Preservice Teachers’ Responses to Postmodern Picture Books and Deconstructive Reading

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I. Postmodern Picture books and Changing the Mode of Texts and the Role of Readers

Postmodern picture books, for example, *Black and White*¹ (1990) by David Macaulay, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*² (1992) by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, and *The Three Pigs*³ (2001) by David Wiesner, have been catching many young readers’, teachers’, and librarians’ sustaining attentions, being awarded Caldecott medals or Caldecott honor medals in the U.S.. Also, in Britain, *Wolves* (2006), Kate Greenaway Medal book of the year, by Emily Gravett is another metafiction that offers two optional endings, as well as a parodic appropriation of traditional wolf stories. The multi-ending gives freedom and power to the reader. One ending is commonsensical in that the rabbit is victimized and eaten by the wolf. The other is that the wolf turns out to be a vegetarian and lives along with the rabbit happily ever after. The alternative ending utilizes parodic effects, bringing creativity and fun to the story. Today, these postmodern picture books are not unfamiliar to the readers anymore, forming a new trendy genre in the field of children’s literature.

¹ *Black and White* is a 1991 Caldecott Medal book. Each two—page spread is divided into four sections and tells four stories of Seeing Thing, Problem Parents, A Waiting Game, and Udder Chaos respectively, which seemingly may not seem relevant to each other but eventually are all connected.

² *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* is a Caldecott Honor book in 1992, which is comprised of nine non-traditional twists of well known fairy tales such as Cinderella, Jack and the Bean Stalk, The Frog Prince, and The Princess and the Pea, etc.

³ *The Three Pigs* is a 2001 Caldecott Medal book, a twist to the traditional story of The Three Little Pigs, featuring three dimensional comic book—like techniques.
It is not only picture books but novels where postmodern features are employed. For example, Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog* (2003), a detective story successfully touches both child and adult readers through its postmodern experimentation. Stefania Ciocia writes,

Throughout the narrative, Christopher draws our attention to the gap between signifiers and signifieds and to the impossibility of articulating exactly and unambiguously what we mean, thus gently leading the more sophisticated members of his audience to conclude, in poststructuralist fashion, that all language is approximate and figurative to a degree. (328)

Dresang and McClelland question whether postmodern metafiction is a unique experience in reading or if the larger body of children’s literature is shifting and changing. They assert that it is an inevitable process for children to have those types of books, which are intended to challenge and transform the conventions of books in the digital age. Dresang acclaims *Black and White* (1990) as a “prototype” of literature for a young person of the electronic age. She goes on to say that “It is the embodiment of profound and unalterable change in literature for young people. Understanding Black and White is a journey toward understanding literature in relation to how children approaching a new millennium are thinking and perceiving” (704). If this argument on postmodern metafiction is thought to be right, we might question, “How do postmodern metafiction picture books challenge metanarratives in children’s literature? And what implications might reading them have for language and literacy education?

It is not easy for us to be aware of how norms and conventions of children’s literature are made and changed in a certain way. It would not be until the conventions and norms in children’s literature are challenged or broken, as metafiction intends to, that we can realize them. Reading postmodern picture books can provide a good opportunity for child readers to be exposed to a broad range of reading experience other than traditional ones due to its postmodern and metafictive attributes such as juxtapositions, intertextuality, multinarratives, performity, and indecisiveness in form and content. Many studies have been done focusing on child readers’ responses to postmodern picture books and their possible pedagogical implications for child readers (see McClay; Pantaleo; Serafini; O’Neil), revealing how young readers possess full capability to appreciate them. For example, O’Neil asserts that reading metafiction can offer a