READING THE VISUAL: 
THE ROLE OF PICTUREBOOKS IN FACILITATING YOUNG ADULT LITERACY 

by 

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF 
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF 

MASTER OF ARTS 

in 

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES 
(Language and Literacy Education) 

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA 
(Vancouver) 

October 2011 

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have examined the ways in which images in picturebooks aid in the development of positive attitudes towards reading. Additionally, studies have shown the ways that illustrations in picturebooks help readers to connect with literature and to comprehend themes and concepts that might otherwise be difficult to deconstruct. This study investigated whether images in a sample of three complex picturebooks: *Fox* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan and *The Island* by Armin Greder might be used to support struggling readers in the secondary school classroom.

Perry Nodelman’s (1988; 2003) theory of narrative art was used as a framework for a close reading of three sample texts. The decision to use this framework was based on the desire to develop a manageable framework for students that would enable them to confidently read the visual elements of complex picturebooks. Specific elements of Nodelman’s theory: format and design, mood and atmosphere, style of illustrations and visual objects were identified as being elements that can be taught and be plausibly grasped by secondary-aged readers.

This study supports the notion that complex picture books provide a valuable resource for teachers to engage secondary-aged readers in critical thought through analysis of the images in these texts.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This degree and thesis would not have been possible without the positive reinforcement and support from my family and friends. I would like to thank my parents and brother for all their encouragement, my North Van crew for listening to my ramblings while plausibly feigning interest, and my colleagues at Balmoral for cheering me on. I would especially like to thank my partner, David, for sharing my academic growing pains, as we began and completed our degrees at the same time.

I truly enjoyed my coursework for this degree, and benefited greatly from the teaching style and infectious enthusiasm for children’s literature of Kathie Shoemaker, Theresa Rogers and Trish Weaver.

A hearty and well-deserved thank you goes out to Margot Filipenko, who handily took the reins as my thesis advisor and did everything she could to aid and abet in the writing of my thesis. I also very much appreciated my committee: the pensive, detailed and speedy editing of Judith Saltman, and the thoughtful questions of Margaret Early.

Thank you all, it could not have been done without you.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As children growing up in Kamloops, my brother and I had a summer tradition: once the holidays arrived, the television was unplugged, and we were in the outdoors until autumn came. Part of the tradition was reading. We were read to, and later we read to each other – at the lake, in the yard, sprawled out under the chestnut trees in the park along the river. My brother and I would drag our favourite picturebooks from the shelves to re-live the images and words over and over, and if our parents were busy, we would “read” the illustrations to each other. I recall creating a pulley-system over the branches of the maple tree (appropriately named “Mable”), so that I could perch among the leaves like a monkey in the tree’s heights, pulling up a basket-full of books and perusing my favourites. Hot mornings in the air-conditioned library, making our selections and earning our stickers for Summer Reading Club turned into hot afternoons in the shaded grass, meeting new characters and discovering their stories.

Our house was always full of books and art; not because we were wealthy, but because we had library cards and an artist aunt. I grew up with an appreciation for visual art and the feeling that visuals can be narrative, which is why I consider picturebooks to be a form of art – art that tells a story. The story that most interests me now still has to do with picturebooks, and I’m hoping to discover how can they be relevant to older readers when their images are interpreted using a simplified theoretical framework.

Given my love for literature, moving into a career as a secondary school English teacher seemed obvious. I continue to have a passion for reading which I have endeavoured to
support in my students, but many have difficulty engaging deeply with written texts. I continue to feel affection for picturebooks and, through my graduate studies, I have come to believe that the visual elements of picturebooks can support young adult readers in a deeper understanding of the elements of narrative. This study focuses on the ways in which picturebooks can support the literacy or reading development of young adults.

Significance of the study

Studies that examine the effects of images on readers have determined that illustrations aid in development of positive attitudes towards reading, in turn helping readers acquire a response and connection to literature. This connection allows for readers to think critically, developing cognition and an understanding of the aesthetic experience of a book. In addition, the illustrations in sophisticated picturebooks enhance the textual narrative and allow for deeper understanding of themes and concepts that might otherwise be difficult to deconstruct.

I have also noted, however, that while many researchers have provided in-depth analyses of picturebooks for young children or of graphic novels for young adult readers, there is a gap in the research when it comes to studies analyzing complex picturebooks for young adults. It is my intention to fill this gap by undertaking a close reading of a small sample of picturebooks intended to attract young adult readers. To that end, this study examines three complex picturebooks that appeal to young adult readers; Fox by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, The Rabbits by Shaun Tan and James
Marsden, and *The Island* by Armin Greder. The purpose of this close reading is to examine how these texts could help to enrich secondary-level classroom lessons and to demonstrate the legitimacy of picturebooks as appropriate reading material for secondary students.

In my own teaching, I often use picturebooks when highlighting difficult concepts such as complex themes. The images help clarify main literary elements as well as aid students who otherwise struggle with inference. In being able to interpret theme through the illustrations, visual learners are placed on a level playing field with their literary-minded peers.

My investigation and its findings can inform practice in secondary school English curricula, specifically in aiding students to think critically and develop visual literacy when analyzing literature. It is my hope that this close reading, using Perry Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of narrative art as a critical lens, will enrich my teaching strategies and, in turn, potentially provide a platform for connections to be made in the secondary classroom between sophisticated picturebooks and the canon of English literature.

**Definitions of terminology**

**Picturebook**

For the purpose of this study, I use the compound term “picturebook” (Marantz, 1997; Lewis, 2001). The term “picturebook” as opposed to “picture book” or “picture-book,” should be a compound word according to Sipe (2007), because it “recognizes the
union of text and art that results in something beyond what each form separately contributes” (Sipe, 2007, p. 273). I agree with his argument that the picturebook is not as simple as a book that “happens to have pictures” (Sipe, 2007), which is why I choose to use the compound form “picturebook” throughout this study.

**Young Adult**

The term “young adult” can be problematic because it is capable of encompassing a wide range of ages, however in this study, I intend the term to signify ages twelve to eighteen, the average age of high school students in British Columbia (grades eight to twelve).

**Postmodern Picturebook**

The term postmodern picturebook refers to the non-traditional plot structure and non-linear format employed by a sophisticated group of postmodern or contemporary authors and illustrators (Goldstone 2002).

**Intruder**

In this study, the term “intruder” is intended to represent a character that is interfering with the world or setting of the picturebook. These intruders may be presented as either the protagonist or the antagonist, but it is the intruder character that causes conflict.
Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the visual narrative of the three primary texts in order to inform educational practices for the incorporation of sophisticated picturebooks in the secondary classroom. Questions guiding this literary analysis are the following:

a) In what ways do the visual elements of these three texts, specifically format and design, mood and atmosphere, style of illustration and visual objects engage the reader and direct the narrative?

b) How is the identity of the intruder character visually constructed within the three primary texts?

c) How might a close reading of the three primary texts aid in legitimizing sophisticated picturebooks as appropriate for young adult readers?

Rationale for selection of primary texts

When deciding which picturebooks to use as primary texts in this study, I began with a search for picturebook texts that were appropriate for young adult readers. I also wanted the picturebook illustrations to be high quality, so I sought out texts that received awards for their illustrations, or awards for their textual and visual unity.

I knew that I wanted to include Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks’ *Fox*. *Fox* was the 2001 recipient of the CBCA Australian Picture Book of the Year, the NSW Premier's Literary Award, and the IBBY Outstanding Book for Young People with Disabilities (www.kanemiller.com). The CBCA (Children’s Book Council of Australia) award is an
especially high honor, as the award "will be made to outstanding books of the picture book genre" (www.cbca.org.au).

In Fox, the illustrations’ texture, their wild qualities yet sense of restraint have appealed to me for a long time and still affect me each time I read this book. I first encountered Fox in 2004, and was surprised it had been in publication since 2001 (in North America). During my education degree, which I pursued at UBC from 2004-2005, we had a presentation assignment; choose any book and read it (or a section of it) out loud to our classmates. The point of the presentation was to gauge our comfort level when reading to others, as many teachers do every day, and our classmates were to give us feedback on our volume, inflection, ability to connect with the story and hold the audience’s attention. One of my classmates read us Fox, and by the end of the story, we realized we had all leaned forward to catch the final lines, “Slowly, jiggety-hop, she begins the long journey home” (Fox, 29), which she spoke in a whisper, to great effect. My classmate’s excellent presentation style drove me to find the book and re-read it myself, but it is Wild’s heartbreaking characters and Brooks’ unsettling illustrations that have held my attention over the years.

Once I had decided to work with complex picturebooks for young adults, a choice partially inspired by Fox, I chose three picturebooks, a manageable sample. I knew I wanted to use something illustrated by Shaun Tan, an amazingly talented and imaginative artist. Tan is the 2011 recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, given to writers, illustrators, and promoters of reading whose work creates an interest
in children’s and young people’s literature (www.alma.se/en). While Tan’s award-winning *The Red Tree* was an excellent candidate, it wasn’t exactly what I was looking for, perhaps because the protagonist of *The Red Tree* is a child, therefore making the picturebook appear more appropriate for children than for young adult readers. I also considered using *The Arrival*, but I set it aside; there is so much depth to that stunning, wordless text I knew it would somehow be overwhelming to write about in conjunction with other picturebooks – *The Arrival* feels like it could be a thesis in itself. I chose *The Rabbits*, which is illustrated by Tan but authored by John Marsden, a book about colonialism and settlement that makes for a thought-provoking social studies or Canadian culture (ESL social studies) classroom resource. *The Rabbits* is also a winner of the CBCA Australian Picture Book of the Year, which it received in 1999. This text also won the Aurealis Conveners’ Award for Excellence and the Spectrum Gold Award for Book Illustration (http://www.lothian.com.au).

I came across *The Rabbits* in 2006 with the help of a Kidsbooks staff member when I was searching for a picturebook to read with my English as a Second Language students for a unit on Canadian settlers. *The Rabbits* has proven to be an excellent classroom resource time and again, and it is a picturebook that I often give as a gift to teacher friends.

My first primary text choices were easy to make; picturebooks that I have known and enjoyed for years as an adult reader. My third choice was more difficult, because there were still so many contenders for that final spot. I decided against Chris Van
Allsburg’s *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, whose illustrations I have used in my classroom as creative writing prompts, because of the lack of narrative plot. In his introduction to this unique book, Van Allsburg explains that a mysterious “Mr. Burdick”, who left his drawings with a children’s book publisher, created the illustrations…and never returned again. Each of the fourteen drawings is left entirely open to the interpretation of the audience, except for a title and caption left by Mr. Burdick. Many stories have been inspired by Burdick’s artwork, which was his hope when he reproduced them in book form. While this is a great classroom resource, it doesn’t lend itself to a literary analysis in the same way as *Fox* or *The Rabbits*.

I played with the idea of working with Stéphane Jorisch’s illustrated version of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” (part of the *Visions in Poetry* series, published by Kids Can Press.) This entire series is excellent for use in the secondary English classroom; the books are wonderful for gaining student interest around poetry, and they help students to deconstruct famous poems on a whole new level. I didn’t, however, want to analyze any texts that were retellings of previously published works; I wanted to work with original, narrative picturebooks. This decision also ruled out Marianna Mayer and Lynn Bywaters’ *William Shakespeare’s The Tempest* and Ian Wallace’s illustrated version of *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*, based on lyrics written by Gordon Lightfoot. I also decided against the Zen-inspired (and beautifully illustrated) *The Three Questions*, written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth because of its roots in Tolstoy’s short story of the same title.
My toughest decisions came when I chose between Armin Greder’s *The Island* (which is the third primary text of my visual analysis), Eve Bunting and David Frampton’s *Riding the Tiger*, an allegorical picturebook about conformity, and *Woolvs in the Sitee* by Margaret Wild, illustrated by Anne Spudvilas. *Riding the Tiger* seems like it would be an excellent book to use in classroom discussions about temptation, power and even drug use, but the boy protagonist’s first person point of view didn’t fit with the narrative structure of the first two books, so I chose *The Island* instead. *Woolvs in the Sitee* is an excellent sophisticated picturebook that conveys multiple narratives through phonetically spelled words and dark charcoal and watercolour illustrations. Like many advanced picturebooks, it leaves room for the reader to negotiate a variety of meanings. It is not intended for beginning readers, but for older students who are ready to play with figurative language, and are working with literary terms and images such as metaphor, motif and symbolism. In terms of visual literacy, *Woolvs in the Sitee* offers opportunities for challenging exploration in a secondary classroom. Obviously, this text would have been a great choice for a close reading, but I did not want to use two books with the same author (Margaret Wild, who also wrote *Fox*), so I kept *Fox* and let the *Woolvs* go.

*The Island*, written and illustrated by Amin Greder, was introduced to me by Kathryn Shoemaker in her illustrated literature class. *The Island* was short listed for the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award in 2008 (www.allenandunwin.com), and I liked the dark atmosphere of it. I felt the overall message Greder portrays through the
narrative had a lot to work with, and it fit with the motif of intrusion that both Fox and The Rabbits possess. It’s interesting to note that the three primary texts are all authored and illustrated by Australians; this was not part of my decision-making process, I only realized this commonality after I’d chosen the books. In terms of selection criteria, I did not initially realize that The Island is originally a German publication, and was translated into English in 2007 when published by Australian publishing house Allen and Unwin. The author/illustrator, Armin Greder, is Swiss-German, but he immigrated to Australia in 1971 and has lived there ever since. Although Greder is not Australian-born, his picturebook The Island expresses many concepts I wanted to explore and it fits well with the other two primary texts. Despite being published in Australia was not part of my criteria for choosing the three primary texts, I realize this shared aspect of Fox, The Rabbits and The Island should be acknowledged, and I have included a section on Australian picturebooks in my Literature Review.

The primary texts
Fox by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks

As previously stated, Fox is an outstanding picturebook and the deserving recipient of 2001 Children's Book Council of Australia award. The disconcerting images and indeterminate ending contribute to it being one of my favourite picturebooks. The story of Fox centers on the protagonists Magpie and Dog, who have formed a symbiotic friendship based on Dog and Magpie’s disabilities – Magpie cannot fly and Dog only has one eye. They forge a friendship of trust and loyalty, as Dog becomes Magpie’s
wings, and she his sight. "I will be your missing eye, and you will be my wings," (Fox, [page 6]) Magpie declares. When Fox arrives, full of "rage and envy and loneliness" (Fox, [page 11]), he is jealous of their friendship, and he tricks Magpie into “flying” with him, teaching Dog and Magpie what it is to be lonely, like him. After Fox abandons Magpie in the desert, she begins the heart-breaking walk home to Dog, hearing, “in the stillness...a faraway scream. She cannot tell if it is a scream of triumph or despair”, (Fox, [page 21]) revealing to readers the depth of Fox’s alienation. This is a picture book meant for older readers. The theme, the plot, the characters and the illustrations would give most young children nightmares. Illustrated in mixed-media and collage, the images hold texture and life, the eyes of the characters show compassion and sorrow and rage, and the hand-lettered, upside-down, sideways text is unsettling, disjointed; building anxiety throughout the pages. Fox is a brilliant text for working with secondary students, it commands attention, it takes the reader to dark places and brings about discussion and ideas on trust, friendship, loyalty, jealousy and loneliness.

The Rabbits by John Marsden and Shaun Tan

The Rabbits examines the issue of cultural assimilation, and the effect of humans on our environment, using bandicoots to represent indigenous peoples and rabbits to portray explorers. The text is excellent, narrated from the bandicoots’ point of view, and as we read, we experience the situation worsening, “our old people warned us. Be careful. They won’t understand the right ways. They only know their own country”
(The Rabbits, page 5), and worse, “The rabbits spread across the country. No mountain could stop them; no desert, no river” (The Rabbits, pages 13-14), and worse, “they chopped down our trees and scared away our friends…and stole our children” (The Rabbits, pages 20-22). Tan’s illustrations lead the sequence of events, forcing the reader to pay attention to detail and read with maturity. There are visual clues that add depth to the plot throughout the visual narrative, from the tiny smokestack in the distant horizon of the first page, to the writing on the rabbit Captain’s jacket, the dotted lines drawn on the rabbits’ livestock, the suspiciously red “ink” dripping from their quills as they sign off on bandicoot children being dragged away by flying ships. This book is an outstanding resource in the secondary social studies classroom, as it offers an excellent perspective on cultural awareness.

*The Island by Armin Greder*

*The Island* is a critically acclaimed picturebook that was nominated for the Children’s Book Council of Australia award in 2008. The plot centres on a man who is washed ashore, naked and vulnerable. Instead of welcoming him with open arms, the townspeople wish to reject him and push him back out to sea, and certain death. Their rationale for this behaviour is based simply on the fact that the man is different from them. As the conflict escalates, the ridiculousness of the townspeople’s irrational fears becomes clearer to the reader and brings about the lesson we have to learn from *The Island*. Greder utilizes the visual codes of gesture and symbolism in his illustrations to
clarify the horror that can ensue when people are incapable of opening their minds and hearts to the differences among us.

**Overview of thesis chapters**

*The Rabbits* by Shaun Tan and James Marsden, *Fox* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks, and *The Island* by Armin Greder can all be categorized as complex picturebooks for young adults. All three primary texts share themes of power, domination, loss and the marginalized or outsider.

In Chapter Two, I will present my Literature Review, which focuses on post-modern picturebooks, the potential of picturebooks for a young adult audience and the role of illustration in meaning-making. In Chapter Three, I will present my theoretical lens and methodology, concentrating on Perry Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of narrative art. My methodology will discuss the ways in which I apply the theoretical framework to analyze the primary texts. Chapter Four will be a close reading/analysis of *Fox*; Chapter Five will focus on *The Rabbits* and Chapter Six will be an analysis of *The Island*.

Based on the work of Perry Nodelman, the discussion of each of the primary texts will follow the same format: Part 1: Format and Design, Part 2: Mood and Atmosphere, Part 3: Style of Illustrations and Part 4: Meanings of Visual Objects. Each chapter will also include a section that examines the concept of the intruder (Part 5), a common element shared by the three primary texts.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

I discovered similarities and comparable ideas in my reading and re-reading of the primary texts, with possibilities that made me want to explore them further.

Underlying the three plots are parallelisms, and those shared qualities are what I intend to explore in my literature review. There is something about these texts that conveys to me they are not merely similar because of their intended audience, but they contain a feeling or quality that draws them together in my mind. What follows in this literature review is my exploration of the similarities in my chosen primary texts as I situate the analysis of the three picturebooks in the context of their postmodern genre, their legitimacy as appropriate texts for young adult and adult readers, the role of illustration in meaning-making, their construction as portrayals of Australia, and their indeterminate or unhappy endings.

The postmodern picturebook

My primary texts can each be considered a postmodern picturebook. Each of these postmodern picturebooks presents the world as a place of destruction and injustice; here there can be no happy endings. The term postmodern picturebook refers to the non-traditional plot structure and non-linear format employed by a sophisticated group of postmodern authors and illustrators. Goldstone (2002) explains that postmodern picturebooks invite the reader to collaborate with the author/illustrator, and she suggests that this collaboration can occur because “the transactions among the author, illustrator and text are not as straightforward as the reader drawing on their
prior experiences and arranging the new text experience on an existing cognitive hanger” (Goldstone, 2002, p. 366). With the reader becoming an active part of the narrative, it is no surprise that postmodern picturebooks tend to elicit strong reactions from their readers; children and adults alike express responses that are more insightful and contain more personal emotions and connections when they are included in interacting with the story (Goldstone, 2002).

Postmodern picturebooks encourage their readers to question traditional linear features and co-create the narrative through non-traditional structures. When readers approach these texts as different ways of understanding, they will gain a more insightful and comprehensive perception of this new “story grammar” (Goldstone, 2002). Readers cannot simply rely on predictions when approaching the story grammar of a postmodern picturebook; their comprehension depends on the strengths of their decoding skills and ability to draw inferences.

Postmodern picturebooks can be distinguished by their nonlinearity, self-referential text, a self-deprecating or even sarcastic tone and an anti-authoritarian stance. The primary texts I am analyzing exemplify non-linear and liberal postmodern features that encourage critical thought. The pages and illustrations are cluttered and require the reader to decipher their intentions, the printed text does not run from left-to-right as is the structural tradition of the English language, and the characters are not always attractive, thus making it difficult to separate protagonist from antagonist. Unlike traditional picturebooks, these postmodern picturebooks do not display a
structural commonality with classic picturebooks such as *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Goodnight Moon* or *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. The characters of the aforementioned, cherished stories resolve their conflicts, learn a lesson and embrace a happy ending through a clearly laid-out beginning, middle and end. The plots of *Fox, The Rabbits* and *The Island* do not tie up all the loose ends with a pretty bow, but rather leave the reader with disturbing, indeterminate endings. Beach (1993) emphasizes that postmodern elements in picturebooks need to be clarified and explained to children because of the changing story structure and unfamiliar linguistic code. However, when postmodern picturebooks are presented to adult readers, their familiarity with these characteristics from years of exposure to postmodern literature, film and popular culture allow them to be absorbed by these elements rather than be confused by them.

**The legitimacy of sophisticated picturebooks for young adult readers**

The picturebook genre is a form of literature that has the potential to be interpreted many ways; this is even more applicable to complex picturebooks for young adults. The union of textual and inter-textual devices allows for picturebooks to be unconventional (Hunt, 2005). As Kress (2000) suggests, we need to reconsider the assumption that visuals distract the reader from the true intentions of the text. Nothing can be further from the truth, argues Kress, as he urges readers to consider how much communication relies on visuals signs; the transfer of information visually is more efficient than through verbal modes. Sophisticated picturebooks can be influential through their combined text and visual images, which have an interdependent
relationship to help define and augment each other, thus creating meaning for the 
reader (Nodelman, 1988). As cited in Nodelman (2005), Nicholas Mirzoeff explains how 
picturebooks are contextualized within the specific culture that produces them, and 
meaning is situated by the culture that receives them. In examining books with specific 
themes, the reader is provided with the cultural context and voice of experience and 
identity that the author and illustrator intend to portray. Denise E. Agosto (1999) 
discusses the value of picturebooks in literacy development in her paper on 
interdependent storytelling in picturebooks. She discusses how illustrated texts build 
literacy skills such as imagination, creativity and critical thinking by encouraging the 
reader to consider both the words and the images. Agosto argues that in order to fully 
understand the meaning of the story, the reader must see the balance between the text 
and illustrations. For young adult readers, picturebooks are a legitimate form of 
literature because of their ability to challenge the interpretation skills of any age or 
reading level, acting as a bridge between textual narration and visual art.

A positive relationship between the act of reading and the reader helps children 
and young adults develop a connection to literature through picturebooks. Samuels’ 
study (1970) of the effects of illustrations on young readers finds that pictures help to 
develop positive attitudes and responses towards reading. In 1986, Kiefer found that 
young readers can interact with picturebooks in a variety of ways. Initially, children use 
language for informative purposes and to retell plot and content. Next, if encouraged to 
think for themselves, a young reader will make their own predictions or inferences.
Kiefer observed that young readers use picturebooks for their imaginative function as illustrations encourage children to enter the story through the images. Children also attach personal connections to picturebooks; these connections are mainly based on the illustrations. According to Kiefer, children are capable of developing “critical thinking not only about cognitive factors but also about aesthetic factors as well” (Kiefer, 1986, p. 65). She noticed that the minds of young readers are engaged by picturebooks because of their intertextual nature: the relationship between author and illustrator. In Kiefer’s 1991 study, she uncovered the picturebook’s ability to engage young readers in expressing their opinions about the quality of picturebooks, drawing emotional responses from the children. Surprisingly, despite an inclination towards bright, coloured illustrations, the children were more engaged in black and white photographs as they shape “children’s deepest aesthetic understandings” and they “make you think more” (Kiefer, 1991, p. 72). The study emphasized that when children are allotted the time and opportunity to interact with picturebooks, they may build an understanding of the illustrations and develop a deeper perception of images. Picturebook illustrations can be a narrative unto themselves while also enhancing the textual narrative. Such emotional responses can be felt by young adult readers as well; Wolfenbarger and Sipe (2007) argue that picturebooks should be made available to young adult readers as part of the education curriculum. “Carefully considering the peritextual features, illustrations, text and the interrelationships among these elements may lead older
students to a new appreciation for picturebooks and the professional work that goes
into creating them” (Wolfenbarger and Sipe, 2007, p. 279).

Condemning certain books to specific reading levels or age groups solely
because they contain illustrations prevents young adults from developing an increased
visual literacy. Returning to a childhood favourite may unlock new insight when
viewed with more life experience, education and a mature perception, and studying
contemporary, sophisticated picture books is an engaging activity for young adults. As
Shirley Hughes, author/illustrator of Dogger and the Alfie series, muses; “...illustration
can be a part of the most ostensibly adult material as well the most apparently
childish.... Dickens and Sherlock Holmes were illustrated as a matter of course because
they began as magazine serials. Holmes's deerstalker [hat] is actually an invention of
the illustrator, Sidney Paget. But over time they [illustrations] became something just
for children's books, and now even that is diminishing. The idea that pictures are
sternly removed from you as soon as you learn to read is a truly terrible one.” (Hughes,
March 2009)

The role of illustration in meaning-making

In 1985, Landes wrote how illustrations allow children to “become ‘readers’
before they can read” (Landes, 1985, p. 54). She speaks of the importance of reading
picturebooks to children and explains how simple questions such as “what do you
see?” and “what does the picture tell that the words do not?” will move the child’s
attention between illustration and text, thus responding to the “wholeness of the story”
(Landes, 1985). Picturebooks allow for readers to invent meaning by interpreting the images, creating duality in the storyline – the visual story and the verbal story, and each can be “separately phased so as to reinforce, counterpoint, anticipate or expand, one the other” (Landes, 1985, p. 52). The text is influenced by the illustrations, and the images influenced by the language, acting as counterpoints to each other. The result of this balance between text and illustration is the efficient communication of meaning, something a novel has to achieve through page after page of words, while a picturebook can achieve understanding through a single, effective image. (Landes, 1985).

Nodelman also emphasizes the positive influence illustrations can have on the reader’s imagination and discusses the value of “reading” pictures. He argues that in terms of meaning-making, the value of picturebooks lies in the fact that illustrations act as an enhancement to the text as opposed to an obstacle for the reader. Nodelman is concerned with the ways in which picturebook illustrations act upon the reader’s cognition and understanding of meaning, and he argues that images are essential to meaning-making and development of reading skills; illustrations primarily function to create understanding (Nodelman, 1988). In his discussion of inference, Nodelman elaborates that the purpose of illustration is the “communication of narrative information, and not aesthetic beauty for its own sake; [illustration] is more significantly meaningful than either accurate or beautiful” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 98).
Readers can make meaning from their interpretations of the images, thus influencing their understanding of the picturebook plot as a whole.

Arizpe and Styles (2003) analyzed children reading visual texts in an attempt to understand their thought processes behind the development of their reading skills. They were concerned with improving readers’ skills so that they might “become more critical and discerning readers” (Arizpe and Styles, 2003, p. 191). Initially they found that young readers were attracted to the image, as children feel it is easier to understand an illustration than written text. As Nodelman (1988) points out, this may not always be the case, as illustrations can often be more difficult to decipher than printed text. Nevertheless, younger children paid more attention to the illustrations, as they were new to reading and had developed strategies to make meaning that didn’t rely on the printed text. Older readers, who read quickly, tended to miss out on details in the images because they have become accustomed to reading text-only literature, and they did not peruse the images for minor details because they had grown unaccustomed to ‘needing’ the images to understand the story. “The reason for having many more and longer eye fixations may be a learning function, not a sign of immaturity, and the result is that children notice more details then adults do” (Arizpe and Styles, 2003, p. 193). Perhaps the surge in popularity in the young adult and adult market of graphic novels, manga and sophisticated picturebooks will encourage more experienced readers to take their time with the text, paying attention to visual details and infer meaning from the images, like they did as children. The subjects of this 2003 study were mostly capable of
explaining how they made sense of images and their reading process. Arizpe and Styles elaborate that these types of metacognitive skills can be developed further, which will aid in readers becoming more adept at critical thought. The picturebook reading process, on average, initiated with the reader paying attention to ordinary occurrences in the images, then noticing extraordinary or strange parts of the illustration. This was followed by questioning what was being observed, making deductions and putting forth a hypothesis as to what was going on in the story. Before moving forward to the next illustration or reading the accompanying text, the readers first must confirm or deny their prediction, scaffolding their interpretation into the next part of the plot (Arizpe and Styles, 2003). Arizpe and Styles are in agreement with Landes (1985) as they confirm that if detail and description portrayed by images must be translated into text, it is much less economical, and, in fact, can be more confusing to the reader than an effective illustration. In their study, they found that the majority of the children participating found the illustrations more significant than the text when it came to understanding the story, and that the books would be difficult to understand without the pictures (Arizpe and Styles, 2003).

Norton’s (2003) study implies that young readers become more actively engaged in literature when presented with corresponding illustrations. Norton worked with Archie comics and suggests that images in this comic book series aid in the construction of meaning, allowing for comic book readers to take ownership of their interpretations. This engagement is affirmed by young readers feeling confident about inferring
situations in text/images of the comics, in comparison to insecurities they reported
feeling when asked to infer situations in school-prescribed texts. Gene Yang (2008) also
points out that images, such as those found in graphic novels or picturebook
illustrations, have a “visual permanence”, allowing readers to take as much time as they
need to “read” the images and make meaning of them. The rate of information-transfer
is in the control of the reader, which permits them to revisit the images and infer more
from them each time (Yang, 2008). Literacy educators agree that the use of sophisticated
picturebooks in the classroom has benefits, due to their appeal to readers through the
visual illustrations. Schwarz (2002) argues that the cognitive skills required to read
books that combine text with illustrations may actually be more complex than text
alone, while the illustrations can encourage students to examine the uses of visual
elements, such as “how colour affects emotions, how people can stereotype people, how
angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it plays into the
message of a work” (Schwarz, p. 263). Another benefit of sophisticated picturebooks is
that they “present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in
accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints”
(Schwarz, 2002, p. 264). In a study conducted by Frey and Fisher (2004), reluctant young
adult readers using graphic novels were reported to have higher engagement with text
features. The illustrations provided contextual clues to character development, plot and
conflict, helping students think critically and become more reflective writers when
discussing the images. Through ‘reading the images’ in sophisticated picturebooks,
students can use multiple literacies to enhance their own understanding of text; for many struggling readers, “the limited amount of text [allows] students to read and respond to complex messages with text that better matched their reading levels” (Frey and Fisher, 2004, p. 20). The picturebook format can scaffold writing instruction into literary techniques such as the creation of atmosphere and tone, while presenting content in a manner that allows for students to be “more knowledgeable consumers of ideas and information” (Frey and Fisher, 2004, p. 24).

The strengths of the sophisticated picturebook as an educational tool revolve around its visual nature. Yang, in his article “Graphic Novels in the Classroom” (2008), explains how most students appreciate images for bridging the media we watch (television) and the media we read (books). Visual images in sophisticated picturebooks are also beneficial for English Language Learners and struggling readers as they may use the relationship between text and illustration to form an understanding of the narrative.

Sophisticated picture books help students gain an understanding of plot, character dynamics and how to apply the themes found in illustration to everyday life, and then broaden those themes into more global ideas. They are engaging and bring new perspectives to intricate issues that can be daunting when presented in different forms of writing.

Illustrated literature promotes questioning and evaluating information critically, encouraging students to gain a broader world-view and a lens through which to view
literature, while promoting a holistic outlook on knowledge; illuminating both conventional and non-conventional literatures within the curriculum.

**Australian picturebooks and national identity**

As the picturebooks I am analyzing are written and illustrated by Australians, I consider how these texts have been constructed as portrayals of Australia. Although *Fox*, *The Rabbits* and *The Island* do not specifically refer to Australia in any overt way, these picturebooks represent Australia through implied principles. An obvious feature of *Fox* and *The Rabbits* is their use of anthropomorphized indigenous animals as main characters, such as the dingo or wild dog in *Fox* and the bandicoot protagonists of *The Rabbits*. In Bradford’s 1995 study of Australian identity in picturebooks, she discusses the use of animals native to Australia as central characters and how Australian writers and artists often reference the landscape, specifically the bush or “outback”, even if most readers are from urban centres and only meet animals such as koalas and wombats in zoos (Bradford, 1995). Australian literature embodies the “myth of the land” (Turner, 1986), drawing on the mythical ideal of bush life in an attempt to distract from the harsh Australian landscape. This harshness is evident in all three primary texts, but is most prominent at the end of *Fox*, as Magpie is abandoned in the “hot red desert” and can “feel herself burning into nothingness” (*Fox*, 2000). This myth of bush life may also be employed “in order to resolve anxieties about the short history of Western culture in this country” (Bradford, 1995, p. 112). The positioning of “Australianness” versus the colonial “Britishness” in Australian literature denotes a
resistance to authority and the class system, and *The Rabbits* is a strong example of colonial versus indigenous, in which the anthropomorphized rabbits (a non-native species introduced to Australia in 1788 by the Europeans) invade the land of the native-to-Australia bandicoots. These binary opposites present themselves through the depiction of the characters. The native protagonists possess a connection to nature and a respect for the outdoors, while the antagonistic rabbits destroy the environment for personal gain. The bandicoots allude to a version of Australian nationalism that focuses on an uncomplicated and pastoral national character that is innocent, yet resourceful and ready to fight for their land and what they believe. These characters suggest “a reworking of the character of the Australian bushman, simple and down-to-earth but nobody’s fool” (Bradford, 1995, p. 113). By Marsden framing the narrative this way and Tan’s illustrations expanding this narrative, *The Rabbits* illuminates the abilities and the past of the indigenous characters, contesting the idea of colonization as the beginning of Australia’s history.

When I initially chose my primary texts, I did not realize they were connected through their Australian authors and illustrators. When I looked into the construction of Australian identity in literature, I was surprised as to how little was written on the subject. In terms of picturebooks, Bradford points out that they are often not successful in the North American market, thereby not reaching a wide audience or gaining a large readership of non-Australians (Bradford, 1995). In my research, it has proven difficult to see how many Australian picturebooks (of all genres, not just sophisticated
picturebooks) actually make it into the North American market. As well, the process of negotiation for publishing rights sometimes creates a gap of a few years between publication dates in Australia versus the date of the American or Canadian editions appearing in North America. From one to two hundred picturebooks are published yearly in Australia, but North American readers will only be able to find a few of those on local bookstore or library shelves (Bradford, 1995). Another barrier that Australian publishers must overcome, according to Turner, is the lack of cultural diversity in Australian books. Turner feels that Australian picturebooks, despite the advantage the picturebook format has in the ability to visually construct diversity through illustrations of diverse characters, do not adequately represent the multiculturalism of Australia. He elaborates that when non Anglo-Australian characters are portrayed in picturebooks, they are usually characterized as unimportant to the story or are sometimes even stereotyped, and because most Australian picturebooks are subjectively written from the perspective of mainstream culture, these marginalized groups, such as aboriginals or non-English speaking citizens, are not offered representations of their own culture (Turner, 1994).

I feel that the authors and illustrators of the three primary texts of my study make an effort to represent Australia without positioning themselves as overly Australian in their identities. These texts promote inclusion, open-mindedness, loyalty and the importance of cultural history, and together these sophisticated picturebooks
represent the range of stories and lessons Australian authors and illustrators have to share with a broad readership.

**The unhappy ending**

Many literary theorists view happy endings as characteristic of picturebooks for children. Employing that rationale and with respect to the three primary texts I am analyzing, does the unhappy ending of these texts imply that the picturebook is intended for a more mature audience? In 2002, Maria Nikolajeva discussed the fact that the majority of children’s books are “basically about play. It can be serious and dangerous play, involving killing dragons in faraway mythical worlds, but the young characters are inevitably brought back to the security of home and the protection of adults” (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 206). This is not the case in the primary texts I’ve chosen as a sampling to represent sophisticated picturebooks, in which the reader is left wondering if the protagonists will survive beyond the void that stretches out after the last page is turned. As a rule, a picturebook intended for children is usually hopeful and optimistic in its tone, and a happy ending predictably implies an optimistic view of reality; it “turns a story ultimately toward hope rather than resignation and contains within it a difference not only between the two literatures [for adults and for children] but also between youth and age…when one learns to compromise, one learns to abandon the happy ending as a pipe dream, or – a children’s story” (Babbitt, 1970, p.158). This ability to accept an unhappy or indeterminate ending is what sets the adult
reader apart from the child reader, and is a shared attribute of the three sophisticated picturebooks in my study.

When considering the four standard genres of literature: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire (Nodelman, 2008), Nodelman suggests that romance is the most suitable for children, as romance focuses on idealized characters in an idealized world. “Romance is appropriate for children because the plots turn on adventures that tend to end happily, thus reassuring the reader that the world is, ultimately, human in shape and meaning” (McGillis, 1996, p. 52). With this in mind, sophisticated picturebooks and their non-idealized, realistic or even pessimistic perspectives could be considered inappropriate for some children and therefore might be intended for young adults. A key feature of children’s literature is the aspect of hope a child reader is left with at the end of a book, “hope is the vital dimension of a children’s book, for it recognizes, at least implicitly, that readers are at the beginning of life, in crucial areas still uncommitted, even to their own personalities, and that for such readers growth and change are still to come. In a fictional world which purports to appropriate the world as we know it, the resolution must leave scope for such growth and change” (Smedman, 1988, p. 91-92). Since most sophisticated picturebooks appear to be aimed at young adults, who are, in comparison to children, representative of a range of life experiences and defined personalities, it is not of great import that the story ends happily. Authors of sophisticated picturebooks are granted a freedom to deliver a troubling tale that ends with uncertainty because their readers, as young adults, possess their own inner
certainty. As Carpenter, in his book *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* puts it: “all children’s books are about ideals. Adult fiction sets out to portray and explain the world as it really is; books for children present it as it should be” (Carpenter, 1987, p. 1).
CHAPTER 3: THEORY AND METHODS

It’s interesting to note that for a long time, despite its popularity and cultural influence, children’s literature was excluded as a subject of academic study at North American universities outside Faculties of Education and Schools of Library and Information Studies, and was not often treated in English departments to any real consideration in terms of literary and cultural studies (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). Children’s literature, ironically, may have been ignored at the university level because of its popularity and accessibility, but this attitude began to change in the 1980s as university English departments included new literary disciplines such as film studies, women’s studies, and of course, children’s literature in their selection of courses (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). This alteration and inclusion of outliers in the literary canon brought about academic inquiries and the need for exploration into the history and complexity of children’s literature. Older, dated critical approaches from the twentieth century such as the New Critical and formalist models were found wanting when applied to picturebooks, as they considered text only and did not make reference to visual content. Instead, children’s literature, especially the picturebook, is much better investigated through discourses such as reader-response theory, poststructuralism, semiotics, feminist theory and postcolonial theory. Over time, as children’s literature has evolved, the academic study of the genre has also grown, establishing the study of children’s literature as a respected field of theoretical research.
One of the more prominent theories utilized when examining picturebooks is reader response theory, as it is capable of engaging critical readers in deciphering the intricacies of texts and their patterns. Reader response theory delineates strategies for discerning the very heart of narrative structure, with the text being fundamental to the literary experience. As a reader shapes and reshapes their experience of reading, they may adopt a stance and begin to set provisional frameworks, building expectations much like a hypothesis in a science experiment. And, like a hypothesis’s need to be tested and re-tested, a reader’s experience may reinforce, frustrate, revise or synthesize those expectations. As I examine sophisticated picturebooks, there are elements of reader response theory that provide a fitting framework for my analysis of *Fox, The Rabbits* and *The Island*. I use concepts from Perry Nodelman’s theory of narrative art (1988, 2003), to develop a greater understanding towards how the authors/illustrators intend these picturebooks to be interpreted and why these texts are justifiably legitimate literature for young adult readers. Reader response theory focuses on the transaction of literature between text and reader, making it a fundamental theoretical lens from which to view sophisticated picturebooks that blend the concepts of literature as art form and literature as cultural artifact.

The focus on the *reader* in reader response theory stems from the reader’s role in making meaning of the text as an active participant in the reading process. Theorists consider reading as a “transaction” or “exchange” between text and reader, though some, like Iser and Rosenblatt, concentrate on the individual reader while others, like
Fish, see reading as a communal act. In my study, I am analyzing three primary texts and my assumptions are based on my interpretations. Specifically, I am interested in examining the validity of these sophisticated picturebooks as a resource for young adult readers. The reader-to-text connections, therefore, described by Louise Rosenblatt (1978) with respect to efferent and aesthetic reading contribute to my study. Rosenblatt acknowledges that there is no “one size fits all” generic reader or text, and until a reader approaches and interprets a piece of literature, it is nothing but marks on a page. She doesn’t feel that either reader or text takes precedent over the other; there must exist a balance between the two. She refers to the relation or balance as a “transaction”. In her book *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt asserts that “the literary work exists as a live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 24). Reader response theory considers how meaning is expressed in written language and visual art while also taking into account the difference between these modes of communication.

Researcher Barbara Kiefer (1986, 1991) indicates that when working with children and picturebooks through the perspective of reader response theory, the children seemed “to grow in understanding the meaning-making power of visual art” (Kiefer, 1991, p. 73). Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s *Grammar of Visual Design* (1996) also considers the influence of illustration on the viewer through the literary theory of social semiotics or “systemic functional grammar”. Kress and van Leeuwen’s
compositional analyses are significant contributions to the study of the relationship between reader and text. Their efforts as researchers to find a common language for the combined effect of text and illustration on the reader provide a groundwork for those interested in the study of the picturebook as a form of visual narrative. This approach to reading picturebooks with attention to the illustrations connects with the theoretical framework I am applying to my primary texts: Perry Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of narrative art. Nodelman’s blend of reader-response theory and semiotics provides me with an effective tool to examine the relationship between the texts and visual images of the three picturebooks chosen for this study.

**Methodology: theory of narrative art**

My own ideas surrounding the power of picturebooks for older readers, as discussed in the introduction, are evident in my choice of primary texts (the three picturebooks) and literary theory. I chose Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of the narrative art of children’s picture books, due to its combination of semiotics and reader-response theory. This theoretical lens emphasizes the importance of visual elements; Nodelman focuses on certain qualities put forth by the illustrations and text to uncover the relationship between language and image. His theory of narrative art specifically uncovers the manner in which visual aspects of a picturebook can engage the reader and direct the plot. Nodelman’s theory also aids in deciphering how the identity of the intruder character is visually constructed within the three primary texts.
Employing Nodelman’s system of categories for making meaning of illustrations, I demonstrate how young adult and adult readers can utilize images to inform their understanding when reading sophisticated picturebooks. Specifically, I analyze how the visuals create a representation of the intruder. Ideally I would like to be able to teach simplified portions of Nodelman’s theory to secondary English students, encouraging the students to use these theoretical guidelines in their study of picturebooks. I feel if given a structured strategy with which to analyze images (such as picturebook illustrations), students will be capable of understanding how pictures provide information in stories.

Of particular interest to this study is Nodelman’s theory regarding the purpose of illustrations in demonstrating the direction of the plot through a series of continuous actions. Nodelman explains how picturebook illustrations violate the “conventional ideas of aesthetic wholeness” (Nodelman, 1988, p.126), and discusses the contrast between two-dimensional and three-dimensional depiction or perspective. The two-dimensional perspective analyzes the use of shapes, size and location of objects in the composition, the specific placement of the characters and other visual objects on the page (left or right side, top or bottom of the page), and the use of colour (which can draw the eye to particular objects and create an emotional effect).

When evaluating three-dimensional depictions, Nodelman considers point of view, perspective, light sources and shadows, overlapping images, and focus on
objects in the illustration. He elaborates that meaning can be derived from one single illustration, and that the context of other pictures in relation to it can communicate the passage of time or movement through the plot. Nodelman adds that this pictorial expression of “movement and time” (Nodelman, 1988) can be depicted through distortion, linear continuance, incomplete actions by the characters, left to right movement (in English-language books), and the consistency of the continuous plot narrative. For the purpose of my close reading, I have utilized four categories from Nodelman’s theory of narrative art:

1) Format and first impressions
2) Mood and atmosphere
3) Style of illustration
4) Meanings of visual objects


In my analysis of the three primary picturebook texts, I intend to highlight Nodelman’s theoretical blend of semiotics and reader response theory with respect to his method of determining how illustrations inform the overall story. Readers of picturebooks, even young adult readers such as secondary English students who are studying a sophisticated picturebook, require strategies to understand the story being told. These strategies differ from those employed when reading a poem or a novel, and are also different from the ways a viewer might have been taught to respond to a piece of art. A picturebook reader must absorb and comprehend how an illustration relates to
the images that come before and follow after it, as well as how the pictures connect to the text. Beyond an illustration’s ability to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, it must also convey information about the story, and more importantly, how the reader is being invited to respond (Nodelman 1988, Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). Nodelman points out that many picturebooks are less simple than they seem, and even if a book is understood by an inexperienced reader, that should not mean that it doesn’t merit a close reading and critical attention from an experienced reader. If experienced readers such as secondary English students are given the tools to understand the complexities of picturebooks, they can be an excellent resource for teaching critical thought and analysis of literature. The strategy of reading closely and paying attention to the four techniques of Nodelman’s theory of narrative art -- format and first impressions, mood and atmosphere, style of illustration and meanings of visual objects -- will aid in my interpretation of the three primary texts and, hopefully, my findings will justify picturebooks as an appropriate resource for older readers.

**Introduction to the analysis**

In achieving the objective of this study: examining the visual representations in sophisticated picturebooks to justify their legitimacy as texts for young adult and adult readers, a sample of three picturebooks published between 1998 and 2007 are analyzed. These picturebooks are written and illustrated by Australians and deal largely with trust and intrusion. The parallels between my three primary texts include: their intended audience of mature (young adult or adult) readers, their indeterminate or
unhappy endings, and their combination of text and illustration to create meaning for
the reader beyond a simple story; each of these picturebooks is intended to elicit critical
thought. In each picturebook the protagonists face an enemy and are brought into a
conflict not of their own making. The main characters in Fox, The Rabbits and The Island
each wish to be left alone: Magpie to her friendship with Dog, the bandicoots to their
land and ways of being, and the man to his survival amongst the villagers. The literary
analysis of these three sophisticated picturebooks will illustrate approaches that can be
replicated with young adults to enrich and deepen their reading abilities and
experiences of reading by developing comprehension skills/strategies that use both text
and illustration. It is hoped that this approach will inform classroom practice.

The analysis of the illustrations from these three works is based primarily on
Perry Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of narrative art focusing on format and first
impressions, mood and atmosphere, style of illustration and meanings of visual objects
(Nodelman 1988, Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). The analysis also employs Molly Bang’s
ideas from her book, Picture This: How Pictures Work (2000). Molly Bang’s critical
theories are applied to deduce how the compositional choices of the illustrator are
capable of directing the emotions of the reader.

The analysis is organized, allotting one chapter to each picturebook, according to
the illustrations’ visual depictions and the manner in which they engage the reader and
direct the plot. The chapters are structured in sections outlining 1) format and design, 2)
mood and atmosphere, 3) style of illustrations and 4) the meanings of visual objects.
Each chapter also focuses specifically on the intruder character in relation to the visual elements, a commonality shared by the three primary texts.

The concept of intrusion is a common theme in literature, especially picturebooks. Since young children often struggle with the idea of inclusion, the theme of intrusion is aimed at young readers in the hope they may begin to understand and accept one another despite their apprehension and prejudice regarding differences. On the other hand, picturebooks may also illuminate the concept of an intruder as an unwanted or fearsome element, to bring about discussion of justified fear, strangers and the danger of the unknown. The notion of intrusion in sophisticated picturebooks is an interesting facet to examine with older readers as it is a concept found in many works of young adult literature. The illustrated books *Fox*, *The Rabbits*, and *The Island* each embroider the motif of intrusion into their plots, and in so doing, demonstrate to readers the notions of loneliness, power and trust.
CHAPTER 4: FOX

This chapter will focus on the first of the three primary texts, *Fox*, written by Margaret Wild and illustrated by Ron Brooks. Specifically, Part 1 of this chapter discusses how format and design choices engage the reader and impact the narrative of *Fox*. Part 2 explores how the use of colour creates mood and atmosphere. Part 3 focuses on the style of illustrations in *Fox* and the ways in which the illustrator, Ron Brooks, uses framing to signify social relationships between the characters as well as relationships with the reader/viewer. Part 4 centers on the meanings of visual objects, discussing the relationship between image and text as well as symbols in the illustrations of *Fox*. Molly Bang’s critical theories in *Picture This: How Pictures Work* (2000) will also be used to infer how the compositional choices of an illustration can impact the emotions of the reader. Part 5 will concentrate on how Wild and Brooks construct a representation of the intruder character within this picturebook.

*Fox* tells the story of Magpie and Dog, two friends who depend on each other because of their physical handicaps. Magpie rides on Dog’s back to act as his sight, while Dog runs swiftly to remind crippled Magpie of flight. Unfortunately, their friendship is tested by Fox, a lonely and angry intruder who wants to show Dog and Magpie what it means to be truly alone.
Part 1: Format and First Impressions

For the purpose of this close reading of Fox, a hardcover edition was used.

Nodelman suggests that generally, hardcover picturebooks (with the exception of “baby” board books) are considered more serious or of higher quality than paperbacks. The reader’s past experiences with different formats of books creates an expectation regarding that particular format;

[W]e expect more distinctive literature from hardcover books with textured, one-colour covers and more conventionally popular material from books with luridly cover plastic coatings...what might seem forbidding and respectable in hardcover often seems disposable and unthreatening in soft. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 44)

The large, rectangular shape of the book when open, known as “landscape format” and the sheer size of Fox contributes to the reader’s response. As Nodelman points out, the reader expects a more visually exciting and “larger” story to emerge from a large text, while a quieter and more subtle tale would be expected from a smaller-sized book (he cites Beatrix Potter’s charmingly illustrated tales as an example of small texts.) Since Fox is both a picturebook and has a larger format, one would assume it must be intended for child readers; both small and large books are designed for their little hands and inexpert eyes. This is how sophisticated picturebooks play with expectations; based upon format, a reader will anticipate the book to be for children, but one only has to
read a little way into the story to understand that while *Fox* may look like a storybook for a child, its intended audience is much older.

The chosen size of *Fox* suits the texture of the illustrations as well as the scrawled, hand-written style of the font; in a smaller book format, the effect of these details would be cramped and consequently they would lose their impact and power. The size and general design of *Fox*, as with most picturebooks published around the world, was most likely decided by the publisher. This notion of format and design being the publisher’s realm also applies to the format and design sections of *The Rabbits* and *The Island*. The size of *Fox* gives space for a connection between text and illustration and doesn’t crowd or diminish either aspect of the book. As stated before, when open, *Fox*’s shape is a large, horizontal rectangle: Nodelman asserts that this is a commonly used shape:

> [T]he extra width of wider books allows illustrators to fill in the extra space around [the characters] they draw with information about the places they occupy – their setting; and if we operate, as illustrators almost always do, on the assumption that such external appearances reveal internal characteristics, we learn much of character in such pictures through the details of background.

(Nodelman, 1988, p. 46)

The wider, landscape format in a picturebook provides a broad canvas on which to depict complex aspects of the narrative. Such depictions provide depth and information beyond just the setting and action. In *Fox*, Ron Brooks’ wide illustrations express the
emotions of Dog, Fox, and especially Magpie in relation to their surrounding environment. This use of the wide page space is most effective in Brooks’ illustration of Magpie left alone in the desert; she is drawn in the bottom corner of a two-page spread, a spot of black amidst aggressive, searing red and yellow scratched into the pages, she “huddles, a scruff of feathers adrift in heat” (Fox, [pages 23-24], Appendix: Figure 6). This illustration would not be as intense or effective if it were painted in a smaller format like that of Arnold Lobel’s Frog and Toad series or Beatrix Potter’s books; the sheer size of Fox develops and amplifies the emotions and situations of the characters.

As a physical object, every aspect of the book provides the reader with information. When a reader approaches a book such as Fox, they are noticing its physical aspects, and, whether aware of it or not, collecting information about the book before the story even begins. The first part of the book that the reader encounters is the cover; the image on the cover of Fox (as well as the title) suggests to the reader that this text will focus on the character of the fox – although it is not yet clear that this fox is not the hero, but the antagonist of the story. The yellow eyes of the fox are fixed on the reader and seem to be a challenge to the reader. When a character’s eyes are looking directly at the viewer, it is called a demand (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), thus the fox’s gaze suggests he is drawing the reader internally into his realm and daring the reader to open the book and read on. The cover of Fox helps to establish the mood of the story that the picturebook conveys while not giving away any of the plot.
Part 2: Mood and Atmosphere

Interest, as well as atmosphere, is enhanced in picturebooks through the use of colour in the illustrations. In *Words About Pictures*, Nodelman has catalogued his findings regarding colour in relation to mood, and he discusses how the palette of a picturebook can evoke a wide range of emotions from the reader. The reader’s perception of colour can be conventional, such as yellow representing the sun, but colour use in the images can also affect the unconscious mind: “[T]hat aspect of being which resides outside the boundaries of the world we can name with language and thus think about” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 59).

Specific colours can induce specific emotions in the reader, therefore conveying mood in a more effective manner than most other aspects of illustrations. Despite colour being a wordless element, the use (or the lack) of colour in a picturebook illustration can communicate atmosphere simply yet efficiently. The eye of the viewer is capable of distinguishing colour in different ways: by hue, by shade, by darkness or brightness, and by saturation (Nodelman, 1988, Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). Many illustrators choose to vary the predominating colour in their images so that they may present the reader with a different mood at different moments in the narrative. The atmosphere of *Fox* is first presented to the reader through Brooks’ use of a predominant red wash in the introductory endpapers.

On opening the book, the reader encounters the endpapers which present a forest scene of rocks, trees and what looks like a stream, but is difficult to make out, as
the entire illustration is coloured a red-orange, a hue mostly associated with intensity and anger. At the narrative’s end, the same illustration graces the final endpapers as well, but in soothing, natural tones of brown, greens and a calm indigo stream. Evidently, Brooks is visually preparing the reader for the rage and emotional violence within the character of Fox through the opening endpapers, which evokes mood for the reader with the singular wash of red over an image which would, if presented realistically (as in the closing endpapers), be more than one colour. Thus, the final endpapers present an emotional tonality of balance resumed to the world of Magpie and Dog with the departure of Fox and his red-hued anger. Our emotional connotations as readers allow us to make associations based on the illustrator’s use of colour. As Nodelman describes, “the emotional implications of colours are particularly clear in those picturebooks in which one colour predominates” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 60), an emotional association Brooks evidently presumes to capitalize on with the red forest.

The following page draws the reader into the story without the use of words – we are introduced to Dog and Magpie through a loosely framed image of Dog carrying Magpie in his mouth, the frame around them the same shade of red as the endpapers. However, despite a prey animal such as Magpie being in the mouth of a predator like Dog, her safety is implied by the blend of creamy white-yellow that surrounds the two protagonists and separates them from the surrounding red:
Yellow, the conventional colour of cheerfulness, dominates in many children’s books and is also found in combination with other colours in picturebooks that specify the particular sort of cheerfulness intended. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 61)

It is this protective halo of colour as well as the expression on Dog’s face, the softness of his eye in contrast to the angry glare of Fox’s on the cover, that let the reader know Dog means well. The red colour doesn’t leave Dog and Magpie at this point, but follows them through the title page, as a subtle blur in the trees behind them as Dog carries Magpie to his den, and through the next set of pages, the copyright and dedication, which show us that Fox is stealthily pursuing Magpie and Dog. Is the red colour, normally associated with a fox’s fur, but in Fox’s case a tone amplified beyond a natural red, intended to signify Fox and the danger he brings to this pair? Or was the red frame meant to remind the reader of the forest fire that burns Magpie’s wing, crippling her and preventing her from flying? When we only have the illustrations to attend to, it makes sense that the red colour is meant to symbolize Fox and his pursuit of Magpie and Dog, since his character is presented to us pictorially. Yet in the first line of text, we realize that a fire has devastated Magpie and Dog’s environment: “Through the charred forest, over hot ash, runs Dog, with a bird clamped in his big, gentle mouth. He takes her to his cave above the river, and there he tries to tend her burnt wing” (Fox, page 1).

This use of the colour red to represent fire, or Fox, or both as an intertwined, inseparable entity of intrusion and antagonism on Dog and Magpie’s world is clarified as the story moves forward; we learn that Fox “belongs nowhere and loves no one”
Was this always the case, or was Fox also affected by the fire, did he lose all he loved, thus drawing him to the “family” of Dog and Magpie, only to realize they were symbiotic and didn’t need him? Did this realization drive Fox to tear apart their relationship by any means possible because of his jealousy and rage, or was he always a damaging force, a characterized manifestation of the forest fire that burnt Magpie’s wing in the first place? Either way, the character of Fox is connected to, as well as associated with, the fire: “Fox with his haunted eyes and rich red coat. He flickers through the trees like a tongue of fire, and Magpie trembles” (Fox, page 9). Both Fox and the fire are implied by the colour red throughout Brooks’ illustrations.

Mood and atmosphere are suggested through the use of colour in Fox; its blend of beige-browns and indigo blues (as well as the aforementioned orange-red associated with fire and the character of Fox), denotes serenity in the scenes of Dog and Magpie together. When the story focuses solely on Dog and Magpie’s relationship, they are surrounded by the serene blue-green of foliage and warm beiges of Dog’s cave. As well, Dog himself, the symbol of Magpie’s safety, has yellowish brown fur. Once Fox enters their lives, he brings with him the angry orange-red of his coat, and his presence transforms their shared cave into blacks and mouldy greens, and one rock smudged with a suspicious red-orange smear, almost as if he has marked his territory.

**Part 3: Style of Illustrations**

Nodelman suggests that “style” is what makes one piece of art different from another, and in *Words About Pictures*, he focuses on the distinct way picturebook
illustrators express their style while communicating information about the story. While Brooks is clearly skilled at merging the visual elements of his illustrations with meaningful picturebook format, he also creates a distinct work of art with *Fox*, effectively fusing style with interpretive meaning. Nodelman emphasizes the manner in which style can assert the identity of the artist, which can be a significant aspect for a professional painter showing at an art gallery, but may not be in the best interest of a picturebook illustrator.

The very essence of the work of illustrators demands that they most often work to communicate the styles of people other than themselves – the distinct qualities of the authors of the texts they illustrate as expressed in those texts. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 79)

According to Nodelman, style can be a blessing and a curse; “illustration is an art that demands the prior existence of another art” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 79). Since the style of illustration in *Fox* suits the rough scrub of the landscape, the unforgiving ferocity of the natural world, and the dark atmosphere of the narrative, Brooks effectively illustrates this picturebook in a manner that conveys information about the characters and their story, beginning with the cover illustration.

Despite the fact that the cover of *Fox* is contained within a frame, it does not necessarily make the image feel separated from the reader, as Nodelman suggests:
Looking at events through strictly defined boundaries implies detachment and objectivity, for the world we see through a frame is separate from our own world, marked off for us to look at. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 50)

Perhaps *Fox* is immune to this theory of framing because of the positioning of the character on the cover, with his gaze directed at the reader, a “demand” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), or it might be the uncertainty of the frame itself, which is scribbled and smudged, like a rough preliminary sketch drawn in charcoal. Either way, *Fox* refuses to allow the reader to take an objective view of the events that unfold within its pages.

Another effective use of framing is during the scene when Dog persuades Magpie to go with him to the stream and look at their reflection when she is astride his back; together they create a “strange new creature” in which she can be his sight and he can act as her wings (*Appendix: Figure 4*). This illustration is not only framed along the sides by the physical words, but by the “real” Dog and Magpie at the bottom of the page, upside down and peering at their mirror images, an effective technique employed by Brooks that prompts the viewer to turn the book around and examine it from every angle. This use of a framing device (the text and the “real” characters gazing at their reflection) within the illustration creates a powerful effect, as Nodelman mentions:

Rather than add objectivity or detachment, these [frames] heighten the dramatic focus; they force us to pay attention to specific parts of the pictures. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 51)
It is understandable, then, why Brooks made a specific attempt to “frame” this image, albeit in an organic rather than ornate manner—this illustration represents a turning point for Magpie, when she realizes all is not lost, and with Dog’s help, she is capable of “flying” again.

The most effective use of framing is found, however, in the depiction of Fox’s eyes, a rectangular band in the lower center of the page that delivers a close-up of his unwavering gaze, accompanied and surrounded by the words; “…Magpie can feel him watching, always watching her. And at night his smell seems to fill the cave—a smell of rage and envy and loneliness” (Fox, [page 11], Appendix: Figure 5). The framed eyes act here as though they are to be “read” as part of the text; the reader cannot move from one section of writing to the next without passing over the eyes, and yet, the eyes are also the first thing any reader will notice as they turn to this page. Since the eyes are surrounded by a frame of white space, the space acts as device of constraint, visually implying that not only is Fox’s stare constrained, but his raw emotions are held dangerously in check as well. Nodelman discusses that, “[W]hile white space around a picture can act as a frame, and demand detachment, it can also do just the opposite; it can provide a focus that demands our involvement” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 53). This is just the effect the close-shot framing of Fox’s eyes has in this illustration—a demand on the reader’s involvement in Magpie’s growing trepidation. Brooks effectively builds the intensity of the narrative through his use of colour, and uses the
technique of framing to illuminate the social relationships amongst the characters of *Fox* as well as their connection to the reader.

**Part 4: Meanings of Visual Objects**

In picturebooks, Nodelman points out, individual pictures are not presented to the viewer as a whole, instead they are only part of a larger work of art that includes other illustrations and text (Nodelman, 1988). Picturebooks only achieve a state of completion at their resolution, when all the illustrations come together to complete the narrative. However, Nodelman emphasizes that each individual illustration can convey meaning through symbolism, which affects the reader’s understanding of what visual objects may signify. Visual objects may be used as symbolic devices, as part of the setting, the positioning of the characters, or even the physical text and its correlation to the picture.

Although Nodelman points out that the physical relationship between illustrations and text is, at times, insignificant, he does describe the way in which words can relate to pictures; both are intended to be seen.

When we open a picturebook, both words and pictures confront our eyes, and consequently they have literal relationships as well as symbolic ones. The words of a text are not just symbols of spoken sounds but part of the visual pattern on the page, without reference to their actual meaning. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 53) This is especially true with *Fox*, in which the pages contain scrawled, hand-lettered text that adds to the sense of unease initiated by the illustrations. Not only is the font
unusual (and almost reminiscent of a ransom note style of lettering), but the actual text does not always run from left to right, as is traditional in English-language books. A reader of *Fox* must follow the writing as it moves vertically up the page, and sometimes the words are placed in such a way that they actually become a part of the depicted scene. The textual and typographical features in *Fox* add a visual weight, and if they were not present, the illustrations would be arranged in a different manner; Nodelman explains how readers commonly look at a page from the top downwards, and “because of their inherently attractive nature, we tend to look at pictures first, then read words” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 55). As Brooks puts the words above or alongside the illustrations, he places the reader in a state of indecision – to read or examine the pictures first? “This ambivalence adds tension to the tense moments of a book”, clarifies Nodelman (Nodelman, 1988, p. 55), and the unusual arrangement of text and illustration in *Fox* builds strong narrative effects and adds interest to the story. However, most of the narrative information in *Fox* is depicted through objects within the illustrations and how those objects relate to each other.

Objects in pictures become meaningful in relation to the extent to which we notice them and single them out for special attention. The more we notice them, the more visual weight they have. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 101)

In picturebooks, there are a myriad of ways an illustrator can direct attention and give weight to an object, but as maintained by Nodelman, contextual information is the most significant means of drawing attention to an object. The reader’s previous knowledge of
an object in the real world makes it worthy of their attention as an image, consequently, the way a reader interprets the object depends on knowing what it represents as well as how much prior knowledge they possess.

Knowledge of texts allows us to comprehend any given picture’s participation in what theorists of literature call intertextuality – the interconnectedness of all acts of communication and their consequent dependence upon each other for their strategies of meaning making. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 105)

This connection between reader and image, as Nodelman points out, is what brings weight and meaning to objects in illustrations. The more knowledge a reader has, the richer their interpretation of images.

The symbolic meaning behind the forested area that Magpie and Dog make their home can be associated with serenity and joy, the greenery of the forest suggesting “the implications of idealized paradise that we identify with poets like Wordsworth and that we as a civilization have probably derived from knowledge of the Garden of Eden and the entire European pastoral tradition” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 112). Interestingly, Fox does not open with peaceful, green scenery, but the devastation of a forest fire instead, foreshadowing the emotional devastation to come, and the greenery appears only in moments where Dog and Magpie are together and have evidently learned to trust each other.

Trust is a key factor in the plot of Fox, as Magpie has come to rely on her companion, Dog, who is blind in one eye. Dog and crippled Magpie are gradually
learning to accept their shortcomings and work together as each other’s sight and “wings”, but the psychological effects of an intruder will soon harm their carefully constructed relationship of trust. Fox’s protagonist, Magpie, is aware of the intrusion into the physical and emotional landscape of her friendship with Dog, and the character of Fox is established later in the plot, depicted in a ‘C’-shape, lithe body curling towards Dog and Magpie, exerting power and dominance over the other characters. Bang states: “When we want a picture to feel scary, it is more effective to graphically exaggerate the scary aspects of the threat and its environment than to represent them as close to photographic reality as possible, because this is the way we feel things look” (Bang, 2000, p. 29). Fox is described as a flicker “through the trees like a tongue of fire, and Magpie trembles” (Fox, page 8). As Bang explains, backgrounds, especially those with trees or foliage, can feel more threatening when there is a concentration of them, especially if they are pointy or surround the character, “like a prison” (Bang, 2000, p. 20). The subsequent illustrations of Fox are symbolically illuminative of his fearsomeness and power; sociopathic eyes are framed between layers of text and gaze out at the reader, demonstrating the emptiness and threat of the antagonistic character.

Part 5: The Intruder

Within the concept of intrusion, Fox embodies the notion of fear, or the unknown. The dramatic tension builds towards a climax as Brooks employs images of incomplete actions and changes in narrative pace: “[i]llustrations can control the visual pace of the story by alternating views, employing white space, and avoiding repetitive
composition” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 79). In Fox, Brooks is brilliant at creating a multifaceted story that not only alternates views, but repositions the text as well, forcing the reader to follow the building pace of the plot as “Fox scorches through the woodlands, through dusty plains, through salt pans, and out into the hot red desert” (Fox, page 22), to conclude with Magpie’s “long journey home” (Fox, page 29). Fox, as the intruder in this picturebook, intrudes on the safety of the setting. Dog and Magpie have created an improvised sense of home for themselves, as Dog “takes her to his cave above the river and there he tries to tend her burnt wing” (Fox, page 1). Despite the abnormal relationship between canine and bird, these characters have forged a sense of community for themselves, which is most likely what attracts the lonely character of Fox to them in the first place. As well, this intruder takes what does not belong to him in order to gain access to the ‘family’ from which he has been excluded. Fox seduces Magpie into “flying” with him, so that he may ultimately abandon her, forcing her and Dog to experience his loneliness firsthand. The sense of longing emanating from the antagonist is equally palpable in the text and illustrations. Nodelman explains that the manner in which an illustrator visually presents their characters in space on the page makes statements about power and subordination. For example, featuring a specific character, such as Fox, “on the left-hand side of the page spread adds to the reader’s anticipation” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 109), signifying to the reader that Fox is wielding power and aggression over Magpie. Bang elaborates: “the bottom half of a picture feels
more threatened, heavier, sadder or constrained” while “an object placed higher up on the page has ‘greater pictorial weight’” (Bang, 2000, page 56).

*Fox* works as an effective portrayal of intrusion because the talented Ron Brooks is adept at using images to speak to a reader’s most visceral reactions and emotions. As Bang states, “our feelings arise because we see pictures as extensions of the real world. Pictures that affect us strongly use structural principles based on the way we have to react in the real world in order to survive.” (Bang, 2000, p. 41)

**Conclusion**

This chapter centered on the primary picturebook text *Fox*, and used Perry Nodelman’s theory of narrative art as a theoretical lens to focus on specific aspects of the visual elements. When simplified into format and design, mood and atmosphere, style of illustrations and meanings of visual objects, Nodelman’s theory can be used by secondary level English students to approach and engage with picturebooks intended for older readers such as *Fox*. The visual elements are not only engaging, but can be interpreted by the reader when using Nodelman’s theory as a guide.
CHAPTER 5: THE RABBITS

This chapter will focus on The Rabbits, written by John Marsden and illustrated by Shaun Tan. In the close reading of this text, Perry Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of narrative art will be used as a lens, focusing on format and first impressions, mood and atmosphere, style of illustration and meanings of visual objects (Nodelman 1988, Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). Illustrator Tan is renowned for his attention to detail with respect to visual elements within a text, especially those that represent multiple meanings. Since The Rabbits tells a story of colonization, and Tan’s compositional choices infer an imbalance of power, I will also use Molly Bang’s work, Picture This: How Pictures Work (2000) to analyze Tan’s illustrations with respect to the concept of intrusion.

Specifically, Part 1 of this chapter will discuss how format and design choices capture the imagination of the reader and direct the narrative of The Rabbits. Part 2 will look at the illustrator’s choices of colour and how mood and atmosphere are affected. Part 3 focuses on Tan’s illustrative style and the interpretations that can be made of his pictures. Part 4 will concentrate on the meanings of visual objects in The Rabbits and the symbolism in the detailed illustrations. Part 5 will examine Marsden and Tan’s depiction of the intruders in this picturebook.

The Rabbits is a story of colonization and destruction of a natural habitat at the hands of the colonizers. Told from the point of view of the colonized bandicoots, the reader learns how the rabbits came to their land and completely took over, damaging
the environment and harming the populace in the name of progress and industry. *The Rabbits* examines the issue of cultural assimilation and the effect of humans on our environment, using bandicoots to represent indigenous peoples and rabbits to portray settlers.

**Part 1: Format and First Impressions**

The physical format of a picturebook and the first impressions of the reader can arouse expectations for the story inside. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the shape and size of a text, the image on the cover, even the endpapers or the copyright page can influence the reader’s experience before they begin to read. The cover of *The Rabbits* features a glossy and highly-detailed illustration of the rabbits arriving in their ships. This detailed visual information is offered to the reader for a reason; the particular illustration is used in the text as a climactic scene, underscoring for the reader the magnitude of the rabbits’ presence on bandicoot land. Nodelman asserts how book covers can be the most significant source of the reader’s expectations, as “the picture on a cover or dust jacket often evokes the essential quality of the story” (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 279). The “essential quality” of the rabbits intruding on bandicoot land and exerting their power is communicated to the reader through the choice of cover illustration, thus preparing reader expectations; these are not ordinary bunnies.

It becomes evident, even before the reader opens *The Rabbits*, that the text’s large size is necessary to avoid restraining Tan’s illustrations. Tan frequently uses a double-
page spread to deliver his images, and the physical format of this text allows for a wide space filled with intricately detailed settings. This intricacy is on display in the opening endpapers; the reader first encounters a serene, bird-filled waterscape that implies a natural symmetry. However, this peaceful connection to nature is juxtaposed with the next page, a dark, aggressive “royal seal” that uses indecipherable words to make the shape of the British flag. This page (which is placed ahead of the title page) provides the reader with foreshadowing; a warning of the darkness and regimented order yet to come.

The cover, the endpapers and the high-quality, glossy paper stock (which Nodelman says implies a serenity or stillness) all communicate information to the reader. A viewer of The Rabbits will begin to understand that this is not going to be a light-hearted storybook for children and may not have a happy ending. These factors of formatting deliver the first impressions of a serious text with a message for an audience of older readers, and help establish the mood that the rest of the book conveys.

Part 2: Mood and Atmosphere

In The Pleasures of Children’s Literature (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003), mood and atmosphere is described as something that can affect how a reader feels about a text, which in turn can affect the meaning of the text for that reader. Illustrators are able to express mood and atmosphere through their use of colour, drawing on the emotions of the reader or making connections to a reader’s prior knowledge through hue, shade and saturation of colours.
Hue refers to how colours are classified, such as “green” or “yellow”, and dominant hues in illustrations are able to evoke different moods from the viewer. What an image means to a reader can be directed by the reader’s associations with that hue. Nodelman uses the example of green implying a restful or calming atmosphere because many readers connect green with nature (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003).

Shades are classified by how dark or light a colour is, for example “light blue” versus “dark blue”. As expected, most readers will associate a lighter shade with a calm or cheerful mood, while a darker shade is thought to be depressing or sad.

Saturation depends on how much white a colour has been blended with, resulting in different levels of intensity. Vibrant colours, with less white and therefore more saturation are associated with energy, while less saturation of a colour can be restrained and soothing.

On the very first page of *The Rabbits*, Tan effectively uses colour to denote mood and atmosphere. The wash of blue sky dominates the right side of the page and gives the reader an impression of clarity and clean air. The deep orange-brown shade of the cliffs and the sunbathing lizards at its base evoke an atmosphere of warmth and relaxation. Tan initially creates a sense of serenity and signifies to the reader that the world of the bandicoots is sun-drenched and safe.

The change in atmosphere of *The Rabbits* is indicated by the change in the sky. A few pages (and many more rabbits) later, the clarity of the blue sky begins to fill with wispy gray clouds. This change in mood and atmosphere occurs when the bandicoots
realize that the rabbits inhabit land differently than they do: “They didn’t live in the trees like we did. They made their own houses. We couldn’t understand the way they talked.” (*The Rabbits*, [pages 9-10])

The gray clouds blemishing the blue sky could represent the bandicoots’ change in attitude towards the rabbits, and the encroaching threat of the rabbits on their land. Tan’s use of gray (instead of fluffy white clouds) implies a lack or loss of colour, perhaps from industry and pollution. As the story progresses, the sky once again communicates the mood and atmosphere, as the night sky is depicted in a gray-green tone that lacks saturation. The low intensity of the sky occurs because of the vast number of stars, which perhaps aren’t really stars, but artificial light coming from the rabbits. The sheer number of “stars” in the illustration is overwhelming, contributing to the mood by making the sky appear looming or overbearing. Despite the amount of light portrayed in the night sky, the reader will find this image threatening or unsettling because of the sickly effect of too much white in the grey-green, creating a lack of colour saturation.

Another significant absence of colour occurs on page [16] of *The Rabbits*, as Tan paints the struggles between the bandicoots and their antagonists in a sepia tone (*Appendix: Figure 2*). This stark yet somehow nostalgic hue lends the illustrations a sense of history, as though the events depicted in the illustration are memories or perhaps photographs of a war long past. Nodelman explains how illustrations lacking colour demand the reader’s attention in a solemn manner, as in a documentary; they “seem so
truthful and serious – it demands our mental activity, so that we cannot just sit back
and soak it in” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 68). Tan’s use of a sepia tone lends an atmosphere
of authenticity to the brutality of the battle images as the bandicoots explain,
“sometimes we had fights, but there were too many rabbits” (The Rabbits, pages [15-16],
Appendix: Figure 2).

Unfortunately, the mood and atmosphere of The Rabbits doesn’t improve, as the
bandicoots lose ground and the sky becomes darker and darker still. The warm orange-
brown shade of the earlier cliffs becomes a field shaded the rusty brown of industry,
dried grass and dead foliage. There is no nature or life left, and this brown shade
represents the opposite of the pastoral blue-greens that grace the endpapers. Finally, as
the rabbits multiply and take over completely, Tan illustrates the cities they have built
in black and white. On pages [21 and 22], the only colour evident to the reader is the
strip of blue sky and white clouds at the top of the page, which is being sucked into a
machine (the arrows on the suction tubes denote the direction the sky is travelling.) All
life is being sucked from the natural world into the machine of industry, and the blue
sky from the beginning of the book is gone, leaving in its place the awful, smudged
black-brown sky of The Rabbits’ final pages. The bandicoots mourn, “The land is bare
and brown and the wind blows empty across the plains” (The Rabbits, [page 24]), as the
evidence of the rabbits’ treachery and polluting ways strip the land bare and leave a
mood and atmosphere of desolation.
Part 3: Style of Illustrations

The style an illustrator chooses to utilize can also affect the mood of a picturebook, as stylistic decisions are essentially unique. Nodelman points out that “style develops from all the various choices an artist makes, about both subject and means of presentation” (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 283). Picturebook styles are intended to communicate meaning to the reader, and no matter how individual an illustrator’s style may seem, they are making a deliberate choice to provide an image that corresponds to the text. As Nodelman explains:

However individual a style may be, then, it always expresses more than just individuality, and because styles do convey meanings, illustrators make the choices that create style in picturebooks deliberately in the context of their conception of the narrative effect they intend, rather than unconsciously in the context of their experience or merely in terms of their personal preferences.

(Nodelman, 1988, p.78)

The function of any illustration is to serve as part of the picturebook’s narrative, and thus while an illustrator’s style may be distinctive, it must also help the reader connect to the story.

Tan’s distinctive illustration style is very surreal and on [page 4] of The Rabbits, the amount of living, inhabitable ground that takes up the majority of the two-page spread emphasizes the vastness of nature versus the size of those that live in nature. The surreal landscape suggests to the reader a healthy, blooming land that has room for
flowers, insects, lizards and birds as well as the bandicoots. As the reader learns, and as Tan may be suggesting through the style of this image, the land may not be spacious enough for the rabbits. The bandicoots explain that:

They brought new food, and they brought other animals. We liked some of the food and we liked some of the animals. But some of the food made us sick and some of the animals scared us. (The Rabbits, pages 11-12)

The accompanying illustration is also in a surrealist style; the image portrays a field of sheep and cattle devouring the land. Nodelman clarifies that surrealism often depicts “unrealistic situations in a highly representational way that makes the impossible seem strangely possible” (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 284). The sheep and cows are meant to be perceived as strange by the reader, and because of Tan’s use of surrealism, are actually quite scary. The sheep’s gaping mouths with denture-like teeth and lack of visible eyes make them appear monstrous and out of place, thus the style allows for the reader to view the livestock the way the bandicoots might.

Like Brooks, the illustrator of Fox, Tan occasionally employs frames to bring weight to certain objects or words. A particularly effective example of framing is found in the illustration mentioned above, where the words “but some of the food made us sick” (The Rabbits, [page 12]) frames an image of a bandicoot receiving from a rabbit what could be perceived as alcohol. The constraint provided by the frame and the petite size of the image stylistically implies that the bandicoots’ complaints are muted and overshadowed by the dominant image of the rabbits’ livestock. A frame of text that
reads “They only know their own country” (*The Rabbits*, [page 5], *Appendix: Figure 1*)

surrounds a globe, stylistically emphasizing its importance; the rabbits plan to conquer
many lands and spread their population. The words around the globe also signify the
warning: through their ignorance, the rabbits will destroy the world of the bandicoots.
The ominous, foreshadowing text “more rabbits came” (*The Rabbits*, [page 6], *Appendix: Figure 1*)
is framed in frayed fabric, like a salvaged scrap of uniform surrounding the
severity of the rabbits’ arrival.

The arrival of more rabbits is stylistically represented in the visual layout of
[pages 9-10], where the bandicoots are illustrated in a banner or narrow strip across the
top of the page, and the rabbits occupy the majority of space underneath. In a reversal
of a previously mentioned illustration (where the surreal pastoral style held most of the
page and the characters took up very little space), the bandicoots are now being pushed
out of their land by the invading rabbits. As stated by Nodelman, “style develops from
all the various choices an artist makes, about both subject and means of presentation”
(Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 283), and the visual depiction of the bandicoots’ loss of
physical space and presence on the page is an effective use of style that engages the
reader with their plight.

Tan repeats the approach to layout and design of the page in his presentation of
a narrow strip of horizon above a deep piece of land in the scene that exhibits
bandicoots being taken as slaves as well as those that were killed in battle. The majority
of the page depicts the “underground”, where a repeated motif of curled, shadowy
shapes implies buried bandicoot bodies. In this particular illustration, Tan’s use of
design within his style is used as an effect to demonstrate the magnitude of loss the
bandicoots have suffered. The top section of the page is dotted with rabbit flags,
claiming the land after evidently massacring the bandicoots.

This massacre is depicted in perhaps the most stylized of all Tan’s illustrations
for The Rabbits, in which the reader views the bandicoots’ rebellion as they hack the
rabbits’ fences and cut their pipes to obtain water. Consequently, the bandicoots are
slaughtered by the overpowering force of the rabbit army. Tan chose to portray these
disturbing images in panels, almost like those of a comic book (Appendix: Figure 2). His
stylistic choice of illustrating small scenes that add up to a greater image of carnage
heightens the dramatic focus for the reader, as Nodelman states, panels will “force us to
pay attention to specific parts of the pictures” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 51). In their article,
Re-Valuing the Role of Images in Reviewing Picture Books, Unsworth and Wheeler speak to
Tan’s distinct style:

Tan uses surreal illustrations to unsettle the reader and provoke uncertainty, but
his use of colour is also central to the construction of the interpersonal or
interactive meanings concerned with the relationship of the viewer to what is
portrayed. (Unsworth and Wheeler, 2002, p. 71)

Tan is also particularly effective at supplying the reader with minute details in his
illustrations that give visual meaning to the narrative through symbolism.
Part 4: Meanings of Visual Objects

Visual objects, when situated in an illustration, can communicate meaning to the reader based on their context. The majority of information found in an illustration comes from specific objects, and what readers find meaningful is based on their own contextual knowledge. The more life experience and exposure a reader has had to literature, pop culture and visual art, the more connections they will make. A viewer that is familiar with the contextual origin of a visual object will pay attention to detail when interpreting an illustration.

Visual objects are usually significant through either symbolism or embedded codes (Nodelman, 1988, Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). Symbolism is the use of a concrete subject to represent an abstract idea, for example an image of a heart used to symbolically represent love, or a picture of the sun to symbolize summer. Codes are based on cultural signs, such as the posture or gestures of a character. If a character is depicted with a red-shaded face, most readers would take that to imply they are blushing and embarrassed. If a character is sitting hunched over, with their head in their hands, it would convey to the reader a sense of despair or unhappiness. The reader’s varying expectations about the visual content of pictures acts as a context for how they will pay attention to them, and the viewer’s visual understanding of The Rabbits will be enforced by the visual objects found in Tan’s illustrations.

The majority of visual objects are brought to the page by the rabbit characters. The initial rabbit settlers are evidently doing reconnaissance in the land of the
bandicoots, as communicated by the maps, notebooks and telescopes they tinker with. The tools, test tubes and diagrams used by the rabbits imply that they have plans and intend to use their newfound knowledge of the bandicoot land in some way. The rabbits are portrayed as civilized in comparison to the bandicoots, as they are dressed in clothing; very dapper suits, uniforms and hats, while the bandicoots are “naked”. Some of the rabbits wear glasses, which often symbolize that a character is intelligent, but in an image on [page 6], a series of three lenses that reflects a rabbit’s eyes multiple times has the effect of monstrosity (Appendix: Figure 1). The rabbits’ thin and sharply pointed writing quills evoke a sense of weaponry, and the fact that many rabbits carry muskets can only mean one thing – they intend to use weapons if necessary.

In terms of codes, the self-assured, upright stance of the rabbits denotes their confidence and aggression in illustration after illustration. The ears of the rabbits are exaggerated in length, and always point straight up or backwards. The reader will connect floppy “bunny ears” with cuddly characters, and when compared to the flexible and soft ears of anthropomorphized rabbits such as Peter, Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail (Beatrix Potter), Tan’s rabbits are cold and calculating. The backwards-facing ears of the rabbits may also remind the viewer of real-life animals when they are behaving in an angry or violent manner, for example, horses put their ears flat when they are on the attack. In contrast, the slightly hunched bodies of the bandicoots imply submission, and the reader will associate their curled tails with being sweet or cute, which, in turn, will draw sympathy from the reader for the bandicoots’ dilemma.
The symbolism of the rabbits' ship can denote arrival, but the sheer size of the vessel makes it frightening and gives the viewer the feeling of take-over and invasion. The many layers of sails that reach up the ship’s mast and into the sky, and the shape they form will remind the reader of the British flag, a motif repeated from the “royal seal” of an earlier page found in *The Rabbits*. The steep slope of the ship’s bow comes to a sharply accentuated point, almost as though the ship itself is a weapon intended for use against any character that dares to defy the rabbits. The many symbols that make up the image of the ship give this illustration an overall sense of unease; the reader is realizing the magnitude of the rabbits’ arrival.

The characters of the rabbits are also associated with the reoccurring symbol of clocks, found on their clothes and even forming the eyes of the rows of soldiers who shoot in formation at the bandicoots. These soldier-rabbits have become machine-like and are visually inseparable from their guns. They themselves are no longer natural, as they have become a visual representation of artillery and destruction. Clocks often symbolically represent time, precision and mechanical engineering, and their correlation to the characters of the industrious, regimented rabbits implies that time could be running out for the bandicoots. Another industrial object connected to the rabbits is the symbol of the wheel, which can represent innovation and invention. Some of the rabbits even have wheels for feet, blurring the line between animal and machine. In a particularly detailed illustration on [pages 9 and 10], an ornate painting is being rolled across the pages (also on wheels). The painting foreshadows what is coming, as it
portrays row after row of golden buildings, perhaps the rabbits’ vision of their new habitat. As it progresses across the page, the painting rolls over a lizard, squishing its body and dragging a line of its blood behind the wheel; visually symbolizing future progress and its careless destruction of nature.

Representations of nature are manipulated and the expectations of the reader are shaken by Tan’s illustration of the rabbits’ livestock. The cattle are more machine than animal, with wheels for feet, and dragging behind them milking machines attached to their udders. The rabbits’ intentions for these unnatural cows are made plain by the butcher-style dotted lines that mark their flesh and portion out the various cuts of meat they provide. A similar symbolic marking is found on the rabbits’ sheep, which are branded, indicating the rabbits’ ownership. The sheep also sport tags on their hindquarters that state ‘100%’; the reader will associate this style of tags with those found in clothing, and the ‘100%’ symbolizes the purity of the sheep’s one-hundred percent wool coats as well as the commercial and profit focus of the Rabbit society.

Throughout The Rabbits, one of the most often viewed visual objects is a flag. The rabbit colonizers have raised flags on almost every page of the text, symbolically representing ownership and power. The rabbits take this power to the next level as they steal the bandicoot children and ship them off in rows of kites, away from the arms of their parents. In a representation of indigenous children being taken from their families to attend residential school, this image is one of the most heartbreaking illustrations encountered in The Rabbits. The illustration presents the gestures of the bandicoot
parents; their arms are reaching skywards towards their babies, in a plea of desperation and anguish. This visual code is amplified by the repeating pattern of many parents and their many lost children; the repetition implies the magnitude of the bandicoots’ loss. The reader will also be emotionally gripped by the drips of red from the quill pen of the rabbit enforcers, the words on their documents are also scrawled in red. Nodelman explains that:

[C]olours have emotional connotations that allow them to act as signifiers of states of mind…sometimes, then, picturebook artists give the specific objects they depict colours with emotional resonances of this sort (Nodelman, 1988, p. 141).

The colour red is often associated with blood or death, and the liquid quality of this red symbolizes the death of the bandicoot culture with the loss of the child generation.

In a final gesture of loss, one of the last pages of *The Rabbits* portrays a single bandicoot in a vast, irreparable wasteland (*Appendix: Figure 3*). The solitary bandicoot is curled into a ball, a palpable gesture of despair, isolation and hopelessness. His once-curly tail, which the reader would have associated with a sweet disposition, now lays flat behind his body. Tan’s picture of the lonely bandicoot in the polluted landscape of the rabbits’ making is intended to visually and symbolically provide the reader with the information that hope is lost for the indigenous bandicoot population.

**Part 5: The Intruder**

Within the concept of intrusion, *The Rabbits* portrays one species taking over and destroying the habitat of another species. In Tan’s anthropomorphic illustrations, these
rabbits are emblematic of settlers and colonizers that dismantle the cultural aspects of a people (or animal). The characters of the rabbits, presented as intruders in this picturebook, encroach on the pastoral ideal of the bandicoots’ land and meticulously destroy the relationship between the bandicoots and nature. It is interesting to note that Marsden, as an Australian author, has chosen to use bandicoots and rabbits to tell this story of colonization. Bandicoots are small, rat-like creatures that are native to Australia, while rabbits are an invasive species, introduced by Europeans in the nineteenth century and suspected of being the most significant known factor in crop damage. Thus, the rabbits truly did invade bandicoot territory and proceeded to wreak havoc on the land.

Throughout *The Rabbits*, the intrusive rabbit characters are given more visual power than their bandicoot counterparts. The bandicoots are often presented to the reader on flat, horizontal landscapes, which Molly Bang credits in her book *Picture This* as giving the reader a sense of stability and calm.

I associate horizontal shapes with the surface of the earth or the horizon line – with the floor, the prairie, a calm sea. We humans are most stable when we are horizontal, because we can’t fall down. Shapes that look horizontal look secure because they won’t fall on us, either. (Bang, 2000, p. 42)

In contrast, the rabbits are often placed above the bandicoots, on top of a machine, a wall or a cliff, surveying the land. Bang elaborates that an object placed higher on the page tends to appear more important to the reader, and has “greater pictorial
weight...this simply means that our attention is drawn to the same object more” (Bang, 2000, p. 56). The stressed importance of the rabbit characters visually implies their power and dominance over the bandicoots, and while they might be the intruders, encroaching on bandicoot land, the reader understands that they are the dominant species.

**Conclusion**

The primary picturebook text *The Rabbits* was the focus of this chapter and Perry Nodelman’s theory of narrative art was used as a lens that centered on specific aspects of the visual elements. Tan’s illustrations force the reader to pay attention to detail and read with maturity. If given the right tools, such as Nodelman’s theory of narrative art, students can uncover clues throughout the visual narrative, from the tiny smokestack in the distant horizon of the first page, to the writing on the rabbit Captain’s jacket, the dotted lines drawn on the rabbits’ livestock, the suspiciously red “ink” dripping from their quills as they sign off on bandicoot children being dragged away by flying ships.

*The Rabbits* is an outstanding resource for use in the secondary social studies classroom, as it provides an excellent perspective on the importance of cultural awareness and post-colonial literary theory. An examination of *The Rabbits* in *From Picture Book to Literary Theory* (2003) points out its usefulness in student writing and discussions on the differences between the colonizing power and the local/regional peoples: “To emphasise its difference, it concentrates attention on a sense of place and feelings of displacement, and seeks to retell history from the perspective of oppressed
or displaced peoples” (Stephens, Watson and Parker, 2003, p.40). *The Rabbits* also serves as an accessible text for the study of allegory; and “how authors lead their readers to understand the multiple layers of story” (Stephens, Watson and Parker, 57).
CHAPTER 6: THE ISLAND

This chapter will focus on the last of three primary texts, *The Island*, written and illustrated by Armin Greder. Perry Nodelman’s (1988, 2003) theory of narrative art will be employed as a critical lens in a close reading of *The Island*. As in the close reading of *Fox* and *The Rabbits*, the visual elements within the text such as format and first impressions, mood and atmosphere, style of illustration and meanings of visual objects (Nodelman 1988, Nodelman and Reimer, 2003) will be analyzed. Molly Bang’s critical theories in *Picture This: How Pictures Work* (2000) will also be used in deducing how the illustrator’s compositional choices can direct the emotions of the reader.

Part 1 of this chapter will discuss how format and design choices can connect the reader to the narrative of *The Island*. Part 2 explores the mood and atmosphere of the text, specifically how colour choices can have an impact. Part 3 focuses on the style of illustrations in *The Island* and the connections the reader can make to the illustrations. Part 4 centers on the symbolic meanings of visual objects, especially the concept of gesture in the text’s illustrations. Part 5 will concentrate on the representation of the intruder within this picturebook.

*The Island* tells the tale of a “foreigner” washed ashore and the people of the island who are frightened by his presence. The close-minded townspeople wish to reject him and push him back out to sea, simply because “the foreigner” is different from them. The irrationality of the townspeople grows and it becomes clearer to the reader
that their fear is dangerous, posing the question: how far will a community go to remain insular?

Part 1: Format and First Impressions

The picturebook reader develops definite expectations around the physical aspects of a text. The text’s size and shape, the cover illustration, and the title page or endpapers are qualities that create anticipation and can influence the viewer before they even read a word.

The edition of *The Island* used in this analysis is a hardcover, implying this picturebook is a serious text, and the solemn, single-colour cover denotes an adult tone. The text is physically “taller” and narrower than *Fox* and *The Rabbits*, and Nodelman observes that:

In narrower books, or in those books in which illustrators have chosen to place pictures only on one side of the two-page spread, there is less opportunity for depicting setting and, as a result, greater concentration on and closer empathy with the characters depicted. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 46)

This revelation in terms of format is evident when considering the plot of *The Island*, as the reader is intended to identify with the character of “the foreigner”. In fact, in an explicit design choice, the title page of this text reveals an illustration delivered from the point of view of “the foreigner”. The viewer, through Greder’s visual depiction, is physically placed on the raft and observes the front of the raft as it is pushing against the waves, towards the horizon and the vast ocean. The narrow format of *The Island* also
contributes to the reader’s focus on this text’s conflict. According to Nodelman, “taller” illustrations “emphasize gesture and expression rather than wide ones that emphasize setting and physical relationships with others” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 47). This emphasis on gesture is a prevalent feature of *The Island* and will be discussed further in Part 4: Visual Objects.

The wraparound cover of *The Island* depicts a large stone wall that resembles a fortress, and this image is actually mimicked in the final pages of the text. A reader of a book titled *The Island* may expect to encounter a visual image of an actual island on its cover, thus the lack of any land at all plays with the reader’s expectations. In terms of reader expectations based on cover illustrations, Nodelman states:

> Clearly, then, we have begun to establish our attitudes toward stories even before we have actually looked at the pictures or read any of the words that contain them. When we do begin to look more closely at the pictures, we do so in the light of the information we have already accumulated…any picture that has been offered to our attention, especially one found in the context of a picturebook, implies that the image it depicts is significantly meaningful, worthy of our consideration. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 48-49)

The dark, foreboding image on the cover of *The Island* conveys to the viewer that this text will most likely have a dark atmosphere and the story within may not be intended for an audience of the younger child.
Part 2: Mood and Atmosphere

The mood and atmosphere of a picturebook affect the meaning the reader will take from the text. The reader’s attitude towards the story is dependent upon how they perceive the overall “tone” of the illustrations. The manner in which mood and atmosphere are perceived by the viewer is strongly influenced by the illustrator’s colour palette. The illustrator’s choice of various hues, shades and depth of saturation can affect the reader’s perception of an image. As Greder creates a particularly sombre mood in the art and text throughout *The Island*, the viewer will make connections between the darkly shaded pictures and the gloomy atmosphere encountered by the character of “the foreigner”.

Initially, “the foreigner” is presented to the reader occupying a blank page with no setting, no text and no surrounding characters (*The Island*, [page 2], Appendix: Figure 8). Greder’s use of white space seems to constrain “the foreigner” and cage him in; Nodelman reveals that “using white space around pictures suggests a character’s sense of being restricted” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 53). White space on the page can also demand the involvement of the reader, when “the foreigner” is the only image on the page, the eye is drawn to him and the reader has no choice but to be concerned with this character (Appendix: Figure 8). Nodelman explains that “isolating characters against a white space the shape of their own bodies forces attention upon them” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 53), and this is more prevalent with respect to “the foreigner”, who stands out because of the dark shading around his body.
The overall atmosphere of *The Island* is established early in the text as Greder employs a two-page spread of the rolling sea and the dark horizon. The only points of lightness in this illustration arise from the white caps of the waves, and these white spaces only serve to implicate the strength and danger of the crashing foam. Since this illustration is without an accompanying text, the reader is meant to understand that this image connects with the plea of the fisherman character, found on the previous page: “But the fisherman knew the sea. ‘If we send him back, it will be the death of him and I don’t want that on my conscience,’ he said” (*The Island*, [page 4]). The sinister blue-black colour and implied dangerous atmosphere in the illustration of the sea (*The Island*, [pages 5-6]) serve to embellish the fisherman’s point; the dark sea equals certain death for “the foreigner”.

Colour is used repeatedly in association with the townspeople, but is most prominent in the group scenes in which these characters behave like a mob and conspire against “the foreigner”. In these images, the most dominant colours are the red and yellow of some men’s hats. The reader will connect red with anger and hot rage, which corresponds with the group mood of the illustrations; these characters are ‘seeing red’ at the intrusion of “the foreigner”. The colour yellow, according to Nodelman, often conveys a cheerful emotion, as it is associated with sunlight (Nodelman, 1988). The vibrant mustard-yellow of the hat, however, transmits the emotion of aggression or even decay; Greder’s choice of a more saturated yellow stands out amongst the darkly shaded bodies of the townspeople. The most outstanding use of colour arises in the
final two-page spread; an image of the fisherman’s ship on fire, adrift in the dark sea.

According to the text on the preceding page, the townspeople “set fire to the fisherman’s boat, because he had made them help the man” (*The Island*, [page 28]), and the boat, engulfed in red flame and trailing a plume of black smoke, denotes a mood of fiery rage and dark, hate-filled destruction.

Despite the gray shade of most of *The Island*’s illustrations, the images on [pages 15-16] stand out because of their complete lack of colour. Nodelman asserts that an illustrator may use black and white “to underpin the reality of fantasy situations coming to life” (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 281). These pages contain four panels that depict “the foreigner” involved in different types of labour as the townspeople bicker over who should give him a job. In the context of the story, “the foreigner” is not actually doing these jobs; the black and white hue of these images serves to communicate to the reader that his actions only exist in the imaginations of the townspeople. What further suggests to the reader that these jobs are not real is that these imagined deeds are drawn in a slightly more exaggerated style than Greder’s other illustrations.

**Part 3: Style of Illustrations**

In 1988, Nodelman compared picturebook style to a theatrical production:

[A]ctors ‘illustrate’ the characters they play on stage both by expressing specific lifestyles and by referring to specific pre-existing styles of acting; but the
illustrator’s work is more specifically like the work of a stage designer.

(Nodelman, 1988, p. 81)

When the reader considers all aspects of Greder’s work as a unified whole, it becomes evident that his visual stylistic choices are made with the expectation that his illustrations will support his written text. In *The Island*, Greder particularly communicates meaning to the reader by employing styles that may hold connotations for the viewer.

One of the more obvious stylistic choices made by Greder is his use of panels to depict a series of scenes on the page. The multiple panels in *The Island* serve to balance the page and contribute some dominant weight to the otherwise white space. Their precision helps the reader focus on the actions of the characters and what is happening by following a clean visual narrative. Nodelman expresses that when using a panel style, there is a “symmetry that not only creates a sense of tidy order, it also increases the decorative atmosphere of the book as a whole” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 51).

Partly because of the panels, Greder’s illustrations for *The Island* contain a cartoon element to their style. The features of the characters are particularly expressive, and the faces of the townspeople are chubby and accentuated by prominent noses and eyes. Nodelman finds that exaggerated features in a cartoon-like style is an effective way to tell a visual story: “[I]t is that expressiveness, that ability to show how somebody or something feels, that makes cartooning so appropriate a style for illustrators of narrative” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 99). In a cartoon-style vignette found at
the bottom of [pages 9 and 10], (under a series of four panels), Greder has placed an image of three boys with raised sticks aggressively marching behind a weeping boy, forcing him across the page. This illustration is located at the bottom of the page and is not explicitly connected with either the page’s written text or other images, however, it does unite with the image on the previous page, where the townspeople force “the foreigner” to march ahead of them at the ends of their pitchforks. The deliberate placement of the boys at the bottom of the page suggests its importance to the narrative; these boys are mimicking what they have seen in real life, and Nodelman suggests: “[P]robably because viewers have learned to expect heavier objects to sink, the bottom of a picture usually suggests more weight than the top. Pictures whose bottoms halves are less busy than their top halves often express distress” (Nodelman and Reimer, p. 290).

A form of this illustration is repeated again at the close of The Island, when the townspeople decide to put “the foreigner” back on his raft and push him out to sea (Appendix: Figure 10). In an interesting stylistic choice, Greder does not show the reader “the foreigner”. The illustration depicts the townspeople using pitchforks and rakes to push at something off-page. Since the character of “the foreigner” is visually pushed outside of the page, the reader loses sight of him. This page contains the text’s last mention of “the foreigner” and the illustration is the reader’s final “glimpse” of him. As Greder doesn’t physically show him, his last actions are therefore left to the imagination of the reader. The reader questions: are the townspeople hurting the stranger with the
pitchforks; is he being stabbed with the tines? Is he quietly accepting his fate as he did throughout the narrative, or is “the foreigner” fighting back and resisting the certain death of the sea? This dramatic, climactic scene is emotionally heightened by Greder’s compositional style that imposes a sense of “blindness” on the reader.

Greder also makes use of a very significant style on [page 12] of The Island by paying homage to the technique of expressionist painter Edvard Munch. In a recognizable reference to The Scream (Munch, 1893), this illustration accompanies the narrative of “the foreigner” leaving his designated area and appearing in town (Appendix: Figure 7). This visual allusion connotes a sense of fear and shock. Nodelman explains that an illustrator may choose to “borrow” an image that already has subtext, as reminders of existing styles of art provide the viewer with connotations (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 284). The overly dramatic reaction of the woman demonstrates the absurdity, and yet, threat of the townspeople’s behaviour and her hysteria reveals what the townspeople collectively fear: “the foreigner” represents the unknown, the intruder. The townspeople’s evident distrust and fear of “the foreigner” is evident in The Island’s visual codes such as gestures.

**Part 4: Meanings of Visual Objects**

The contextual knowledge of the reader allows for connections to be made when viewing visual objects or the gestures of a character. When a reader is familiar with a context they will take the time to focus on the details of an image, thereby increasing their ability to interpret and understand the illustrator’s intentions. The assumption a
reader makes with respect to an image enables them to discover the meaning behind the gestures, facial expressions or physical poses of the characters on the page. Nodelman asserts that “contextual assumptions about the functions of pictures are always of great significance in giving meaningful weight to objects in illustrations” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 105). The physical appearance of a character also suggests information about them and moulds the emotions of the reader.

Unlike Fox and The Rabbits, The Island features human characters, and since a human reader is more likely to identify with the physical gestures of a human character, Greder’s use of gestures in his illustrations creates salience and adds meaning to the narrative. The reader’s first introduction to the character of “the foreigner” is in the illustration of his nude body on [page 2] (Appendix: Figure 8). The stark nakedness of “the foreigner” in conjunction with his slightly slumped posture and empty hands at his sides communicates his defencelessness to the reader. His nudity, as well as his calm yet slightly quizzical facial expression, make the character appear harmless and vulnerable. His raft, illustrated on the page opposite “the foreigner,” is small and rickety, further visually implying to the reader that this man is to be pitied, evoking empathy. As well, the raft’s “mast” (a feeble looking stick) flies a white piece of fabric, a cultural symbolic code that represents peace or surrender. Unfortunately, the townspeople are incapable of understanding these subtleties, and in the pages that follow, brandish farming tools such as pitchforks, rakes and hoes in a gestural manner that implies weaponry (Appendix: Figure 10). As well, in the illustration found on pages
[3-4], the reader is positioned in the shoes (or bare feet, rather) of “the foreigner”, as the townspeople look directly at the viewer. This direct gaze is known as a “demand” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), and much like the character of Fox in Wild and Brooks’ *Fox*, these townspeople are breaking the boundary between character and reader, which creates a stronger, more visceral connection to the narrative.

This narrative is also impacted by the relationship between illustration and text, and on [pages 7-8], the reader’s expectations are manipulated when the viewer is presented with an image that does not match the words. While the text reads “[S]o they took him in” (*The Island*, [pages 7-8]), implying the townspeople brought “the foreigner” into their homes in a gesture of kindness, the picture, through gestures and facial expressions, shows that “the foreigner” is being escorted at “pitchfork-point” into the town. In this reverse form of interanimation, in which the text is not matching the illustration, the reader is intended to understand that the townspeople have no intention of caring for “the foreigner”. The disconnection between text and illustrations, as the image contradicts the implied textual meaning, emphasizes this idea.

The townspeople are uncomfortable with the presence of someone on their island that differs from them, and this is visually depicted throughout *The Island*. “The foreigner” cannot join the church choir, apologizes the priest, and the viewer realizes this rejection is because the priest assumes the stranger is evil; this is symbolically suggested by the illustration of “the foreigner” with devil horns. He gives the townspeople nightmares, and their interpretation of his character is portrayed by a
particularly frightening image of “the foreigner” crouched on top of a man in bed, his facial expression and posture undeniably monstrous (Appendix: Figure 9). “I am sure he would murder us all if he could,” said the policeman”, (The Island, [page 20]) is the text that accompanies an illustration of “the foreigner” in an enraged, murderous pose, his fist clenched, eyes narrowed and back turned, implying a duplicitous plot. Yet when “the foreigner” is depicted eating, alone in his goat pen, he is seated on the ground, with his gaze directed downwards, averted from the viewer in an offer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) that is utterly submissive.

The townspeople, on the other hand, are illustrated as a large, aggressive mob, and once they decide to force “the foreigner” back on his raft, their pitchforks symbolically represent spears. When put in context, the tool as weapon motif connects in the reader’s memory with the many visual representations that exist of the scene in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein in which enraged townspeople confront the misunderstood monster with rudimentary, pitchfork-type weapons. In this illustration on [pages 23-24], “the foreigner” is bound with a rope, symbolizing his imprisonment and the fact that he has no choice in the matter; he is a wordless victim.

In the final pages of The Island, the text describes how the townspeople set fire to the fisherman’s boat, as punishment for his acceptance of “the foreigner”, and they build a wall around the island to keep strangers away. The image of the flaming boat visually symbolizes revenge and punishment, as well as the symbolic truth that hatred can spread with the rapidity of fire. The illustration of the wall and watchtowers, which
is also found on the picturebook’s cover, symbolizes isolation, exclusion and distrust.

As well, the slain body of the cormorant, which the townspeople shoot “so that no one would ever find their island again” (The Island, [page 28]), represents the death of innocence, a fall from grace, and outright violence against anything the townspeople don’t understand, anyone that is different.

**Part 5: The Intruder**

The reader’s visual introduction to the character of “the foreigner”, as previously mentioned, is the image of the vulnerable, nude man. The text, however, doesn’t sympathize with “the foreigner”, nor does it ever mention that he has no clothing. The text does specify, “[H]e wasn’t like them” (The Island, [page 1]). This single line, put forth on the very first page, immediately emotionally prepares the reader for the prejudice to follow in the narrative of this picturebook. Furthermore, the physical placement of this text is deliberately separated from the main body of text, giving it weight as well as placing it directly opposite the image of the nude “foreigner” on [page 2]. Nodelman discusses placement of text as an aspect that has narrative significance; when words occupy a small amount of space and leave a page almost empty, it “adds to the dramatic tension of the story” (Nodelman, 1988, p. 54). Therefore, the meaning derived from the line “[H]e wasn’t like them” (The Island, [page 1]), in both the literal meaning and the visual weight created by the text’s placement, immediately segregates “the foreigner” in the mind of the reader.
The character of “the foreigner” also stands out as an intruder amongst the townspeople because of his small size in comparison to their large, overweight bodies. In *Picture This*, Molly Bang explains the emotional effect this can have on the viewer:

> We feel more scared when we are little and an attacker is big, because we’re less able to overcome the danger or control it physically. When we are little, we are weaker and can’t defend ourselves as well in a physical fight (Bang, 2000, p. 18).

In pictorially depicting “the foreigner” as small in comparison to the townspeople, the viewer will emphasize with his character and his overwhelming situation.

Unlike the intruders in *Fox* and *The Rabbits*, where the reader was intended to understand that the characters of Fox and the rabbit colonizers were the antagonists, “the foreigner” protagonist of *The Island* is presented as a sympathetic character. In this sophisticated picturebook, Greder’s purpose is to help the reader develop an understanding of prejudice and its negative impact on society. Simply because someone is different does not justify hatred, and *The Island* makes this point in a visually effective and disturbing manner.

**Conclusion**

The third and final primary picturebook text *The Island* was featured in this chapter while Perry Nodelman’s theory of narrative art was used as a lens to view certain elements of the illustrations. Older students will be able to think critically about a picturebook’s visual narrative and enhance their understanding of a concept such as prejudice and hate as represented in the illustrations of Armin Greder’s *The Island*. This
complex picturebook text would make an excellent resource in the secondary English classroom when studying and discussing short stories or novels that thematically portray the concept of intrusion.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

This chapter consists of five sections. In the first section, I summarize my findings and discuss the validity of picturebooks as a resource for young adult or adult readers. Next, I discuss the significance of the visual construction of the intruder character. Following this, the pedagogical implications of the study are examined and, finally, questions for further research suggested by the study are presented.

Picturebooks as legitimate texts for young adult readers

Picturebooks that are intended for the young adult reader contain distinct characteristics, such as those shared by my primary texts; a complex theme, somewhat disturbing illustrations, intricate vocabulary and an often unresolvable conflict. Visual narratives that encourage critical thought and analysis of images are a valuable resource for the secondary classroom. In a speech delivered in 2009, Shaun Tan discussed how he rediscovered the value of picturebooks as an adult after being asked to illustrate texts aimed at teenagers. He states:

Picturebooks seemed especially good at presenting a reader with complex questions in a concise way, largely through the imaginative play that can exist between words and pictures, outside of any simple or direct visual-verbal relationship. The best may prompt the reader to think about familiar concepts in an unexpected way, offering up a new and interesting perspective. (Tan, March 2009)
From an educational standpoint, the appeal of picturebooks lies in the fact that they invite readers of varied literacy abilities to take part in a critical visual analysis. In fact, the British Columbia Ministry of Education includes the comprehension of visual texts in their Prescribed Learning Outcomes for language arts courses in grades eight to twelve. Prescribed Learning Outcomes are intended to outline the province’s expectations for student learning across British Columbia, and are broken into three sections for language arts: Oral Language, Reading and Viewing, and Writing and Representing. Under the category of Reading and Viewing, students in grades eight to twelve are expected to gradually develop their comprehension of “a variety of visual texts, with increasing complexity of ideas and form” (www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/plo).

Considering the number of readers who struggle with the text-only literature of the standard classroom, picturebooks that present complex, “adult” ideas through illustration are a helpful and thought-provoking resource.

**Visual elements as factors in narrative**

My decision to approach this thesis using Perry Nodelman’s theory of narrative art is based on my desire to develop a manageable framework for students that would enable them to confidently ‘read the visual’. Specific elements of Nodelman’s theory: format and design, mood and atmosphere, style of illustrations and visual objects are instructive and can be plausibly grasped by secondary-aged readers. The visual
elements of *Fox, The Rabbits, and The Island* have an impact on the reader’s interpretation and, in turn, direct how the reader responds to the narrative.

**The visual construction of the intruder**

Wild, Brooks, Marsden, Tan and Greder’s conceptual visions of the intruder served to unite the three primary texts and hold value for readers making connections with other works of literature that also portray this concept. Although their authors and illustrators convey the intruder characters through diverse illustrative styles, distinct plots and a varied cast of characters, the key motif of intrusion is established in all three picturebooks. What makes these picturebooks so effective is the plausibility of the intruder characters. The stories need not be complicated, yet they provide a snapshot of emotional distress and disturbance: anxiety, such as Magpie’s discomfort with the arrival of Fox, the bandicoots’ dismay at the rabbits’ disregard for nature, or the townspeople’s brutal treatment of “the foreigner”. *Fox, The Rabbits, and The Island* are vivid and appealing picturebooks that exemplify the combined power of text and illustration, generating dialogue on trust, friendship, loyalty, jealousy, intrusion, prejudice and loneliness.

In their respective picturebooks, my three primary authors and illustrators achieve an intimate relationship between the visual and the textual, which together create a strong narrative. The authors and illustrators effectively present a depiction of
intrusion, and in so doing, they have constructed sophisticated picturebook texts that will fit within the secondary school curriculum.

**Implications for the classroom**

Ideally, I would like to be able to teach simplified portions of Nodelman’s theory to secondary English students, having the students use these theoretical guidelines in their study of picturebooks. I feel if given a structured strategy with which to analyze images (such as picturebook illustrations), students will be capable of understanding how pictures provide information in stories.

That there should be so much symbolism in picturebooks is surprising only because their intended audience is young and presumably unsophisticated. All symbols are inherently arcane. Only those in the know can interpret them, and a cross is just two pieces of wood to those who are not familiar with its implications. Knowledge and experience can provide that familiarity. Children provided with both the general information about the meanings of particular visual symbols will have the tools to appreciate the otherwise hidden subtleties of many picturebooks – even many apparently simple ones. (Nodelman, 1988, p. 107)

Sophisticated picturebooks could be presented to high school students as supplementary to a novel study unit, or a unit dedicated to picturebook analysis could stand alone. As mentioned previously, the British Columbia Ministry of Education
(www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/plo) expects teachers to address the validity of visual texts in their Prescribed Learning Outcomes for language arts courses in grades eight to twelve. Within the three categories for language arts, students are expected to “speak and listen to make personal responses to texts, relating reactions and emotions to understanding of the text” (Oral Language), “recognize and explain how structures and features of text shape readers’ and viewers’ construction of meaning, including visual/artistic devices” (Reading and Viewing), and “use and experiment with elements of style in writing and representing, appropriate to purpose and audience, to enhance meaning and artistry, including visual/artistic devices” (Writing and Representing). The importance placed on our Ministry of Education’s Prescribed Learning Outcomes amplifies how valid visual devices can be in the study of literature, as long as the classroom teacher provides their students with strategies for analysing the visual elements of the text.

Picturebooks that depict intrusion, such as my three primary texts, would make excellent connections to novels such as The Outsiders in English 8, or To Kill a Mockingbird in English 10. Different curricular areas can inspire a variety of picturebook choices, such as using information picturebooks in the science classroom. Imagine studying the visual dynamics in terms of mood and atmosphere by reading Bunting’s Riding the Tiger in Planning 10 when learning about drug addiction. Picture reading and analysing the many borrowed styles in Gutiérrez’s Picturescape with an art class before a field trip to the Vancouver Art Gallery. Play with the various formats of Shakespearean picturebook interpretations in drama class. Discuss how Wallace’s illustration style
connects to Gordon Lightfoot’s lyrics when reading Canadian Railroad Trilogy with a music class. Let creative writing students be inspired by the images and begin their own short stories with the lines from Van Allsburg’s Mysteries of Harris Burdick.

When transposed into a curriculum model, Nodelman’s theory of narrative art is a feasible lens through which picturebook illustrations can be viewed by students. If teachers put the emphasis on analysing illustrations rather than text, English language learners and students with learning disabilities will have the opportunity to feel confident and be successful. Sophisticated picturebooks can be a useful classroom resource for secondary school teachers in terms of literacy development.

Implications for further research

Since this thesis centred on a close reading of three primary picturebooks as opposed to classroom-based research, it would be a logical next step to undertake some action research in a secondary classroom. Taking Nodelman’s theory of narrative art and simplifying it into a curriculum model would allow for various teachers of different curricular areas to try using sophisticated picturebooks in their classrooms, as mentioned in Implications for the Classroom.

As well, a limitation of this thesis was the fact that the three primary texts were all Australian picturebooks. It would be interesting to apply the same research questions and theoretical lens to three Canadian picturebooks and see what findings
can be made from such a study. Another variation would be to use Nodelman’s theory in a close reading of the narrative art of graphic novels as opposed to picturebooks.

In terms of future research, I am particularly intrigued in how others interpret picturebook illustrations, as we all make different personal contextual associations with images. I am also interested in how picturebook readers would transform their interpretation of a visual image into movement. I would especially like to focus on two aspects of Nodelman’s theory that most relate to the reader’s understanding of a visual image; mood and atmosphere and style of illustrations. Since I have a background in dance, I dream of facilitating a study in which choreographers read picturebooks and create a dance piece based on their interpretations of the visual narrative.

When provided with the right techniques and tools, older readers could find the study of contemporary, complex picturebooks an informative and engaging activity. Picturebooks help students gain an understanding of plot and character dynamics as well as theme, and the idea that themes from picturebooks are applicable to life. Picturebook images are engaging and bring new perspectives to intricate issues that can be daunting when presented in different forms of writing.

Illustrated literature aids students in questioning and evaluating information critically, encouraging them to gain a broader world-view and providing them a lens with which to view literature. Picturebooks intended for young adult readers are capable of promoting a holistic outlook and illuminating both conventional and non-
conventional literatures within the curriculum. In his essay entitled *On Three Ways of Writing for Children*, C.S. Lewis writes:

> For I need not remind such an audience as this that the neat sorting-out of books into age-groups, so dear to publishers, has only a very sketchy relation with the habits of any real readers. Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us. No reader worth his salt trots along in obedience to a time-table. (Lewis, 1952)

I believe that at the heart of my three primary texts, as of all picturebooks, is this: illustrations are able to provide readers, no matter what age, with both the pleasure and power of story.
WORKS CITED AND WORKS CONSULTED

Primary texts

Works cited


**Works consulted**


FIGURE 1: The Rabbits (Pages [5-6]) – unable to obtain publisher’s permission for reprint.

FIGURE 2: The Rabbits (Pages [15-16]) – unable to obtain publisher’s permission for reprint.

FIGURE 3: The Rabbits (Page [26]) – unable to obtain publisher’s permission for reprint.
FIGURE 4: *Fox* (Page [4]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.
FIGURE 5: Fox (Page [11]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.
FIGURE 6: Fox (Page [23]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.
FIGURE 7: *The Island* (Page [12]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.
FIGURE 8: *The Island* (Page [2]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.
FIGURE 9: The Island (Page [17]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.
FIGURE 10: *The Island* (Pages [21-22]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission.