

Voices of the stinky cheese man: a comparative study of two postmodern picture books

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Abstract: *This paper is a comparative study of two picture books which demonstrate postmodern tendencies. The paper is structured into three parts. I will begin with a presentation of the characteristics of the metafictional devices used by writers and illustrators in postmodern picture books. The second part will compare the two picture books chosen in terms of postmodern readings and will identify and explore the metafictional devices that I have noticed within each text. Finally, I will discuss the two texts in terms of relevancy to classroom teaching, using the Four Resource Model framework developed by Freebody and Luke (Freebody, 1992). In order to demonstrate the classroom application of the chosen texts, examples of how the texts can be used within each of the four areas of the framework will be given. An appendix, which includes the plot summary of the two books, precedes the references list.*

Keywords: *children's books, postmodernism, metafictional devices, pedagogy, reading, Four Resource Model*

I. Metafictional devices in postmodern picture books and their relationship to multiliteracies

For a better understanding of the subject matter of this section, it is important to define the terms 'new literacies / multiliteracies', 'postmodern picture books,' and 'metafiction.'

According to Semali (2001), 'new literacies' are those literacies that have emerged in the post-typographic era and which include,

alongside printed text, moving images and graphics. The most frequent new literacies in the post-typographic era are computer, information, media, television and visual literacies. Due to constant change and evolution, Semali (2001) admits that creating an absolute definition to a term as wide as new literacies is unwanted.

The New London Group introduced the term ‘multiliteracy’ to refer “the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity” (New London Group, 1996). In fact, multiliteracies also refer to the different new literacies (Hill, 2008) defined above.

In ‘postmodern picture books,’ the authors and the illustrators make use of devices that challenge the reader to come up with their own interpretation of the text, thus defying the reader’s expectations and encouraging thinking skills that lead to the construction of new and different meanings (Colker, 2008).

Waugh (1984) defined ‘metafiction’ as the “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (p. 2). Using a range of metafictional devices, which can make use of both verbal and visual techniques, the postmodern text draws the reader’s attention to the fictional characteristic of the story (Pantaleo, 2005). These metafictional devices have an “interdependent and synergistic relationship” (Pantaleo, 2004, p. 218) and thus sometimes literacy researchers discuss them collectively.

The twenty-first century has been described as the century of change, with major implications in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the students (Anstey, 2002b). Literacy educators (New London Group, 1999) have reached the conclusion that such changes in our society require changes in the way teachers view literacy, thus building a case for the importance of new literacies / multiliteracies. Because of their use of metafictional devices, postmodern children’s books can be used by educators to teach new literacies (Anstey, 2002b).

According to Anstey (2002a), Pantaleo (2005, 2004), authors and illustrators of postmodern picture books make use of the following metafictional devices: obtrusive narrators, multiple narrators, multiple or multistranded narratives, narrative framing devices (stories within stories), non-linear and non-sequential plots, indeterminacy, intertextuality, using a variety of illustrative styles, nontraditional

design and layout, typographic experimentation, description of the creative process, mixing of genres, and parody.

Through the use of metafictional devices, authors and illustrators distance the readers from the text, and underline the fictional quality of the work which results in the reader taking upon a more interactive and interpretative role. Due to the fact that metafictional texts make references to their fictional status, one major characteristic of metafiction is its self-reflexiveness and self-consciousness. The fictional reality of the text is revealed through the use of illustrations which do not necessarily need to be in conjunction with the words of the text. This is why the metafictional devices in postmodern books require a higher level of engagement and greater attention to how meaning is created (Pantaleo, 2004).

Metafictional devices give the readers the power to distance themselves from the text, thus breaking free of traditional reading expectations and practices. Through the use of metafiction, postmodern picture books help students to become better readers (Pantaleo, 2004) and be better prepared to understand texts that are part of the twenty-first century multiliteracies (Anstey, 2002a).

II. Comparison of two postmodern picture books

This section will compare two post modern picture books that employ the similar metafictional devices. The two books are *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith.

Pantaleo (2004, 2005) has described in detail the metafictional devices used by Anthony Browne in *Voices in the Park*. They are as follows: interconnecting multiple narratives, multiple narrators or multiple characters focalisers, narrative framing devices, disruption of traditional time and space relationships in the narrative, non-linear and non-sequential plots, intertextuality, indeterminacy, parody, and typographic experimentation.

O'Connor (1995) has identified the following metafictional devices in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*: indeterminacy, parody, intertextuality, surrealism, irony, and excess. To this, I have also found examples of the following metafictional devices: interconnecting multiple narratives, multiple narrators or multiple characters focalisers, narrative framing devices, disruption of traditional

time and space relationships in the narrative, non-linear and non-sequential plots, and typographic experimentation.

Basically, all the metafictional devices identified by Pantaleo (2004, 2005) in *Voices in the Park* are also present in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. These common elements of metafiction, which only draw the reader's attention to the status of the text as fiction (Pantaleo, 2004), will be identified and their implications on the readings of the texts explored.

- narrative framing devices (stories within stories)

Examples of narrative framing devices abound in both *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. In *Voices in the Park*, the author tells his story through the eyes of four different characters. Thus, at the end of the book, the readers make sense of the overall story by making connection between each of the characters' stories. Similarly, in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* we can identify a main story that is being told with the use of other, apparently not connected, stories.

Voices in the Park is made up of four chapters which tell the readers a story about a walk in the park. Each chapter is written from the point of view of the four characters involved in the story: a mother and her son (Charles), and a father and his daughter (Smudge). The same technique is used in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. The narrator, Jack, himself a character in one of the stories (*Jack's Bean Problem*), tries to tell the reader some "Fairly Stupid Tales," but he is constantly interrupted by Little Red Hen's complaints of lack of recognition.

However, there are differences in the number of stories used to tell the story of each book. While in *Voices in the Park* the reader can identify four stories that make up the overall story, in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, the authors chose to tell nine stories. The interventions of an obtrusive narrator, who builds on the main story from before the title page and in the Introduction, can also be considered a tenth story, that of the narrator's journey in telling his story.

- interconnecting multiple narratives

In order to create a cohesive story, the narratives of the stories in *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* are interconnected. The interconnectedness includes both textual and visual references.

Most of the interconnecting references between the four stories in *Voices in the Park* are visual. This is partly due to the fact that Browne chose to accompany the illustrations with just a few sentences or even no words at all. In contrast, the illustrations from *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* are heavily supported by text, but, nevertheless, just as in Browne in *Voices in the Park*, Scieszka does sometimes use just a few sentences on one page or even leaves entire pages blank.

The visual intrusions in *Voices in the Park* have the role of foreshadowing the role of the various characters of the story. For example, the most obvious intrusion in the illustration on the second page of *First Voice* is the mouth of the dog on the right-hand side and the tip of the boy's shoes on the left-hand side of the page. On the third page of the same chapter, on the left-hand side of the illustration, sitting on the bench, part of the girl's arm and leg can be seen. On the third page of *First Voice*, on the left-hand side of the illustration we see a man in rags, reading a newspaper (Simandan, M., personal communication, July 28, 2008). All these intrusions tell part of the story of the other three characters, the boy, the girl and the man, who will all be introduced to the reader with their own narrative. But, these narratives are also built upon the narratives of the other stories told in the book, thus creating a myriad of interconnecting references, explored later in this section under intratextuality.

Similarly, examples of visual elements that create interconnecting narratives can also be given from *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. Little Red Hen, the narrator, the Giant, and the Rabbit are spotted by the reader in illustrations meant for other stories. To give just one example, the hair that Rabbit grows as part of his race with the Tortoise metamorphoses into the first letter of the story about the Stinky Cheese Man.

However, in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, there are also several textual references that interconnect its narratives. The book begins with Little Red Hen asking the narrator to help her plant the wheat, only to be given the following reply: "And no, I can't help you plant the wheat. I'm a very busy guy trying to put a book together. Now why don't you just disappear for a few pages. I'll call when I need you" (Scieszka, 1992). In this example we have three different narratives: the Little Red Hen's, the narrator's (the one who is

in charge of putting the book together) and Jack's (the main character in the story *Jack's Bean Problem*).

- multiple narrators and multiple characters focalisers

Previously I have discussed the narrative framing devices of *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* which basically tell a story within another story. These metafictional devices are made possible by the use of multiple narrators and multiple characters focalisers. Each narrator comes with his or her own voice, obviously each time told from a different point of view. As mentioned earlier, the different protagonists who present their version of the story are the mum, Charles, the father, and Smudge in *Voices in the Park* and a plethora of character focalisers, among them Little Red Hen, Jack, and Giant in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*.

- non-linear and non-sequential plots (including narrative discontinuities)

Due to the metafictional devices analysed above, Pantaleo (2004) argues for the fact that the narrative in Browne's *Voices in the Park* is non-linear and non-sequential. Readers will make sense of what really happens in the book by looking beyond the written words and constantly referring back and forth to previous illustrations (Simandan, M., personal communication, August 12, 2008). Similarly, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* includes several narrative discontinuities, among which the inclusion of the Table of Contents after the first story and the absence from the book of *The Boy Who Cried "Cow Patty"*, a story which, according to the Table of Contents should have ended the book. Instead, Scieszka ends the book with Jack, the narrator, fleeing the scene in order to avoid being eaten by Giant.

- disruption of traditional time and space relationships in the narrative

In both *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, the shifts in point of view bring along temporal and spatial differences. For example, in *Voices in the Park*, the seasons and part of the day change depending on who is telling the story, a technique used by Browne in order to better portray how each character feels. Nevertheless, the reader understands that the two parents took their children and dogs for walk in the park at the same time. In *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* the disruption of time and

space are obvious from the very beginning, with two of the characters from the stories being introduced to the reader before the title page.

- indeterminacy

The non-linear and non-sequential plots lead to disruption of traditional time and space relationships in the narrative which in turn create indeterminacies (Pantaleo, 2004). According to Anstey (2002), indeterminacies can be found in setting, plot, character, and visual and illustrative text. Both *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* make use of this metafictional device that eventually gives the readers the opportunity to interpret the books in several different ways (Pantaleo, 2004).

Among the many indeterminacies I spotted (Simandan, M., personal communication, July 28-31, 2008) in *Voices in the Park* are the queen and the poor man walking towards each other, the shadow of the crocodile, the faces in the trees, the post lamp in the forest, and the whale in the trees. Apart from these are also the different seasons and times of the days also mentioned earlier.

Similarly, visual and textual indeterminacies can also be found in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*: the start of the story, the title page, the dedication, the contents page numbers falling on Chicken Liken head, the map of Florida on the tongue of the frog, labels with the scientific names of the insects, and the missing characters in *The Red Running Shorts* to name just a few.

- intertextuality

The narrative in *Voices in the Park* consists of both intertextual and intratextual references (Pantaleo, 2004). The same can be said about *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*.

Some of the visual intratextual references that I have identified (Simandan, M., personal communication, July 28-31, 2008) in *Voices in the Park* are as follows: the mouth of the mongrel, the girl's clothes, the two tall buildings and the hats. Alternatively, in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* intratextuality is achieved by characters interfering with stories in which they are not supposed to be present, such as Little Red Hen in *Jack's Bean Problem*.

There are also many intertextual references in both books. In *Voices in the Park*, the illustrations make reference to children's book (e.g. *Mary Poppins*), to movies (e.g. *King Kong*) and to art (e.g. *Mona Lisa*). In *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* the authors make intertextual references to a variety of fairy tales and

nursery rhymes (Todd, n.d.), such as *Ugly Duckling*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* to name just a few.

- typographic experimentation

Examples of typographic experimentation can be found in both books under analysis. In *Voices in the Park*, Browne used the font type to reflect each character's personalities (Pantaleo, 2004 and Simandan, M., personal communication, July 28-31, 2008). In *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, the typographic experimentation is taken to extremes, with characters crushing with their feet the dialogue, words falling off the Table of Contents and the Little Red Hen's dialogue being as red as the hen's body. The narrator even points out a few in the text, such as the Table of Contents and when Giant speaks in capital letters.

- parody

Just as with the other metafictional devices discussed above, parody elements can be found in *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* which are both visual and textual. Some examples of visual parodies to be found in *Voices in the Park* are as follows: the shadow of the mother as a howling wolf, the begging Santa Claus, Munch's *Scream* on the front page of the father's newspaper, as well as the boy's reflection on the slide (Simandan, M., personal communication, July 28-31, 2008). Similarly, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* abounds in examples of parodies, such as the dedication page (e.g., "Who ever looks at that dedication stuff anyway?") and the introduction (e.g., "In fact, you should definitely go read the stories now, because the rest of this introduction just kind of goes on and on and doesn't really say anything.")

To sum up, the use of the metafictional devices discussed in this section make both *Voices in the Park* and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* highly interactive and open to interpretation.

III. Application to classroom using the Four Resource Model framework

In this last section of the paper I will discuss the two texts in terms of relevancy to classroom using the Four Resource Model framework developed by Freebody and Luke (Freebody, 1992). The following four roles have been identified for successful readers in a postmodern culture: code breaker (coding competence - How do I crack the code of this text?), meaning maker (semantic competence - What does this text mean?), text

user (pragmatic competence - What do I do with this text in this present context?), text critic (critical competence - What does this text do to me?) (Freebody & Luke, 1999).

Following, examples of how the two books analysed in the previous section can be used within each of the four areas of the framework will be given. All the activities suggested below have been designed for a class of 20, Grade 5 students, but are easily applicable to any levels. With the exception of the last activity, the students are divided into four groups of five. Two groups are assigned *Voices in the Park*, while the other two *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. One student in each group is chosen to represent the group and to record the group's findings and, later on, share them with the representative of the other group that analysed the same book.

- code breaker

The question that each group will have to explore in order to develop code breaking strategies is: "Which words do you think are interesting?" (*Four Resource Questions*, 2008). In their groups, the students brainstorm ideas and the group representative writes down the words that appeal to them. Once they have completed this task, the teacher asks the students to give an explanation of what the words mean in their contexts. The representative take notes once again. While the students are on task, the teacher monitors and gives advices and assistance where needed.

After the students have completed the activity, the representatives of each group share their ideas with the groups that analysed the same book. Once back in their original groups, the entire class helps to put up a list of interesting words taken from the two books. This list can be used later on by the teacher as the weekly spelling list.

- meaning maker

The question that each group will have to explore in order to develop meaning making strategies is: "What are the characters thinking or feeling?" (*Four Resource Questions*, 2008) Each group is given the possibility of choosing two characters that they would like analyse in terms of their emotions. After the students have completed the activity, the representatives of each group present their findings in front of the class. With visual support from the book, the presentations can generate lively discussions in which the teacher can take the role of facilitator and mediator.

- text user

The question that each group will have to explore in order to develop text using strategies is: "If you were going to put this text on the web, what changes would you make?" (*Four Resource Questions*, 2008) The teacher

can collaborate with the Information Technology teacher so that the students brainstorm for ideas in the class, and put the text on the web with the desired changes in the computer room.

- text critic

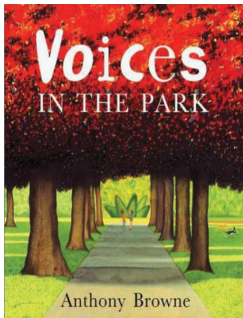
The question that each student will have to individually explore in order to develop text analysing strategies is: “What would the trip to the park be like in 2010?” (*Classroom organization*, 2002) for *Voices in the Park*, and “How would the book be different if the narrator had been Little Red Hen and not Jack?” for *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. The students have to draw one scene from that book that affirms their answers. On completion, their work can be displayed and scrutinized? by the entire class

Summing up

This paper has discussed the characteristics of metafictional devices used by writers and illustrators in postmodern picture books. Two picture books have been compared in terms of the metafictional devices noticed within each text. Finally, the two texts have been analysed in terms of relevancy to classroom use using the Four Resource Model framework developed by Freebody and Luke (Freebody, 1992).

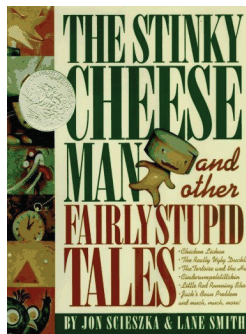
Appendix

Plot summary



Voices in the Park (1998) by Anthony Browne tells the story of a walk in the park. It starts by introducing the mother and her son, Charles, who take their pedigree dog, called Victoria to the park. At the same time, a father and his daughter, Smudge, take their mongrel, Albert, to the same park. The two families meet in the park.

The two dogs immediately start chasing each other, the two children eventually play together, but the two adults ignore each other. The story ends with Charles having to go home as his mother disapproves of his friendship with Smudge.



The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales (1992) by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith consists of nine stories that mainly retell well known fairy tales. The stories are regularly interrupted by Jack, the narrator, and Little Red Hen who have their own stories to tell. The collections of these funny “stupid

tales” include: Chicken Licken, The Princess and the Bowling Ball, The Really Ugly Duckling, The Other Frog Prince, Little Red Running Shorts, Jack’s Bean Problem, Cinderumpelstiltskin, The Tortoise and the Hair, and The Stinky Cheese Man.

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