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Word Balloons in Children's Picture Books

Erika Schnatz

May 15, 2015

Research question

When did speech bubbles first appear in children's picture books? In what ways have speech bubbles been co-opted from comic books to serve picture book narratives? What does this example suggest about the future of children's books co-opting the visual language of comic books?

The visual language of comics has slowly permeated American popular culture since the first regular newspaper strip, Richard Felton Outcault's *The Yellow Kid*, back in 1895. From the onomatopoeic visuals in the campy '60s *Batman* television series and pop art paintings of Roy Lichtenstein, to the never-ending string of superhero-based blockbuster movies today, comics have been co-opted and adapted to almost every medium imaginable. One area slow to embrace the visual language of comics is perhaps the most similar in form in terms of its relationship between words and images: the children's picture book. A closer look at the historically poor reception of comics by the gatekeepers of children's literature will illuminate the tension between comics and picture books, and underscore the innovation of fusion texts that meld elements from comics with picture books.

The tension between comics and the gatekeepers of children's literature

The rise of the comic book in the mid-1930s was viewed with disdain by most librarians and children's book publishers, who saw the medium as a threat to literacy. Sales numbers didn't help matters: in 1938, *Action Comics* sold nearly one million copies per month, while a picture book published by Viking or Macmillan rarely exceeded a first printing of five thousand copies.¹ As objects designed to be read and thrown away, the physical form of a comic book countered the core mission of libraries. It's not surprising that so many librarians viewed the popularity of comics as a threat to their own domains.² Though comics were big business (bringing in over \$10 million a month in gross sales in 1940), traditional picture book publishers did not go anywhere near the genre; influential librarian-critics like Anne Carroll Moore, the head of children's library services for the New York Public Library system, and the rest of the American Library Association would have been up in arms if publishers like Viking or Macmillan had even considered acquiring comics.³

The publication of Fredric Wertham's anti-comics study *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 was more fodder for gatekeepers of children's literature. Teachers and librarians frequently drew on metaphors of addiction and contamination when discussing comics until the conversation died

1 Leonard S. Marcus, *Minders of Make-believe: Idealists, Entrepreneurs, and the Shaping of American Children's Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 137.

2 Joe Sutliff Sanders, "Chaperoning Words: Meaning-Making in Comics and Picture Books," *Children's Literature: Annual of The Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and The Children's Literature Association* 41, (2013): 57-90.

3 Marcus, *Minders of Make-believe*, 145.

down in the late 1950s. It was not until the 1970s when teachers began to cautiously endorse comics as a way to reach “reluctant” or disabled readers (founded on the assumption that the visual/verbal nature of comics made them easier to read).⁴ Views on comics had evolved slightly, which was enough of an opening for what many academics consider the first mainstream comics-style picture book: *In the Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak, published by Harper & Row in 1970.

In the Night Kitchen offers an explicit homage to Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo* comic strip in its use of panels, captions, stylized lettering, color palette, and word balloons. It is very likely the first instance of a picture book narrative told entirely in captions and speech bubbles.⁵ Despite that designation, *In the Night Kitchen* is most often remembered for controversy surrounding the book, as the main character Mickey is fully nude in multiple spreads. Though the book was widely praised in professional reviews and won a number of awards, including a Caldecott Honor in 1971, more media attention was given to a small number of librarians who had diapered Mickey with white tempera paint, as not to offend their patrons.⁶

Despite the critical acclaim for *In the Night Kitchen*, after the book’s publication there was no rush by publishers to acquire comics-influenced picture books, and librarians and educators still viewed comics as a sub-literary genre. Even today comics are treated as an outlier by many academics in children’s literature. Though there is inherent kinship between comics and picture books, very little crossover has occurred between academics in both fields.⁷ In 2012 comics and picture book spheres were finally bridged at a symposium at the Modern Language Association convention in a panel titled “Why Comics Are and Are Not Picture Books.” Later that year Charles Hatfield and Craig Svonkin expanded on that panel by tapping a number of experts in children’s literature to contribute to an extended discussion of the same topic in the Winter issue of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*.⁸ Each of the essays explores the interrelations between

4 Charles Hatfield, “Comic Art, Children’s Literature, and the New Comics Studies,” *Lion And The Unicorn: A Critical Journal Of Children’s Literature* 30, no. 3 (2006): 363, *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 26, 2015)..

5 Philip Nel, “Same Genus, Different Species? Comics and Picture Books,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 446, *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 26, 2015).

6 Kathleen T. Horning, “The Naked Truth,” *School Library Journal* 58, no. 8 (August 2012): 32, *Professional Development Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 11, 2015).

7 Hatfield, “Comic Art,” 364.

8 Charles Hatfield and Craig Svonkin., “Symposium: Why Comics Are and Are Not Picture Books,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2012): 430, *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 26, 2015).

picture books and comics, drawing on rhetorical, semiotic, and intertextual theories of genre in an attempt to distinguish picture books from comics. Many cite examples of “comics-flavored” picture books, but the emphasis on genre leaves much to be explored.

With a focus on aesthetics, the following will explore the ways in which word balloons have been co-opted from comic books to serve picture book narratives. Following the publication of *In the Night Kitchen*, examples of comics-flavored picture books are few and far between. Some of this may be connected to the state of comics during this period. The early 1970s through the mid-'80s is commonly referred to as the Bronze Age of comic books; landmark events included the split of collaborators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, low sales, and the fewest amount of comic book publishers since 1936 (only six comics publishers during this era). DC tried to attract readers by releasing more titles, but due to low sales they found it necessary to drop dozens of titles overnight and cut staff.⁹ It was also during this time that the Direct Market was developed, shifting sales from corner drug-stores and five-and-dimes to a loose network of comic book stores. Many of these comic book stores were located in inconvenient locations, were not well kept, and were not kid friendly.¹⁰ The majority of comics produced during this time were geared towards adult collectors, not children. It was not until the early to mid 2000s that comics publishers began to actively pursue younger readers again. Traditional children's publishers finally began to invest in and acquire comics, leading to the creation of high-profile projects such as Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly's *Little Lit* series launched by HarperCollins in 2000, and Scholastic's graphic novel imprint “Graphix” launched in 2005.¹¹

The late 1990s and early 2000s also marked the period when US librarians began embracing comics. As square-bound trade editions of comics became readily available and graphic novels and manga spiked in popularity, librarians could finally purchase comics in a form that could be properly labeled and cataloged. Trade comics finally were durable enough for the repeated readings endured by a public library book.¹² A generational shift helped this trend, as librarians who grew up reading Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series gained purchasing power and began building collections at their libraries. The creation of the “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” list by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 2007 was another boon to the market. Each year the list features graphic novels and illustrated nonfiction for ages 12-18 and helps libraries find books that audiences like.¹³

9 Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2008): 99-108.

10 Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 114-5.

11 Hatfield, “Comic Art,” 360-1.

12 Sanders, “Chaperoning Words,” 87.

13 Heidi MacDonald, “How Graphic Novels Became the Hottest Section in the Library,” *Publishers Weekly* 260, no. 18 (May 6, 2013): 22, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed May 11, 2015).

Many contemporary picture book creators, whether they be authors, illustrators, or author-illustrators, are influenced by graphic novels from the mid-1980s in the same way that Maurice Sendak was influenced by comic strips like Winsor McKay's *Little Nemo*. A fondness for the medium has led a crop of popular picture book makers to co-opt the language of comics in their own work, and in the past decade comics-flavored picture books have become increasingly common. What is remarkable about this trend is the innovation and variety found in the use of these comic signifiers. The larger format and low word count of the genre has enabled picture book illustrators to think outside the box, especially when utilizing word balloons.

The co-option of comics language by picture books

Before investigating the variety of ways in which word bubbles have been co-opted for picture book narratives, an explanation of speech balloons from a comics perspective is beneficial. As David Carrier explains in *The Aesthetics of Comics*, "The speech balloon is a defining element of the comic because it establishes a word/image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures illustrating a text..."¹⁴ The word bubble is what makes it possible in comics to "deploy many different kinds of verbal information within storytelling visual images."¹⁵ Later on in *The Aesthetics of Comics* he captures the unique nature of this storytelling device:

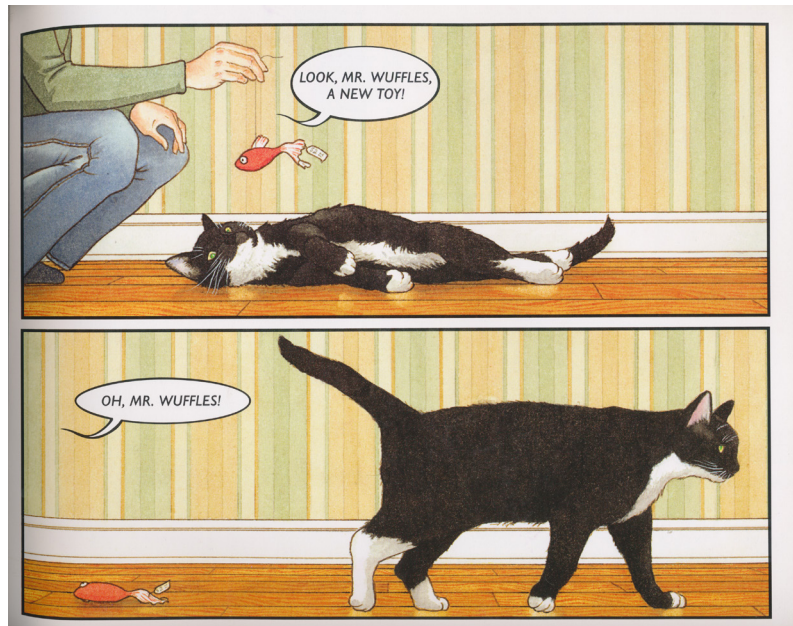
The speech balloon itself, though visible to us like the other depicted elements, is not normally an element in the depicted space; we can see it, but the depicted characters cannot. What in the picture space are words or thoughts in our space become representations thereof within the balloon. The balloon itself, a mere container, does not correspond to any object represented in the picture. That the thoughts or words are surrounded by a rounded shape says nothing about the nature of those thoughts or words. And yet, the specifically visual qualities of balloons also are important. Some are graceful, others chunky; insert too many balloons in the picture, and that space feels crowded. We readily compare and contrast the balloon with the depicted objects surrounding it, observing how its shape does or does not fit into the composition. The balloon thus is not just a neutral container but another element in the visual field. Indeed, even identifying balloons as containers already is to hint at some ways of identifying their expressive significance.¹⁶

14 David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comic*, (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000): 4.

15 Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 2.

16 Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 44.

Figure 1



It has been found that preschool children who do not know how to read possess a visual literacy that distinguishes meaning through the form of the text, its location on the page, and the size and color of the printing.¹⁷ Speech bubbles are a familiar enough convention that preschoolers can translate them into an aural stimulus. Differences in size or depth or color of printed words correspond to differences in volume of the reader's inner voice, so a reader recognizes that passages written in bigger, bolder, and/or capital letters call for a louder voice and vice versa. When words break the borders of speech bubbles, the preschool-aged reader understands that those words convey yelling and shouting.¹⁸ Often the quality of lines formulating printed letters or borders of speech bubbles reveal the psychological state of the character. The signifier acquires a visual dimension that adds to its meaning: curves replaced by an angular shape may signify rage and fury, and when printing appears shaky, it likely signifies some type of panic. A change in color of the text within the speech balloon or the color of the speech balloon itself cues the viewer-reader in to a change in emotional state.¹⁹

Variations in size, color, and shape are ways in which illustrators can alter the visual cues in speech bubbles and impact the tone of the narrative without using words. A book's tone can also be affected by how much of the narrative text is contained within word balloons. In some comics-flavored picture books, text in speech bubbles may be on the same page as narrative text (that is, some of the story is told through speech bubbles and some in text on other areas of

17 Angela Yannicopoulou, "Visual Aspects of Written Texts: Preschoolers View Comics," *L1—Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 4, no. 2 (2004): 170.

18 Yannicopoulous, "Visual Aspects of Written Texts," 171.

19 Yannicopoulous, "Visual Aspects of Written Texts," 172.



Figure 2

the page not encapsulated by a shape). Other books, such as *Mr. Wuffles!* by David Wiesner and Mo Willems' *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* use word balloons to tell the entire narrative. *Mr. Wuffles!* is a particularly interesting example as it is considered a wordless book (though it contains a handful of words, as you can see in Figure 1), and it uses pictograph-type symbols in speech balloons to clue in the reader to the emotional and psychological state of its characters. For a reader who is preliterate, the symbols in these word balloons will make as much sense, if not more, as the words spoken by the human character at the beginning and the end of the story (Figure 2).

Icons in word balloons can also be found in *Billy Twitters and His Blue Whale Problem*, written by Mac Barnett and illustrated by Adam Rex. In this example, seen in Figure 3, the images in the word balloons support the text on the facing page. Even without the text, knowing the title (*Billy Twitters and His Blue Whale Problem*), the viewer can deduce that the character in the bright yellow t-shirt is Billy Twitters, and the classmates surrounding him do not like that his blue whale is taking up space on the playground (the bold red "No" symbol over the whale in the word balloon is a clear indicator of this). Another noteworthy component of speech balloons in *Billy Twitters* is their placement; throughout the book, the faces of Billy's parents are obscured by word or thought bubbles. The first instance of this occurs before the story even starts: a figure soon to be identified as Billy's mother marches across the copyright and dedication page with a thought bubble containing a storm cloud where her face should be (Figure 4). Later on in the story, Billy's father's face is obscured by a speech bubble asking "How was your day at school?" (Figure 5). This purposeful obfuscation of Billy's parents is likely a nod to the headless adults that populate Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* comic strip, as illustrator Adam Rex has previously paid

Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5





Figure 6

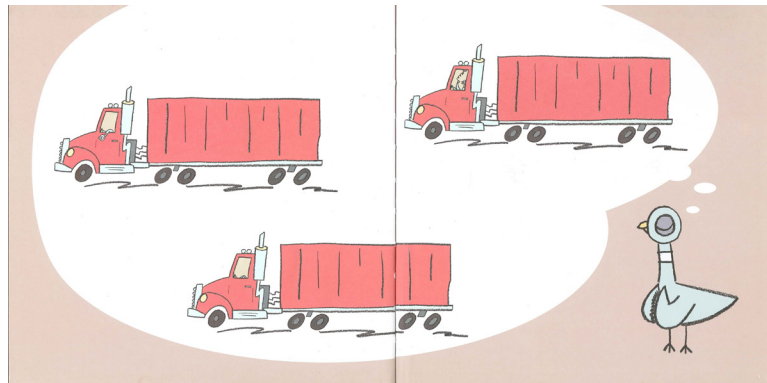


Figure 7

homage to Schultz's characters in his book *Frankenstein Makes A Sandwich*.²⁰

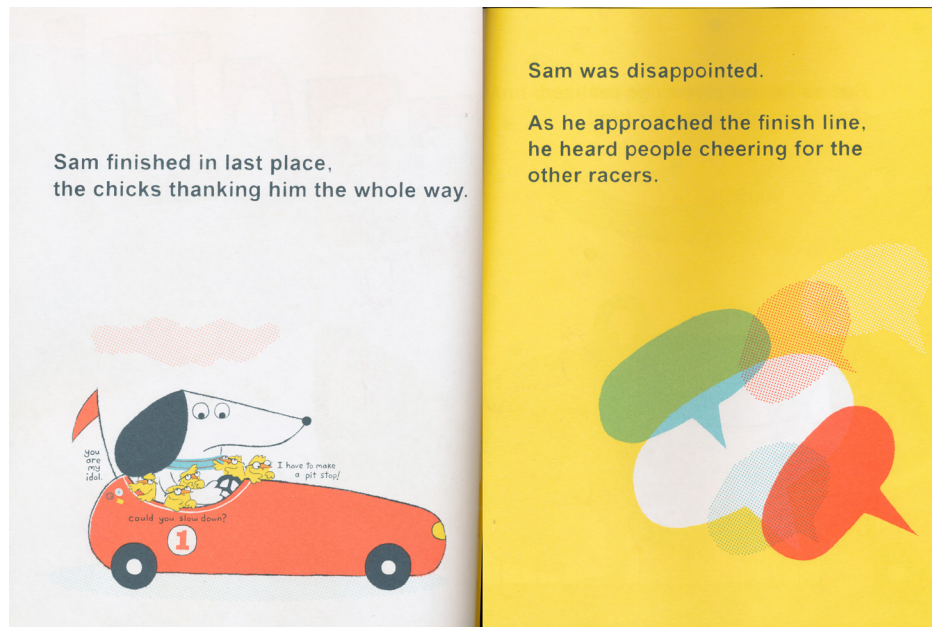
Many of the picture book creators who utilize word balloons for their narratives also use them in paratextual elements of their books. They make an appearance on the copyright and dedication page in *Billy Twitters and His Blue Whale Problem*, and have also been found on covers, back covers, jacket flaps, and endpapers. Author-illustrator Peter Brown uses speech bubbles in tandem with illustrated self-portraits on the back jacket flaps of his books (Figure 6). Mo Willems utilizes speech and thought bubbles in seemingly every paratextual element possible: in *Don't Let The Pigeon Drive the Bus!* the title of the book is in a speech balloon on the front cover, his biography is contained in a speech bubble on the back cover, and the endpapers contain Pigeon thinking about driving a vehicle (which cleverly sets up the book for potential sequels) (Figure 7). In Greg Pizzoli's *Tricky Vic: The Impossibly True Story of the Man Who Sold the Eiffel Tower*, speech bubbles are used as containers for book blurbs. In many instances, especially on back

20 David Friedman, "Interview with Adam Rex, illustrator and author of 'Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich,'" *Ironic Sans* (blog), September 5, 2006. http://www.ironicsans.com/2006/09/interview_with_adam_rex.html.

Figure 8



Figure 9



covers of picture books, the word balloons are used more as a decorative design element than as a form of attribution, as they are not connected to any specific character or thing (Figure 8). The quoted blurbers are not illustrated on the back of *Tricky Vic*, and the speech bubble containing Mo Willems' biography floats on the bottom of the back cover. Though these examples are more decorative than functional, they are a cohesive part of each book's design.

In some picture books, speech bubbles serve as a visual shorthand for sound or noise. In these instances, the shape of the balloon is enough to suggest cheers from a crowd or ambient noise. The former can be found in Greg Pizzoli's *Number One Sam*: a handful of speech bubbles in different colors, sizes, opacities, and patterns are grouped together to visually suggest the "people



Figure 10

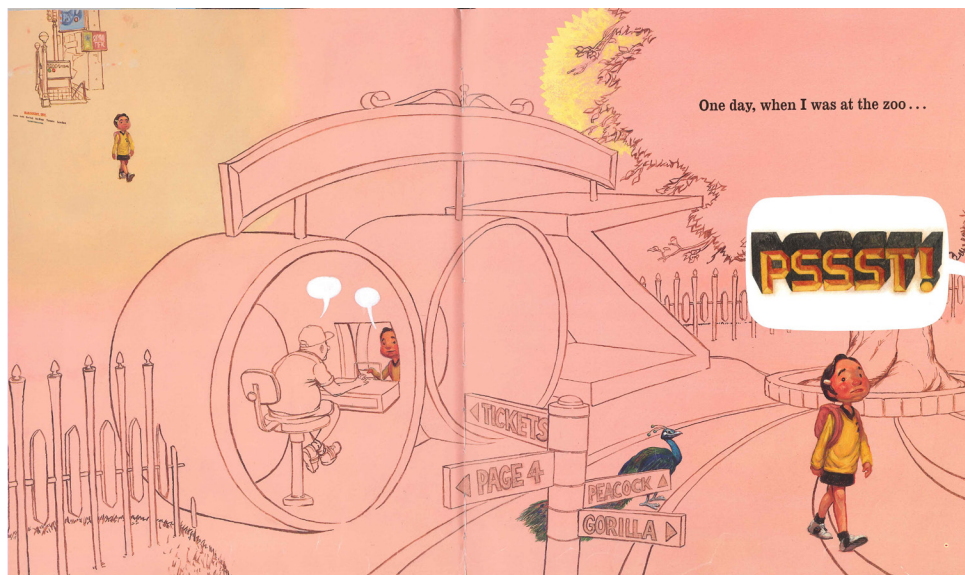


Figure 11

cheering” in the narrative (Figure 9). Here the speech bubbles are a stylish, simple way to suggest a crowd without the need to illustrate them, which complements the minimal illustrations on facing page. A similar example is found in *Those Rebels, John and Tom* by Barbara Kerley and illustrated by Ed Fotheringham. As seen in Figure 10, the shape of the speech bubbles paired with punctuation marks of different sizes and colors is enough to suggest a spirited group conversation. Another example of speech bubbles signifying ambient noise can be found in *Pssst!* by Adam Rex. In Figure 11 word balloons are used to show a conversation has occurred. Since the action taking place can be deduced by visual cues, (the girl is buying a ticket and entering the zoo), there is no need for dialogue within the speech bubbles. On the facing page of the spread,

Figure 12

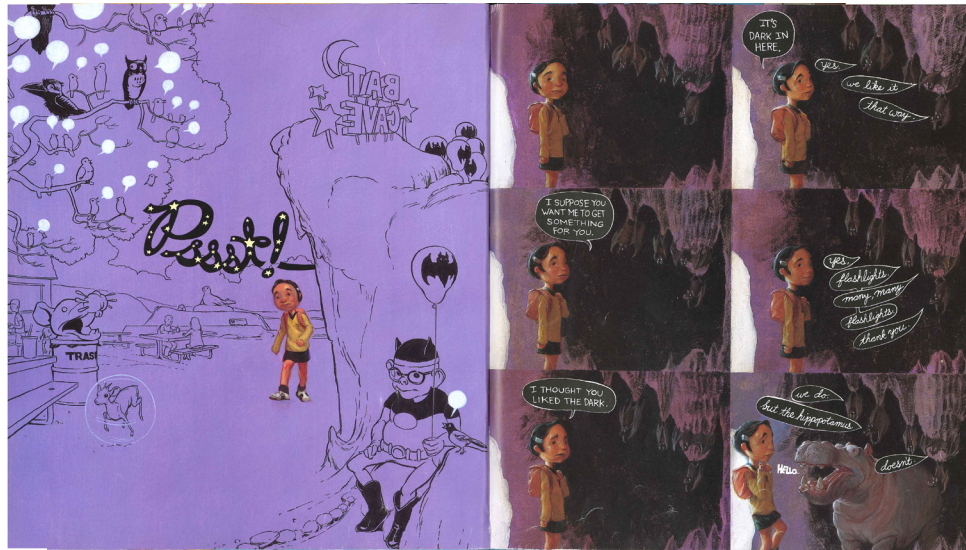


Figure 13



a word balloon is used in the more traditional sense to indicate the speech of a character out of frame. This visual shorthand is repeated several times throughout the book, as seen in Figures 11, 12, 14, and 15.

Rex's *Pssst!* is also an illuminating example of typography within word balloons. In addition to the all-caps hand-lettered wording traditionally found in comics, Rex also employs colors, script, and a wide variety of hand-lettered text to visually identify each animal at the zoo. The bats speak in a cursive text (seen in Figure 12), while the gorilla speaks in bold, blocky capital letters (Figure 13). In addition, each iteration of “Pssst!” in the narrative is connected to the animal following the page turn. Some instances of “Pssst!” are a reflection of the animal’s background, like a Mexican paper cut-style bubble associated with the boar, while other “Pssst!”s are related to what

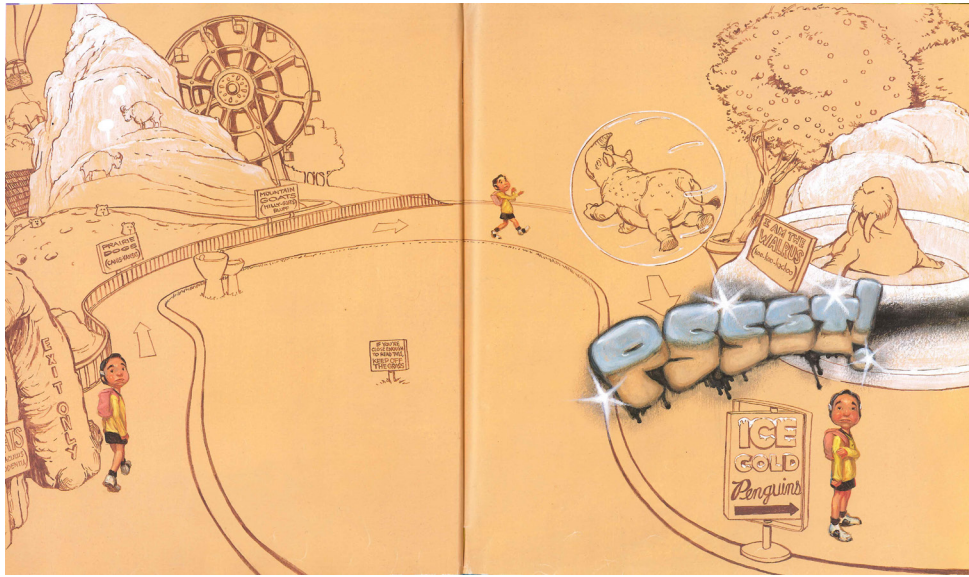


Figure 14

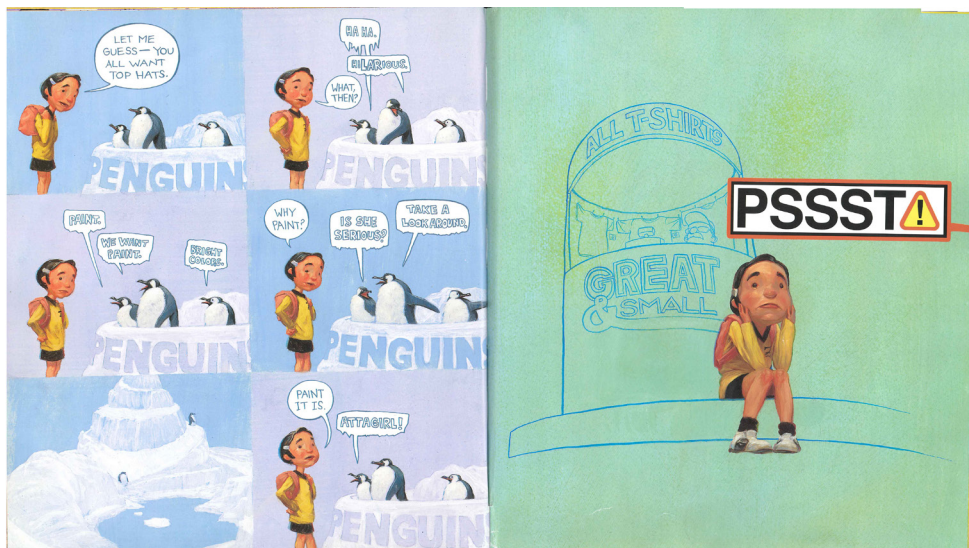


Figure 15

the animal has or needs, like the graffiti-style “Pssst!” associated with the penguins who want paint (Figure 14 and Figure 15). On the opposite end of the typography spectrum is the work of Lisa Brown, who has illustrated books by Cathleen Daly and Lemony Snicket, among others. In her work, as demonstrated in Figure 16, a traditional serif font is used for the dialogue inside speech bubbles and the surrounding narrative text. The size and case of the text inside the word balloon is enough to convey the emotions of the father character. Another interesting aspect of Brown’s work is what the speech bubble looks like. Here the traditional tail of a speech bubble is replaced with a single line that punctures the bubble. Though this style of word balloon deviates from the norm, it is fully functional and clearly indicates to whom the dialogue is attributed.

Figure 16

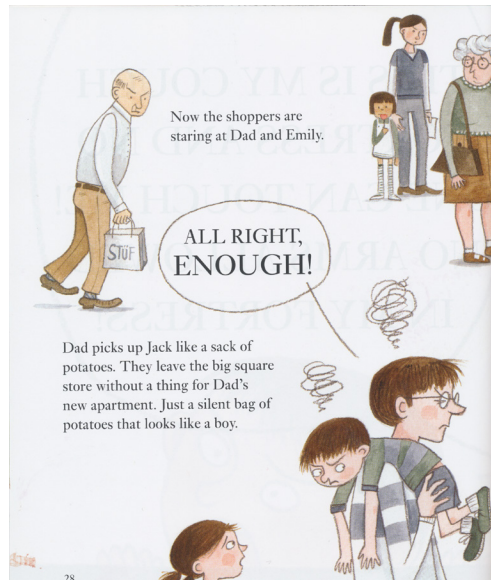


Figure 17



Figure 18

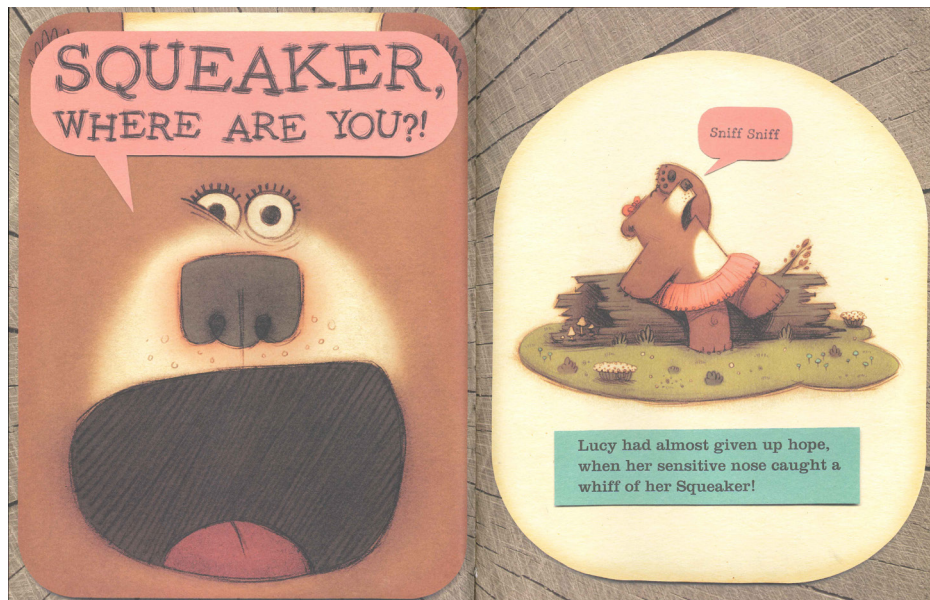




Figure 19



Figure 20

Somewhere between the typography choices of Adam Rex and Lisa Brown is the work of Peter Brown, who mixes computer-created fonts with hand-lettered text. In *My Teacher Is A Monster! (No, I Am Not)*, the display type in the speech bubbles is a font designed to look hand-written, and is paired with a slab serif used for narrative text (Figure 17). In *Children Make Terrible Pets*, the word balloons are hand-lettered by Brown and another slab serif font (Clarendon) is used for the narrative text (Figure 18). *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* receives a similar treatment, where the dialogue in the speech bubbles is hand-lettered and paired with a slab serif font for the narrative text, but in this instance the hand-lettered dialogue in the word balloons is intentionally drawn to mimic the slab serif used for the narrative text. This is done to amplify the instances where Mr. Tiger lets out a “Roar!” in large brushstrokes (Compare the tame animals in Figure 19 to a wild Mr. Tiger in Figure 20). The bright, yellow-orange color of Mr. Tiger and his corresponding

word balloons are used to great effect in this book as well; the color pops against the muted gray-brown tones of his friends and neighbors and their respective speech bubbles.

The examples above are just a handful of ways that authors and illustrators have co-opted the visual language of comics to serve a picture book narrative. With the exception of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, all of the books mentioned were published in the last 5-10 years, and there are many other comics-flavored picture books on the market including work by well-known creators such as Dan Santat and John Rocco. Careful decision-making regarding the size, shape, color, placement, and style of word balloons let them evolve beyond the confines of a comic panel and take on a personality and liveliness apt for a picture book. Artists such as Mo Willems have developed a signature speech balloon style that is easily identifiable and recognizable. As the line between comics and picture book blurs, the potential grows for more complex and visually sophisticated children's literature.

The future of "fusion" texts

Based on the recent influx of comics-flavored picture books and the popularity of their creators, it is likely that this trend of fusing mediums will continue. Kids' comics were a vital piece of the comics industry's nearly 15% overall sales increase in 2012.²¹ The "Diary of A Wimpy Kid" series, which uses a mix of comics and text to tell the narrative, is a consistently strong seller. *Hard Luck*, the eighth book in the series, topped Nielsen Bookscan's charts in 2013, selling over 1.8 million hardcover copies.²²

Fusion texts and comics are doing well sales-wise, and they have become popular with the gatekeepers of children's literature. A Caldecott Honor was awarded to a graphic novel for the first time in 2015 (*This One Summer* illustrated by Jillian Tamaki and written by Mariko Tamaki), and comics-flavored picture books have earned Caldecott Honors over the past few years. That group includes a Caldecott Medal for *The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend* by Dan Santat in 2015, a Caldecott Honor for *Mr. Wuffles!* by David Wiesner in 2014, a Caldecott Honor for *Blackout* by John Rocco in 2012, and a Caldecott Honor for *Interrupting Chicken* by David Ezra Stein in 2011.²³

21 Shannon O'Leary, "'My Little Pony' Leads Kids Comics Charge," *Publishers Weekly* 260, no. 15 (April 15, 2013): 8. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 12, 2015).

22 "'Hard Luck' Top Print Seller in 2013," *Publishers Weekly* 261, no. 1 (January 6, 2014): 6. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 12, 2015).

23 American for Library Service to Children, "Caldecott Medal & Honor Books, 1938-Present," Accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecotthonors/caldecottmedal>.

As each generation of young readers becomes more visually literate than the generation prior, picture books should evolve to a more complex level of design to meet the demands of their viewers. Modern children raised in the increasingly visually intense world of TV, movies, and video are well equipped to handle more complex stories and ideas.²⁴ At this point, the visual language of comics has been co-opted by every level of children's literature. Board books such as *Hug* by Jez Alborough feature word balloons, Mo Willems' "Elephant & Piggie" series is wildly popular for beginning readers, and comic/novel hybrids like the aforementioned "Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series" and its female-protagonist-driven equivalent, "Dork Diaries," have sold exceedingly well. Elements of comics can even be found in the Caldecott-winning tome by Brian Selznick, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Books like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* are a refreshing addition to children's literature, even if booksellers and librarians have some difficulty in determining where to shelve them. Comics-flavored picture books are a catalyst that turns many children and adults, who could read, but didn't want to read, into readers. It appears that these fusion texts will continue to grow in popularity as long as children are interested in reading.

24 Scieszka, Jon. "Design Matters." *The Horn Book Magazine* 74, no. 2 (1998): 196-209. *Professional Development Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 12, 2015).

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