yet, the title page shows a row of ants climbing across the page and onto the following two, which contain the copyright information as well as the dedication. Rendered in this way, as a birds-eye view that mimics the way an actual row of ants would appear on the page, we are from the beginning made aware of the pages, and thus the material structure, of the book. Because of this, even though the actual story does not
follow the patterns of more obviously-metafictive texts, we are aware that we are reading a book even before we have seen and read the first page.

The effect of this awareness in terms of narrative is multidimensional. For one thing, being reassured from the very beginning that the narrative in which we are taking part is confined within a book is comforting; we will not be turned into ants because we do not exist in Lucas’ storyworld. On the other hand, these ants, drawn as trompe l’oeil optical illusions designed to look very much like an actual row of ants upon the page, have the power to trigger the opposite reaction. Were those real ants moving across the page? And once these ants are determined to be representations, we still must think “well, they could have been real; it is possible for them to have been real.” Because it is possible for a real ant to occupy the same space upon the page, the text can be interpreted through the lens of verisimilitude; that is the narrative itself comes quite close to reality, to negotiating the space between real and story worlds. Because these illustrated ants remind us of the structure of the book (here is this object with climbable pages,) they are then also opening us to the very real possibility of actual ants crawling across the pages. Thus at the same time they reassure us that the story world is separate from our own as well as blur the lines between the two.

Waugh discusses this phenomena in regards to the relationship between the “historical world and the alternative or fantasy world” (Waugh 38). “In metafiction they are always held in a state of tension, and the relationship between them—between ‘play’ and ‘reality’—is the main focus of the text” (Waugh 38). This state of tension is what I have found to exist in picturebooks, supporting this claim despite Waugh’s focus strictly on novels. Because this second type of metafictive device in particular—that is, metafiction that occurs within the narrative and not as a physical component of the book itself—holds such power over the way its
narratives are read, it is worthy of an examination in service to a project that would determine the narrative role these elements play.

**Fully Self-Aware Metafiction: The Monster at the End of this Book and The Stinky Cheese Man**

Perhaps the most recognizable type of metafiction, and the most extreme example of this, is what I call fully self-aware metafiction—books that directly address the reader and the structures of which explicitly recognize that the reader is reading a text in which the narrative is explicitly occurring. Two such texts have been consistently heralded as “postmodern picturebooks.” In *The Monster at the End of this Book* (1971), Grover (of *Sesame Street* fame) directly asks the reader to clarify what the title says.

> What did that say? On the cover, what did that say? Did it say there will be a monster at the end of this book?? (2-3)

The line that immediately follows is based on a presumed reader response.

> It did? Oh, I am so scared of monsters!! (3)

Again, these texts rely on the reader to develop meaning. Without the reader’s response to Grover’s question, the second line does not makes sense. Just as we must interact with a text to develop a complete narrative, we must interact with this type of metafiction in order to develop meaning.

The second text, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992), is a collection of fairy tale parodies presented by Jack (of the beanstalk) who serves as equal parts narrator and master of ceremonies. Both texts implore the reader through direct address.

> Listen, I have an idea. If you do not turn any pages, we will never get to the end of this book. And that is good, because there is a monster at the end of this book. So please do not turn the page. (Stone 5)
And if you don’t think that’s fairly stupid, you should read “Little Red Running Shorts” or maybe “The Stinky Cheese Man.” In fact, you should definitely go read the stories now, because the rest of the introduction just goes on and on and doesn’t really say anything. I stuck it on to the end here so it would fill up the page and make it look like I really knew what I was talking about. So stop now. I mean it. Quit reading. Turn the page. (Scieszka 5)

In addition to its utilizing direct address, this type of book is aware of its existence as a physical object. Grover is shown and described as attempting to “nail this page to the next one,” and the table of contents of Stinky Cheese falls from the sky to crush several characters (see Figure V for example) (Stone 10, Scieszka 9).

This particular type of metafiction presents some interesting narrative possibilities, specifically regarding the reader’s interaction with the narrative. As Waugh puts it, “frames are set up only to be continually broken… contexts are ostentatiously constructed, only to be subsequently deconstructed” (Waugh 101). Readers of Monster see that they cannot save Grover from his monstrous fate; in fact in reading to see if he escapes, the readers themselves are bringing him closer to his fear. In The Stinky Cheese Man, readers must contend with the fact that the Table of Contents that they require to navigate this multi-storied book brings about the death of several characters. The very act of reading these books constantly reinforces through word and image that the narratives we are encountering are happening inside of a book. As readers we are navigating a delicate line between the narrative’s confinement to a bound structure and to the narrative as it exists outside of the storyworld. Though the pages Grover keeps fighting against are reminding us of the pages we must turn to read his book, the text depends upon us to turn these pages. The action that occurs in the real world directly impacts the action occurring in the story world.

The line between story world and real world is thus difficult to determine in this type of picturebook. The very act that removes us from the horror—flipping of the pages—is also the
thing that contributes to the horror—flipping the pages towards the monster at the end of the book. This particular aspect of picturebooks—the paradox of metafiction as reassuring against and metafiction as contributing to narrative horror—is one that will resurface later in this study in the delineation of metafictive elements in these books. So far it corroborates what we have already determined, that the reader is the meaning-maker of these texts. That point alone blurs the line between story and real world.

**Representational/Structural Metafiction: Bootsie Barker Bites**

This interaction between narrative and physicality of the book can be subtler than an illustrated chunk of the physical book crushing to death several characters within the narrative. In several of Marc Brown’s *Arthur* books—a series that only sometimes deals with bodily transformation while still adhering to linear observations of the preceding chapter—characters are shown resting their heads on their hands, their elbows leaning on and beyond the panels of the illustration for support, to borrow a second term from comic theory. The panel, as McCloud tells us, is a “single moment in time,” with the space between the panels, the gutter, up to the reader to “fill in the intervening moments, creating the illusion of time and motion” (94). Though they are not directly acknowledging the panel in the way that Grover acknowledges the page (“this is a good page to start on… nice and clean with nothing on it”), their bodies are still represented as interacting with it. By physically interacting with the design elements of the image instead of the image itself, they have infiltrated the world outside of their own. They have exited the story world to claim a place in the space between the real and story worlds.

To return to *Bootsie*, for example, we first see Bootsie as she arrives at the narrator’s house for a playdate. The panel has cropped Bootsie’s mother’s head out of the frame, focusing on what the narrator would see at her child-sized height—Bootsie. Bootsie is shown with a
wicked grin, and she makes direct eye contact with the reader (and presumably the narrator) as she stands on the threshold. When the narrator tries unsuccessfully a few pages later to “get Bootsie interested in [her] book about turtles,” she (and her turtle) are shown fleeing her yellow wallpapered bedroom—and the paneled image (Figure VI). Though Bootsie’s figure is still squarely in the middle of the panel, her body casting a shadow on the rug as she tears up the turtle book with her legs in the air, the narrator’s body overlaps the black lines of the panel. Both of her legs as well as one hand that clutches her beloved (and thankfully intact) turtle toy come in contact with the white space outside of the image. She casts no shadow while her body exists in this gutter. This is important to note as previous illustrations also take part in this otherwise blank space. On the previous page we are shown two scenes.

   First, we have a tea party.
   Then, my mother tells Bootsie and me to play in my room. (2)

And just as the narrator has described, we see the two of them sitting at a child-sized table eating donuts and tea followed by Bootsie dragging the narrator by the arm towards the latter character’s bedroom. Both of these scenes are shown without the panels of the previous two described scenes; they are illustrated in the space provided by the gutter, no different from the gutter the narrator is shown fleeing onto a moment later. Yet at the table and on the way to the bedroom, both Bootsie and the narrator (as well as the table, chairs, and toy turtle) are casting shadows. This occurs in every scene presented in a similar way—Bootsie kicking over the salamander tank, the narrator shouting to her mother that Bootsie is “PLANNING TO EAT ME ALIVE,” Bootsie’s hat on the ground, left behind from when she fled the narrator’s bedroom… Yet when the narrator flees the paneled image a second time, and when Bootsie does the same thing later in the text, neither girl casts a shadow. What this suggests is that the gutter is actually two separate spaces, the first being a continuation of the paneled image shadowed story world of
the narrative and the second being a second story world without shadow that occupies a place between the story world and our own. Or, in other words, at times the gutter is part of the story world and at other times it is occupying a space outside of it. The last time we see the narrator she is shown standing outside of her own dream sequence, as evidenced by her body standing outside of the cloud-shaped black panel (Figure VII). Her figure (as well as her salamander and toy turtle) casts a shadow onto the white space. Because she has successfully scared Bootsie off, she is free to exist again safely in the narrative’s story world; she does not need to take cover in the secondary space. It is worth noting here in this final scene that the narrator is doing what Bootsie did in the first; in turning her head away from the scene in front of her she makes eye contact with the reader. Her body points inwardly towards the dream sequence unfolding in front of her, yet her face is turned away from this scene and towards the reader, effectively interacting with the reader to focus our gaze on the rocket ship and Bootsie’s fate.

The extra narrative space occupied in turn by both the narrator and Bootsie, can only be accessed when the character attempting to access it has the freedom to do so. Though the narrator escapes from Bootsie into this secondary story world twice during their first playdate she cannot escape at all during the second, as Bootsie has physically pinned her to the floor. Similarly, at the very end of their first playdate, Bootsie has her arm wrapped around the narrator’s neck, her hand covering her mouth, trapping her in the original story world.

These instances—the characters crossing over from one story world to the next and the narrator gesturing towards the scene in front of her—are metafictive by nature, containing elements that place the characters (and thus the reader), however briefly, outside of the primary story world. After all, in negotiating a transition from one story world to the next, we must acknowledge that there is a story world; in doing this, we are forced to acknowledge that it is a
separate entity from our own world. For a character to direct our reading inwardly only further
enhances this.

These interactions between the structure of the book and the narrative contained within it,
however subtle, still contribute a great deal to the reading of the narrative. If we recognize there
to be a second story world between the story world of the narrative and our own world, then
neither the narrator nor Bootsie are ever truly escaping from one another. Because their options
are one of the two story worlds, they may flee their panels but they can never truly be free from
each other, each girl possessing the ability to transverse the two, and, more importantly, only the
two. Just as the circumnarrative traps its characters in a never-ending cycle of bodily
transformation/harm, this interaction with the two story worlds traps the characters in a never-
ending escape to and from the main and secondary story worlds. This makes the final paneled
image quite grim. Though the narrator imagines Bootsie has been strapped to a rocket and
propelled out of her world (the story world), she has only been propelled out of the one narrative;
she still exists in the white space secondary story world. Because the characters can go back and
forth between the two, our narrator is not truly safe. On the flip side of this, however, this
trapping of the characters in and between these two worlds keeps the reader safe from the
narrative’s reach. The narrative is constantly reinforcing itself as a narrative that exists within a
book. On the flip side of this particular flip side, however, the secondary story world is a blurred
space where characters interact with the reader from the real world. Again, these instances of
metafiction are both comforting and fear-inducing.

What we have in these texts is a complicated structure of layered meaning. We have the
narrative told through image, the narrative told through words, the one complete narrative
formed through reader interpretation of the first two narratives, the story world, the real world
and the reader, the second story world formed through reader interpretation, and still, as always, the transitional space as we navigate these worlds and narratives. These books “written for children first” without a doubt “merit grown-up conversation” (Barnett 1). Nothing on these pages can be taken at face value. This is perhaps the only literary form where we must implicitly distrust everything on the pages in front of us while simultaneously using it and nothing else to construct a meaning we can trust. *Bootsie* is unaware of the multiple storyworlds, but we do not have to be.

**Paratextual Metafiction: Mud Puddle and Burger Boy**

Though *Bootsie, Stinky Cheese, and Monster* utilize the physicality of the books within the narrative, metafiction is not limited to visual references to the structure of the text. Again, the understanding of metafiction used throughout this project is anything that places the reader outside of the text, however briefly. Given this, I would like to argue that metafiction can also occur in the paratext, in which the endpages act as a continuation of the narrative, or the text begins in conjunction with paratextual information (copyright, dedication, title page, etc.). Nikolajeva is perhaps the best known scholar who has done any work regarding picturebook paratexts. She discusses the possibility of endpapers “add[ing] to the narrative itself and even influenc[ing] our interpretation” of the narrative (Nikolajeva 249). Robert Munsch’s *Mud Puddle* (1986) offers a prime example of this first type of paratextual metafiction. The text proper tells the story of Jule Ann, a little girl living in a state of constant threat thanks to an anthropomorphized mud puddle who eagerly splashes down on her whenever she appears. In true recursive fashion, Jule tries to thwart the puddle in a series of repeated scenes before she finally enacts her vengeance with a well-aimed bar of soap. The first set of endpages in the book show the puddle happily accruing boots and branches, apples and leaves. In the closing set, the
puddle is seen again, this time running from the soap that destroys it within the text. The endpages, a necessary part of physical book construction, are thus treated as an extension of the narrative. Similarly, the endpages in Alan Durant’s *Burger Boy* (2006) also become part of the narrative. The text tells the story of Benny, a boy so intent on eating only hamburgers that he gradually transforms into a hamburger. After Benny-as-burger runs for his life, he cures himself by eating only vegetables, again to excess, so that he turns again from boy to food, this time carrot. The end pages mimic this, the first set showing a repeated image of a hamburger and the last replacing the hamburgers with carrots (Figure VIII). The implication of the end pages showing only transformed Benny and never original, non-threatened Benny is a disturbing one; by opening and closing the text with a series of repeated threats to Benny’s life as a human, the book itself seems to be rooting for its title character to fail.

In many other books (*Otto, Stripes*), the text and/or images begin in the paratext, sharing a page with the copyright information, dedication, or title and author, so that from the very beginning the narrative occurs in conjunction with the physicality of the book. As seen in the above examples, it serves as a reminder from the very beginning that the narrative exists within a book. Camilla’s stripes are thus contained, and non-contagious. When the narrative itself leaks over onto the end pages, however, it becomes less tied to its pages, and more fluid. The mud puddle has fled its own story world, again to a place that exists between that and the real world. Again, what this means is that the narrative is extending its reach outside of the confines of the pages, pushing against the boundaries of the story world, existing in a space that would be otherwise reserved for the real world. The only way to access such a place is through reading.
Intertextual Metafiction

Outside of direct reminders of the book as tangible object, metafiction also exists as references in the words/images to the outside world. In *Look At Me!*, the book itself appears in one of the scenes, available for purchase on a street corner, and characters from different Munsch books appear in the background, infiltrating the story in a way that is impossible to ignore. This infiltration is first and foremost a look-and-find\(^1\) of sorts for the reader; it is fun to recognize a beloved character in the background of a new text. Munsch’s main illustrator, Michael Martchenko, is known for including background humor and intertextual references in the backgrounds of his illustrations (*Something Good* (1990), *Pigs* (1989), *Alligator Baby* (1997)).

His illustrations for *The Sandcastle Contest* (2005), to name just one such work, are host to a family of vacationing squirrels who partake in their own adventures in the background and foreground of the images (the type of non-essential storyline mentioned in the previous chapter). Men in the background are building replicas of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and Big Ben and Pablo Picasso is shown as a sand castle contest participant.

Though not much has thus far been written concerning these intertextual references in the picturebook, scholars have been writing about similar occurrences in other media forms. In horror films, for example, specifically horror film franchises, references are constantly made to previous films. Though these two narrative genres at first seem unrelated—the picturebook being “writ[en] for children”—they are surprisingly alike. For one thing, the picturebook, as we have seen throughout this project, is no stranger to real or threatened bodily transformations. On top of this, the transformations that occur in these texts are occurring in ways that are structurally similar to the transformations (death being the most obvious example) that occur in horror films.

\(^{1}\) Look and Find books are a type of children’s activity books in which the goal is to find specified details that have been hidden in a larger detailed image. *Where’s Waldo?* is perhaps the most-popular example.
In many franchised horror films, the plot is nonlinear in the same way picturebooks are nonlinear—the bulk of the narrative is recursive in that the killer kills and kills and kills, and the deaths could be rearranged without much damage occurring to the overall narrative. These films also end in similar ways to the picturebook, with the possibility for the narrative to repeat itself left wide open, despite the apparent death(s) of the main villain. Based on these similar occurrences in structure (and, in some ways, content), narrative theories of horror films can be useful to this second part of the project—understanding metafiction’s impact on the narrative overall.

In postmodern horror films, “all of [the] references to other texts—which have become recognizable staples of the [horror film] genre—are… condensed into one… scene [thus] destroy[ing] the effect-via-effects of terror” which then “calls attention simply to itself as a work of art” (Arnzen 1). Because these references are so quickly recognized as to be expected, we approach these films as a look-and-find in themselves. Once we locate these references within a scene or scenes, we have already been actively reading the film in a way that recognizes it “as a work of art.” In these picturebooks that contain such intertextual references, our reading is interrupted by this act of searching for and recognizing these references to other texts. The above-named background characters in the similarly-structured picturebook are doing a comparable thing to their narratives. Munsch’s characters and books as shown in the background of *Look at Me!*, for example, are “call[ing] attention [to the book] as a work of art,” which then lessens the impact of the narrative terror (Arnzen 1). What this similar inclusion of intertextuality does to picturebooks is crucial to this project’s main question, as it suggests that the appearance of other Munsch books in the backgrounds of several scenes has a direct impact on the narrative. In *Look*’s case, the inclusion of an image of the book itself in the background
of an illustration has two contradictory consequences. First, we are reassured that the narrative we are encountering firmly exists within a picturebook. Though the rose bush, as we saw in the previous chapter, may seem a threat to the real world outside of the story world, here we are reminded that the rose bush lives only in this fictional world that takes place in a book. However, the inclusion of the book as something for sale in the background images also places the narrative within the story world. If the book exists as a book in the world in which the story is taking place, who is to say that the story taking place cannot exist in a world where the book exists? The rose bush can then spread across our bodies just as it did Madison’s.

In its ability to indirectly reference itself and the real world, the picturebook is again crossing boundaries between the real and story worlds. What this suggests is that the already complex layering of narratives occurring in the picturebook must be expanded yet again. We have already established the existence of three narratives—signaled, to borrow from Saussure, by the illustration (signified), the word (signifier), and the juxtaposition of the two—that signify one complete narrative that cannot exist without reader interpretation. Sipe offers the following visual aid, developed using the sign systems of semiotic theorist Charles Sanders Peirce and education scholar Marjorie Siegel.

![Figure 8: (Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 102)](image)

He recognizes what I have discussed previously, that is, that these two sign systems are not two separate entities, and suggests two possible combinations of the these interpretations—interpreting the words in terms of the pictures, and interpreting the pictures in terms of the words.
This supports my own reading of interpretation as being hierarchal, though does so without an ultimate combined interpretation. What I have suggested throughout this work is that interpretation results from the following:

1. Word-exclusive narrative
2. Picture-exclusive narrative
3. Juxtaposed narrative formed by reader’s interpretation of 1 and 2

This basic interpretation model could easily be expanded further to align more closely with Sipe’s interpretations of image through word and vice versa, but this would still keep the final narrative interpretation plural; one each for words and one for images. Sipe claims that “the possibilities of meaning in the word-picture relationship are inexhaustible,” something this work ardently supports, but does so using dual interpretations, and without considering the narrative spaces that fall outside of the main narratives (Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 103). This project is interested in the condensing of Sipe’s dualistic space into one narrative interpretation as well as the possibility for narrative spaces within these main two.

What we must do now is consider the expansion of these narrative spaces into sub-narrative categories. The above inclusions of intertextual references through the signified, though a part of
the main illustration, are separate from the narrative informed by the signified. What we have then are either micro-narratives—the appearance of the book existing as the narrative “this book exists in this world”, and the repercussions this entails—or a sub-narrative space, part of the picture-only narrative but a step-removed from the juxtaposed complete narrative. The sub-narrative space model is appealing as it allows for a hierarchal understanding of what constitutes the primary narrative space. To reiterate and expand.

1. Word-exclusive narrative informed by the signifier
2. Picture-exclusive narrative informed by the signified
   a. Sub-narrative informed by signified
3. Juxtaposed narrative formed by reader’s interpretation of 1 and 2

If we were to consider these intertextual references as a second line of image-based narrative, one that carries as much narratological significance as the first line of picture-based narrative, we would be placed in a position that requires us to develop two separate versions of 3, the juxtaposed narrative. But to construct a version of this third reader-interpreted space would be to exercise a blatant neglect for almost the entirety of the image. These intertextual references must be considered with less weight, simply because they are not comparatively significant to the narrative. Instead, this consideration allows for the juxtaposed narrative to be slightly tweaked with the factoring of these sub-narratives. To analogize this point, directions to build a birdhouse will still produce the same birdhouse if an additional direction prompts the builder to paint the birdhouse blue; there will just be two slightly differing birdhouse possibilities, painted and unpainted.

It is important also to remember that this sub-narrative space exists only in the narrative spaces either primarily or partially informed by illustration. What we cannot have is 1a, a sub-narrative space informed only by the signifier. While I hesitate to privilege signifier or signified
over the other in my analyses of the picturebook, this is where the signified’s unique interpretive qualities make a difference in interpretation.

To read is to transact with words from a text…The visual arts are fabricated and can be read with the same deliberateness required of literary texts. But instead of reading words, words are used to read images. (Feinstein 44)

Because we use the word to read and understand the image, we are a step further removed in our interpretation of the latter. In the word-only narrative of the picturebook, we are much closer to an interpretation simply because we are using language to interpret language. In contrast, to see a picture of a house without the language necessary to say “this is a house” changes our interpretation from “this is a house” to “this is a building with a door and two windows in the front, a chimney on the side, and an SUV in the driveway next to a garage.” Theories of cognitive grammar tell us that the “conventional meaning of a lexical item must be equated with the entire network, not with any single node,” or, in other words, that we cannot assume a schematic understanding of a lexical category “fully compatible” with all possible specifications (Langacker 4). What this means is simple. In the house example, we could deepen our understanding further with all conceivable “extensions and elaborations” that would mean the difference between this house and that house and those houses over there, but we are still constrained by the limits of language (Langacker 4). We can infer that the object being described is probably a house, but we are further removed from the truth in this interpretation than we would be in an interpretation of the signified. This further removal from language is what allows our interpretations of the visual scene to differ, and why we can put more weight on the foregrounded characters as opposed to the intertextual references appearing in the backgrounds and sidelines of the pages. Because we are reading images through words, our reading of an image that contains backgrounded and foregrounded characters is directed towards the meaning that the words suggest.
So while we cannot develop the same layered possibilities described above through word-exclusive narrative because of the differences between interpreting word and image, what we can have is 3a, a juxtaposed sub-narrative formed by 1 and 2a. This is where the picturebook occupies a unique narrative place. In its dual-narrative of image and text, it can achieve not only reader-created meaning, but multiple interpretations through these narrative sub-spaces. Other literary forms not sustained by the inclusion of the signified cannot sustain these layers of meaning. While there is still meaning left to interpret in a singular word narrative, we still must deal only with what we are told; we do not have to contend with what we are told alongside what we see.

With image supporting narrative spaces 2a and 3a, the reader-interpreted narratives can be combative (the painted and unpainted birdhouses). If we interpret Look, for example, without considering the intertextual metafiction named above, then the rose is strictly restricted to the storyworld. As seen in the previous chapter, if we were to interpret the text with this sub-narrative information, the rose is able to transgress the boundaries between real and story worlds. The juxtaposed narrative still tells the story of a girl whose body is transformed temporarily by a rose that eventually transfers itself to another body. All that differs is what occurs in this transitory space between our world and the story world. Is the rose clearly and cleanly housed within the narrative or is its positionality looser?

What this means for the picturebook is that the already-complex levels of meaning and meaning-making I have explored above must be broadened further to include these sub-narrative spaces. In doing this, we are left with the two narrative spaces that juxtapose with both reader interpretation and sub-narrative spaces to create the third complete narrative space that itself has multiple variations of meaning that navigate the transitory space between the real and story
worlds. What I want to suggest here is an expanded meaning-making hierarchy, a Picturebook Multiple-Interpretation Model.

1. Word-exclusive narrative
2. Image-exclusive narrative  
   a. Image-exclusive sub-narrative  
3. Juxtaposed narrative formed by reader’s interpretation of 1 and 2  
   a. Juxtaposed narrative formed by reader’s interpretation of 1 and 2 and 2a

Sipe writes that the picturebook “give[s] children the opportunity to engage in an unending process of meaning making as every rereading [or, I argue, reading] brings about new ways of… [interpreting] words and pictures. In other words, picturebooks allow children to have multiple experiences as they engage in creating new meanings and constructing new worlds” (Sipe “How Picture Books Work” 107). This conclusion, though slightly-Bettelheimian, goes beyond how readers engage with the text, and aligns with what I have been suggesting throughout this work. The picturebook is inherently a form that demands everything from its reader. Without an interpreter, these texts are meaning-less. Their success is dependent upon reader intervention(s). An interpretation that privileges intertextual references is possible, and this possibility sets the effects of metafiction on a scale. A reading that places great interpretive meaning upon these references, for example, will result in an awareness of the book as a book that a differing interpretation might not employ.

Though it seems an obvious conclusion—different readers make different meanings—this is still a radical conclusion to make. In saying there is no one meaning to ascertain from a text, or that meanings are “inexhaustible,” the reader has an extraordinary amount of power.

Humor as Metafictive Device:
Related to intertextual metafiction, and mentioned briefly within it, is the use of humor as a metafictive device. In *Bootsie* we see stuffed animals covering their eyes in fear and the narrator’s beloved toy turtle hiding under the bed. The toys in the background, though terrified, are distracting; we pay attention to the kangaroo shielding its baby instead of Bootsie torturing the narrator. Because this is a still image (as opposed to a film), we can refocus at will, but our preferring the background over the foreground is still a departure, though momentary, from the narrative. Though not necessarily “drawing attention to the book’s status as an artefact,” humor does indeed temporarily remove us from the narrative we are supposed to be focusing on. Because the stuffed animals in the background of the text present a second narrative that distracts us from the main narrative, this and other incidences of humor are operating as metafictive devices similar to the intertextual sub-narratives mentioned above.

To give an example of the narrative possibilities of the inclusion of such humor, I turn back to *Burger Boy*. At one point in *Burger Boy*, protagonist Benny is shown sitting on a hill outside eating carrots. Upon closer inspection we see that the hills are actually heads of either iceberg lettuce or cabbage, the trees are broccoli, and the birds are eggplants. We are therefore subsequently and momentarily tossed out of the narrative with this realization, a desuturing from the narrative. To borrow again from film theory, “suture represents the closure of the cinematic énoncé in line with its relationship with its subject (the filmic subject or rather the cinematic subject), which is recognized, and then put in its place as the spectator” (Oudart 1). To desuture is to reopen this gap, to reinsert our positionality as viewers external to the narrative utterance. This desuturing is quick, occurring only on one spread and yet in throwing us out of the story world, even for a moment, we must recognize that we have been reading a book before we are able to reenter the story world.
To cite a second and similar text, in *No Jumping on the Bed* (1996) Walter ignores his father’s warnings to stop jumping on the bed, as “one day it’ll crash right through the floor” of their apartment (Arnold 7). He goes to bed, somewhat unwillingly, and begins to fall asleep to a “soft thump, thump, thump coming from the room above” (8).

He switched on his bedside lamp. “If Delbert can jump on his bed, so can I.”

Walter bounced higher and higher. On his last jump his hair brushed the ceiling. But when he came back down, his mattress creaked, the floor cracked, and the whole bed tipped sideways. Then down through the floor fell Walter, bed and all. (10)

Walter finds himself crashing through the floors below, one at a time, falling into his downstairs neighbor’s spaghetti dinner, a fish tank, a box of stamps, and so on and so forth. He finally lands back in his bedroom.

He opened his eyes. Everything was in its place. His bedroom lights were out. The door was almost closed and through it Walter could hear his mother and father talking quietly. (30)

He “[lies] back down to sleep” just in time to see Delbert fall through his ceiling in a perfect instance of an internal circumnarrative. At first glance, there is little in the way of metafictional devices. Walter is secure in his panels—the narrative seems unaware of its existence within a book. And yet, as he crashes through the floors, Walter encounters Miss Hattie, Mr. Matty, Aunt Batty, twins Patty and Natty, Mr. Hanratty, and, finally, Maestro Ferlingatti (Figure IX). As the reader progresses through the narrative, crashing through the floors with Walter, these multiple rhyming names present a second narrative, one that distracts from the first just by virtue of being noticed. Readers are then left to grapple with the main narrative—Walter falling through the floors and ceilings of several apartment units—as well as this second, and thus competing, narrative of the rhyming names that draws attention away from Walter’s plight. The text overall thus becomes a game.
Literary theorist Michel Beaujour speaks to this game-like quality in his “Game of Poetics.”

The desire to play a game in reverse usually arises when the straight way of playing has become a bore… the rules of the game, which although arbitrary, had somehow become “natural” to the players, now seem artificial, tyrannical, and dead: the system does not allows for sufficient player freedom within it and must be discarded. (Beaujour 61)

Waugh builds on these insights to define freedom as the “moment when the game or the genre is being discarded, but the rules of the new one are not yet defined, and are therefore experienced as the ‘waning of former rules’” (Waugh 42). Metafiction, then, “is in the position of examining the old rules in order to discover new possibilities of the game” (42). To read No Jumping on the Bed! by the “old rules” means to ignore this secondary sub-narrative of the rhyming names. Yet in reading the word and picture-based narratives with an additional eye tuned towards these details, we are essentially “playing the game backwards;” that is, we are “discover[ing] new possibilities of the game,” and thus the narrative. Play, or “freeplay” as philosopher Jacques Derrida would add, is a “field of infinite substitutions” made possible by the absence of any one “truth or origin” for the reader to “decipher” (Derrida 9, 12). In laymen’s terms, play as it relates to this project, is the possibility for multiple readings because there is no one meaning (or “true” meaning as Derrida would say) to be found.

Something similar in regards to play is happening in The Day Louis Got Eaten (2011). The text opens with Louis and his sister riding their bikes through the woods, only to have Louis, as the title correctly implies, suddenly eaten by a four-legged, brown-furred beast called a Gulper. His sister chases down the Gulper only to find it in turn eaten by another creature, who is eaten by another, then another (Figure X). Finally she tracks down the final creature, crawls inside this Russian nesting doll of a situation to find Louis, unharmed if eaten, and sets the two of them free by inducing hiccups in the innermost creature. Yet the narrative is also very much a
metafiction because it offers a secondary reading that is again similar to playing a game backwards. For one thing, Louis is eaten by a series of creatures whose names reflect the sounds they make while eating. A Gulper gulps him up, a bird-like creature called the Grabular grabs the Gulper, a vaguely-amphibious Undersnatch snatches the Grabular from underwater and is in turn guzzled by the pleasant-seeming Guzzler, who, finally, is yumped up by an almost entirely spherical Yumper. On the pages preceding each new creature, hints of the next creature to come appear hidden on page corners and behind trees—a claw here, a beak there. In the same way that the “nonessential story lines” of the rhyming names in *Jumping* and *Sand Castle's* squirrel family work against the linearity of the text by presenting a conflicting narrative, the conflicting narratives in *Louis* seek an alternate interaction from an initial reading of the primary narrative space. We read of Walter jumping on the bed and are drawn out of the narrative by our pursuit of names. This phenomena is related in some ways to ekphrasis, “that pausing, in some fashion, for thought before, and/or about, some nonverbal work of art, or craft, a poïema without words, some more or less aestheticized made object, or set of made objects” (Cunningham 1). Like this phenomena, the moments in these texts are “stopping [the] action” to direct our attention for a while” at these non-narrative narratives (1). In demanding to be noticed, we stop interacting with the book as a book and instead react to it as if it were a game. Though there is no Grover to tell us to “count to ten before turning the page,” these texts are interactive in the same way. Finding the claw is something we do before turning the page. What, we are expected to ask ourselves, will the next rhyming name be?

As mentioned above, metafictive devices in the picturebook operate in two conflicting ways. Metafictive devices, as we’ve seen above, pull us out of the text and force us to recognize the narrative’s location within a book. These devices offer a secondary reading of the text by
altering the act of reading in the normative mode—that is, linearly and without desuturing—to follow closely the rules of play. This reinforcement of the text as occurring in a separate space from our own would work to lessen the horror of books in which appear occurrences of bodily harm. Thus metafiction in the picturebook is a powerful device that controls reader interpretation of the narrative, either by blurring or demarcating the transitory space between real and story world. Whichever of these occurs, the text interacts with the real world in ways that are unique to this form of literature. We must consider these two separate spaces regardless of their impact on the narrative—and that is where the picturebook exists on a plain separate from all other literature; the narrative and story world is inextricably connected to the real world. To read a picturebook is to navigate this space always.

**Narrative Implications of Multiple Metafictive Devices: The Land of Hungry Armadillos**

Because metafiction can perform these two drastically opposing narrative implications, it is worth exploring what a combination of metafictive devices can do. Rare is it that a text contains a singular metafictive element, and even if this were the case, a single device can operate in multiple ways. *Look*'s intertextual reference to itself, for instance, could also be considered an example of humor as a metafictive device; it does, after all, instantly throw us back into the real world.

*The Land of the Hungry Armadillos* (2000) has multiple metafictive devices at work. *Armadillos* begins with main character Gus and his little sister, Wendy, fighting over a box of crayons. After Gus is sent to his room, he “wish[es] for a box of crayons and a pad of paper all his own” (David 10). When he opens his eyes he is met with the crayons and paper he had dreamed of, “the largest box of crayons and the largest pad of paper [he] had ever seen” (10).
The only catch? The paper and crayons are delivered by a monstrous foxlike creature who calls himself Zub.

“All those crayons and all that paper are for me?” He held out his hands. Zub waved a finger. “They’re all yours for a trade,” he explained. “What will you give me in return?” Gus looked around his room. “How about a pair of purple socks or my Atomic Ace underwear?”

“I don’t think so,” Zub said...

“How about my little sister? Could you use her for anything?”

Zub smiled. (11)

And with that Gus trades Wendy away. He soon realizes his mistake, as all good older brothers do, and makes a second wish for her safe return. Instead, Zub transports him to the Land of Hungry Armadillos where Wendy is doomed forever to “bake, ice, and then pass out cupcakes” to a never-ending line of “waiting armadillos” (19). Zub refuses to let her go.

“You made a trade because you were a greedy, selfish boy who wasn’t thinking about his sister. Well, now you have to live with your decision.” (23)

Gus makes a deal with Zub to take Wendy’s place, and he does—but only for the moment before he begins to float up and away from Zub and the Land of Hungry Armadillos.

“You traded for bad to get the crayons and be rid of your sister. But then you traded for good to send her home. I should have known a trade for good wouldn’t work.” (29)

And there the story ends, Gus and Wendy safe from Zub. Metafiction, as we will see, both reinforces and calls into question this safety.

To start, Armadillos is a classic example of structural metafiction in the picturebook. The illustrations are so hastily rendered so that bits of the blue background show through the scribblings of Zub’s orange fur (Figure IX). Parts of the previous page are visible on the following spread, and, most notably, The Land of Hungry Armadillos itself is shown depicted upon a piece of graphing paper, a fact made evident by the graphing lines as well as the fact the
page’s design incorporates into it an entire bound notebook. When Gus makes the good trade and floats upwards and out of Zub’s grasp, he is propelled back into the white “traditional” space shown earlier. This time, however, the white space is revealed to have also been a representation of paper, this time a piece of white paper. Additionally, when Zub appears in the Armadillo Land “grinning a big grin” he is shown coming out from behind what is depicted as a scanned red folder sitting atop the graphing paper. This constant visual reinforcement of the narrative’s existence upon paper within the pages of a book limits the horror of Zub and his armadillo minions. Gus and Wendy may be threatened by a fox monster whose head is more than double their combined sizes, but the monster, like themselves, is only an illustration on a piece of paper; Zub is not even fully colored in. They and their horrors are confined within their story world. By this same token, however, graphing paper and folders do exist within the world of reader as interpreter. The story world is touching upon our real world, blurring the line between the two. Thus the threat of harm posed by our interaction with and interpretation of the narrative is both diluted and concentrated by the structural metafictive aspects.

In addition to structural metafiction, Armadillos also contains aspects of paratextual metafiction. The book begins with the paratext: both the copyright and dedication pages show Wendy screaming as Gus reaches out to steal her colored pencils. It is worth noting here that only Gus’ arm is depicted, as it grabs Wendy’s wrist from the lower left hand corner of the spread. This presents a direct conflict between storyworld and real world as we know and can see that there is nothing else attached to this arm in the storyworld even though the text implies that the entirety of Gus’ body is terrorizing his younger sister. Of course Gus is not dangling off the page, sitting next to us as we read about and see his arm latching onto his sister, but through visual implication his presence does extend into our world.
To go back to the paratextual metafiction, again, as mentioned above, and, like the structural aspects of the pages, placing the book’s dedication in the black space of Wendy’s open and screaming mouth reinforces the narrative storyworld, protecting the reader-as-interpreter from harm. The narrative we are engaging with is separate from our world. We have not only the conflict between story world and real world; we also, have a conflict between types of metafiction. This conflict is also present in our interpretations of narrative and sub-narrative spaces—that is, this conflict in interpretation is found in the picturebook in multiple ways.

What I am interested in exploring here are the narrative implications of multiple metafictive devices. In addition to the above-named devices, for example, Armadillos utilizes humor as a metafictive device, which, as stated in the previous section, changes the act of reading to more closely align with play. As the reader navigates the humorous aspects of the narrative, it becomes clear that the narrative itself is structured around a modified version of recursivity. It is in this recognition of modified recursivity that the act of reading aligns with the act of play. At the beginning of the text, before Gus trades Wendy away, he creates a sort of revenge drawing as an outlet for his anger:

Gus took a piece of paper and drew a land that had red mountains, a lake of bubbling goo, and a line of hungry armadillos with wide open mouths. In the center, he drew his little sister crying. (5)

Meanwhile, Wendy has used her own papers to draw a cupcake. These details are not yet humorous in the sense that their discovery constitutes an act of play, but later in the text, as we see Gus enter predominantly red land with lines of hungry armadillos and a frantic Wendy making and dispensing cupcake after cupcake, our reading changes. This modified recursivity (I say modified because the scenes clearly parallel one another, though they are not the same), in its demands for our attention, draws us temporarily out of the narrative. Though this strange land/armadillo/cupcake repetition is crucial to the image and word-only narrative spaces, what I
would like to suggest is that they also constitute the image-only sub-narrative space in that these
details alone work in conjunction with the images and words to create one possible interpretation
of the narrative. The recognition of this parallel is what creates this sub-narrative space.

Through this single aspect of metafiction, then, we already have the potential for two
narrative interpretations. First, we have the juxtaposed narrative of image and word, which leads
us through the story of Gus losing and regaining Wendy and Zub and his horrifying land of
armadillos. But we also now have the possibility for another narrative option, a narrative with
the same series of events but with the added layer of play, a consequence of the text’s own
recognition of itself. Combine this with one or both of the other types of metafictive devices
(structural and paratextual) and these conflicting interpretations are magnified. With structural
metafiction simultaneously securing and freeing its narrative to and from the book in which it is
located and paratextual metafiction firmly securing the narrative to the story world, we are
ultimately faced with a narrative that is constantly navigating and engaging with the real and
story worlds as well as the space(s) between the two.

What metafiction can do for picturebook narrative, then, is multifaceted. Metafictive
devices can anchor their narrative to its place within the confines of a book, while also severing
this relationship. They can modify the act of reading to comply loosely with the rules that
govern play or reposition the reader in the murky space outside of her own world as well as the
story world, all while firmly insisting that the narrative is taking place in ink on paper. The
interaction of these metafictive devices leads to the conclusion of what I have called the
Picturebook Multiple-Interpretations Model, in which the reader forms no single conclusive
narrative, allowing for either multiple very different or only slightly varied narratives to exist.
Regardless of any one particular metafictive device’s impact on the narrative, together they work to blur the line between narrative space and the world inhabited by the reader.

**Conclusion:** *Maude the Not-So-Noticeable Shrimpton* and *We Are in a Book!*
What I have demonstrated in the previous two chapters is that nonlinearity and metafiction in these picturebooks of bodily transformation are working to amplify the horror of these transformations. These elements work to negate any sort of conclusive endings, expanding the narrative to outside of its paginated boundaries. This narratological expansion is taken even further as both of these elements blur the boundaries between real and story worlds. But, as explained in the previous chapter, metafiction can also work towards reining in these expanded narrative possibilities and confining these stories to within their thirty-two pages. What I argue in conclusion is that a similar tension occurs between linearity and metafiction, so that these narratives of bodily harm are indeed still amplified in horror, but ultimately the narrative possibilities of metafiction, when working in conjunction with one another, limit these narratological implications. Where horror is amplified by the picturebook’s linearity, it is lessened by its metafictive attributes. And when the metafictive elements are blurring the lines between real and story worlds, the linearity is pulling the text back towards the story world. In this conclusion, I analyze the narrative possibilities discussed in the previous two chapters in a close reading of a transformation text in an effort to explore what these two aspects of narratology combined can do for the overall narrative.

Maude the Not-So-Noticeable Shrimpton

In Maude the Not-So-Noticeable Shrimpton (2013), protagonist Maude is the easily-misplaced member of the eccentric Shrimpton clan, a family “so talented… so larger and life [that] you just couldn’t miss them even if you wanted to,” which was for the best, as “the Shrimptons hated to be missed” (Child 3). As the book progresses, the narrative follows the recursivity described in Chapter One, and the scenes that follow this brief introduction are
essentially modified versions of one individual character introduction scene. As we turn the pages, we are introduced, one after the other, to each member of the Shrimpton family.

Mrs. Shrimpton created flamboyant hats from feathers, fruit, and fur. Her latest had a live peacock positioned perkily on top. Mrs. Shrimpton’s hats were real head-turners. (4)

On the following page we meet Mr. Shrimpton.

Mr. Shrimpton’s mustache was so long and so twirly that butterflies liked to perch on it. It was quite a statement as mustaches go. (5)

And we continue to meet the family in this fashion, introduced to daughter Penelope (who “was exceedingly beautiful”), son Hector (“a mesmerizing mover”), daughter Constance (with “a voice like music,”), and son Wardo (“a laugh a minute”) (6-9). As we have seen in Chapter One, these descriptive scenes would surely fail any jumbling test. While it is visually implied that the children are being introduced chronologically, this does not explain the preferencing of Mrs. over Mr. Shrimpton, and does not account for the final introduction of middle child Maude. The chronological ordering of the other children, then, is positioned more fluidly in space. Wardo could come before Hector with no damage sustained to the narrative. With Maude however, the text finally asserts a forward-moving (as opposed to stagnant) linearity to tell us that she is different from the other Shrimptons. “Being noticed,” we are reminded, “was what all the Shrimptons lived for. All except, that is, for Maude Shrimpton” (Figure XII) (10-11).

After this final introduction, however, the scenes that follow can again be shuffled without any noticeable effect on the overall narrative. We are introduced to Maude’s not-so-noticeability over several pages and scenes, all of which could be shuffled, reversed, erased, etc. with, fittingly, no noticeable effect on the overall narrative.

Unlike Penelope, when Maude crossed the street, she had to dodge cars. (12)
She moved so inconspicuously that when she performed in her school play, people thought she was part of the scenery. (13)

Her voice was so small that not even the Shrimptons’ collection of unusual dogs could hear her. And dogs, as you know, have exceptional hearing. (14)

And so on for several more scenes. This flexible linearity is again interrupted by an asserted non-flexible linearity that propels the narrative forward in time. The repetition of scenes again ends, this time to introduce Maude’s impending birthday. At this point, the text’s narrative progression closely aligns with Bootsie and other recursive texts that gesture towards linearity.

In response to her family’s request for a birthday wish, Maude asks for a goldfish.

“What a marvelous idea,” exclaimed her father. “A giant carp or a whale! Something enormous…”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said her mother. “Something golden, like a phoenix.”

Of course a goldfish will not do for a family of such exceptional qualities, and, much to her displeasure, Maude is gifted a tiger. The text continues in this forward-moving march, reminding us of what the Shrimptons have forgotten.

…That’s the thing to remember about tigers: they do get very hungry. And when a tiger is hungry… it is VERY hungry indeed. (25)

What follows is a return to recursivity. They have run out of tiger food, and, in the ensuing panic, each family member reacts in his or her own eccentric way. As the text warns us on page one, however, “you just couldn’t miss them even if you wanted to,” and the text ends as Maude stands “completely still” as it is heavily implied that her entire family has been eaten by their newest pet (1, 32).

The text as a whole is linear only when it has to be. The majority of its thirty-two pages are dedicated to recursive scenes, with only three very brief interruptions to introduce either Maude’s peculiarities, her upcoming birthday, or the tiger’s hunger. Even within these scenes,
however, the linearity is not quite arrow-straight. When Maude’s birthday is nearing, her siblings make their own gift suggestions. In order, we read Penelope swoon “something startling,” Hector stammer “something striking,” Constance sing “something stupendous,” and Wardo snicker “something silly” (18). Just as we see with the individual repeated scenes, this dialogue in a non-recursive scene could be easily reversed or rearranged with no loss in meaning. Just as easy to consider would be the expansion of this scene through repetition. Penelope could sigh “something superb” just as easily as she swoons “something startling.” Thus this scene that is positioned as linear in the overall text is in itself recursive and expandable; in short, the scene itself is not linear. What does this dual recursiveness mean for the narrative as a whole?

Because of its recursivity, the introduction of the individual Shrimptons is not located in any space in narrative time. This expands the individual eccentricities of each Shrimpton beyond the confines of their individual page. Without a temporal indicator, we are told not that Penelope is “exceedingly beautiful” today, but that her existence currently and has always been tied to her being “exceedingly beautiful.” The text’s second series of recursive scenes is again displaced from narrative time, offering a series of events that have happened at some undisclosed point in Maude’s life. Again, because of this recursivity, we can assume that Maude has always been “what you might call a blender” (13). The instances of her “merg[ing]… fad[ing]… disappear[ing]” have occurred her whole life, and, like Frances’ experiences in *Witch*, have probably occurred many other times outside of the text (13). In these two sets of recursive scenes then, the narrative has been expanded outside of its thirty-two pages. Maude’s discomfort then has been amplified, as has her own nature.

By the time the text reaches the final set of recursive scenes, we are primed for the effects of repetition. The narrative, already expanded twice, is more than ready to be expanded a third
time in its depiction of the tiger’s attack. Though the text gives each member of the family only one chance to speak before the tiger makes its move, we have long been primed for its possible expansion. What this means for the narrative is that the family’s panic is elongated; their fear is not tied so strictly to its pages.

“Disappear,” whispered Penelope, blinking her dazzling blue eyes… “Yum yum,” thought the tiger. (29)

In its continuing recursiveness, the text has prepared us to expand. The following scene, though fabricated on my part, would neither disrupt nor change the narrative. Its inclusion would have no impact on the text.

“Blend in,” squeaked Penelope, averting her sparkling blue eyes… “Yum yum yum,” thought the tiger.

The linearity is working to extend the narrative further than its existing pages, thus amplifying the final horrific scenes, as well as the effects of the previous two sets of repeated scenes. What we have not done thus far is examine linearity’s relationship with metafiction, where the two converge and pull apart.

Metafiction in Maude plays out much like the game Waugh describes. As we read, we notice that Maude is true to the text’s word, and we see glimpses of her blending in behind curtains, in tree trunks, on stair steps… The text encourages our privileging play over reading, asking “can you see her?” in our initial introduction to our titular character (9). She is camouflaged in every appearance, quite literally at the park in a printed camouflaged dress. By the end of the text, the game of searching for Maude has become entangled with the act of reading, as her survival depends on her blending into the wallpaper. “Can you see her?” we are asked again on the final page (Figure XIII) (32). Adding to this, the word-based narrative components are themselves playing a game influenced by concrete poetry. In noticing that the description of Mr. Shrimpton’s mustache is shaped like a mustache, for example, we are
temporarily disengaged from the act of reading. In this reading-as-game approach, the text that has been so expanded beyond its pages by linearity is reined back in by metafiction. Just as metafiction alone can both tie and release the narrative to and from its pages, the conflation of both linearity and metafiction dictates our interpretation of the text.

The picturebook, with its natural recursiveness and frequent awareness of self, offers narrative interpretations that are at times surprising and always unique to the form. These are texts with linearities that defy traditional reading practices, and, in this defiance, texts whose narratives expand endlessly into a space that is neither story nor real world. These texts navigate this newfound space by pushing and pulling against it, sometimes with ease, other times with resistance. The structures and formatting of these texts offer simultaneous conflicting narrative interpretations, and it is entirely up to readers to develop these narratives. What this means for these texts of bodily harm, and for all picturebooks, is that there is no one or even two narrative possibilities of any one text. Where one aspect of narrativity suggests one interpretation, another suggests its opposite. It is up to the reader to make meaning.

We Are in a Book!

I want to conclude this project by approaching a second text, one related to this project for both its theme as well as for its relation to metafiction. Mo Willem’s We Are in a Book! (2010) is similar to Monster for its fully self-aware metafiction. In this text, Gerald the elephant and Piggie the pig discover that “a reader is reading us!” (Willems 13). This discovery leads to the similar realization that “we are in a book!” (16). Unlike Grover, Gerald and Piggie are thrilled to be read, and actively engage the reader in a way that requires and anticipates the turning of pages. “I can make the reader say a word!” says Piggie, and Gerald eagerly waits for the reader’s presumed utterance of the word in question (“banana,” in this case) (23). Piggie,
sharing in the fun, asks Gerald if he would like to try to make the reader say a word “before the books ends” (39). To this, Gerald is astonished. “ENDS?!,” he shouts, “the book ends?!” (Figure XIV) (40-41). Piggie is matter-of-fact. “Yes. All books end” (42). Gerald begins to panic over his impending demise, exclaiming that “this book is going too fast!” (48).

I have more to give! More words! More jokes! More “bananas!” I just want to be read. (49-52).

To this Piggie devises a solution, and the book ends with Gerald and Piggie, hands clasped, directly imploring the reader (Figure XV).

Hello. Will you please read us again? (56)

The text recognizes what is crucial to my understanding of the picturebook. Yes, all books end, as Piggie explains so patiently. But the end does not have to be the end. Sometimes the end can be the very beginning.
Works Cited

Primary Texts:
Secondary Texts:


Appendix

Figure I: Scene from *There’s A Witch Under the Stairs*

My parents don’t seem to understand that when they send me down there, I might never come back. Everyone would look for me and call for me, but I wouldn’t be able to answer.

Figure II: Madison and the rose from *Look at Me!*

Figure III: The Weed Whomper man and the rose.
until she came into the room.

Figure IV: Final scene from *Imogene’s Antlers*
Figure V: A scene from *Would You Like To Play Hide and Seek with Lovable Furry Old Grover?*

Figure VI: The narrator fleeing from Bootsie (and the panel) in *Bootsie Barker Bites*
Although if she does, it’s fine with me.

Figure VII: The narrator standing outside of the thought balloon panel and gesturing inwards.

Figure VIII: Endpapers from *Burger Boy*
“If I had known you wanted to see my paintings,” he said, “I would have tidied up a bit.”

But they never once paused to admire Mr. Hannatty’s colorful artwork. They were too busy splashing in his cans of paint. Then his floor caved in and everyone followed Walter’s bed down through the hole.

Down and down fell Walter, Miss Hattie, Mr. Matty, Aunty Batty, Patty and Natty, Mr. Hannatty, Patty Cat, seventeen cans of paint, the stamps, the TV, the spaghetti, the bed, and all.

Figure IX: All of the rhyming names in No Jumping on the Bed!

She had almost caught up with it when, unfortunately …

Figure X: Sarah following the Grabular in The Day Louis Got Eaten (note the Undersnatch in the bottom right.)
Figure XI: A barely colored in Zub from The Land of the Hungry Armadillos

Figure XII: Maude (fifth from left) is introduced in Maude the Not-So-Noticeable Shrimpton
And Maude just stood completely still.

Can you see her?

Sometimes, just sometimes, not being noticeable is the very best talent of all.

Figure XIII: The last page of Maude. It is visually implied that the tiger has eaten the other Shrimptons.
Figure XIV: Gerald is astonished to learn that he and Piggie are in a book in *We Are In a Book!*

Figure XV: Gerald and Piggie advocate for circumnarrativity.