RENDERING THE VISIBLE WORLD: 
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF INTERNALIZATION, 
REPRESENTATION, ORDER, AND NAMING IN A SELECTION OF 
CONTEMPORARY METAFACTIVE ALPHABET BOOKS 

by 

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to answer the question of what metafictive alphabet books offer outside of the aim of literacy education. The alphabet picturebook is often treated as irrelevant beyond its didactic purpose due to its seemingly transparent nature. Because alphabet books exist in theory as a purposive tool to aid in the learning of literacy skills, other attributes of alphabet books are overlooked. The relationships between signs and symbols found in conceptual alphabet picturebooks are complex and worthy of close examination.

This research investigates how the four inherent functions of alphabet books (internalization, representation, order and naming) work in contemporary, non-traditional, metafictive alphabet picturebooks. The research uses a close reading of four primary texts utilizing a theoretical framework centred in the poetics of alphabetization.

This study explores the ways in which the apparent simplicity of the alphabet picturebook masks its underlying structures, and how those structures contribute to our understanding of language.
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DEDICATION

For Brave Irene
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*The baby will, later, learn her tens and alphabets on a pillow in bed. And will sometimes wonder: Little word, who said me? Am I owned or free?*

- Fanny Howe, *The Lives of the Spirit*

*Alphabetic education is the spine of understanding.*

- Seth Lerer, “Stories of the List”

In recent years I’ve experienced the pleasure of having new young people in my life (nieces, nephews and the children of close friends) and I’ve been intrigued to realize that the rituals and routines connected to reading are as important a part of their lives as reading was (and still is) to mine.

My fascination with children’s literature likely began when I was forbidden to read my younger brother’s picturebooks. He had a wicker basket filled with them. Frequent trips to the library meant there was a new selection each week. Early on I associated picturebooks not only with pleasure or its denial, but also with a range of emotional states: anxiety, freedom, acceptance, disobedience. Picturebooks for me, then, were heavily weighted, used as a tool of control, and, to my mind, these colourful stories were far from innocent—so began my continued desire to understand this genre.

Some of the very first books read to children are alphabet books; they mark a threshold of beginnings, and assume the role of initiating a child into the readerly world.

focuses on the “alphabetization” of American culture, and the history of the alphabet as a
genre of text for children (Crain 4-8). The Story of A was a major inspiration for my
interest in the functions and purposes of the alphabet and is referenced heavily
throughout my research. While Zimmer’s review article, “Letters on the Loose” is not
scholarly, I am intrigued to find alphabet books discussed in the Times, as it attests to
their popular and cultural significance. Zimmer states: “There is no finer tradition in
English-language education than transforming the letters of the alphabet into living,
breathing objects of fun” (Times 36). Zimmer goes on to describe the merits of four
contemporary alphabet books and concludes, “Letters need not be mere vehicles for
literacy, as these books demonstrate. They can be the very stuff of creativity, rooted in
the age-old impulse to make the alphabet our plaything” (36). Is this sentiment reflected
in the alphabet books themselves? Are they really as playful and free of instructional
focus as Mr. Zimmer suggests?

My motivation for this study arose out of my curiosity over the fact that the
apparent simplicity of alphabet books may mask their complex role in contemporary
culture. I’d be remiss not to mention the alphabet books themselves. The fact that I prefer
experimental, metafictive alphabet books, and therefore selected them as the focus of my
research, is value laden. I hope to be transparent about this bias. My preference for
metafictional alphabet books derives from my fascination with them, and my desire to
further understand how they work.

Originally, in determining my thesis focus, I had selected a different thesis topic,
but I continued to obsessively study alphabet books and the theoretical underpinnings of
the alphabet picturebooks. The writing of children’s literature scholar Seth Lerer inspired
me to continue with the topic of the alphabet. Lerer’s insistence that there is incredible significance within the structures and forms of children’s literature: “[e]ven the simplest-seeming of our children’s books teaches something elegant and deep” (39), gave me the footing to know that to study the genre of the alphabet book would be to study something profound.

1.1 Significance of the study

“[P]arents and others teach children what they take for granted about language and its operations simply by taking these things for granted”

- Nodelman, “A is for What?”

_During modernity the history of the child and the history of the alphabet have proceeded hand in hand; to attend to one is to uncover news about the other. To be attuned to the ways in which we think and write the alphabet is to witness the small change of cultural capital at work_

- Crain, _The Story of A_

The scholarly literature concerning alphabet books reveals a very complex genre, and a rich history—one that suggests alphabet picturebooks are engaged in much more than teaching the letters of the alphabet. The alphabet books of Dr. Seuss, Edward Gorey, and Chris Van Allsburg, as discussed in George Bodmer’s 1989 article “The Post-Modern Alphabet,” are examples of the creative and cultural explorations of the alphabet book genre by the late 1980s that redirected the genre towards a new direction and
purpose from its original didactic intent as found in *Orbis Pictus, The New England Primer*, and other similar titles through the centuries.

While several alphabet books have turned away from didacticism, many have remained true to the traditional form. I found that from a sample of sixty-five alphabet picturebooks, most retained a traditional framework. There is a division in the genre, and while this indicates a difference of perspective, what it reveals about the essential functions of alphabet books is unclear. Do traditional and non-traditional alphabet books teach similar skills despite their oppositional outlooks? What does an understanding about the workings of metafictive alphabet picturebooks indicate about the significance of the genre?

The purpose of this research project is to examine the functions of alphabet books and determine how those functions operate when they are employed in metafictive alphabet books rather than traditional alphabet picturebooks in which the intent of literacy instruction is paramount.

Few scholars have written about contemporary alphabet books from this particular perspective: examining not simply whether alphabets have a particular function or purpose, but considering *how* these functions work, especially in metafictive alphabet books. I address metafiction as it relates to picturebooks in more detail in the literature review and methodology chapters (2 & 3). In brief, the examination of metafictive alphabet picturebooks allows me to separate the inherent functions from their traditional intent (literacy) due to the fact that metafictive alphabet picturebooks play with their presumed role and call into question didactic aims.
The research I undertake is, therefore, unique. I examine the following four primary texts: Jon Agee’s *Z Goes Home* (2003), Shirley and Milton Glaser’s *The Alphazed* (2003), Étienne Delessert’s *A was an Apple Pie* (2005) and *What Pete Ate from A-Z* by Maria Kalman (2001). The purpose of this analysis is to shed light on how (and if) the functions of alphabet books are meaningful when they are separate from their presumed intent—literacy instruction.

### 1.2 Key terms

**1.2.1 Alphabet book**

The “alphabet book” is a subgenre of the concept book. The concept book for preschoolers is a picturebook created in order to teach or introduce an abstract idea to young children, for example: counting, alphabet, opposites, or in a more abstract sense, mathematics and language. The alphabet book has traditionally been designed to introduce young children to the English-language alphabet. Jeanne Chaney, in her article “Alphabet Books: Resources for Learning” (1993), provides a concise definition of alphabet books: “Typically, one-half to no more than two pages comprise the information for each letter. The page or pages may consist of the uppercase letter, the lowercase letter, or both accompanied by the featured word, the illustration and the text. Most often limited to a 26-letter presentation” (97). The alphabet books selected for this research study are not thematic (i.e., letters of the alphabet themed around categorical topics: animals, technologies, or other topics). Instead, I selected titles that represent language itself, rather than themed categories.
1.2.2 Alphabetization

“Alphabetization” is a term coined by Patricia Crain in *The Story of A*. “The term *Alphabetization* derives from the romance-language verb—to alphabetize, to be alphabetized—for the getting and giving of literacy” (Crain 6). Alphabetization is a social practice in Crain’s view: “the constellation of activities and practices that surrounds the learning and teaching of the alphabet” (7). Crain further explains the term:

“Alphabetization is the process of internalizing the technology of the alphabet; it is what is required of individuals and, collectively, societies, in order to become literate. It, like the alphabet, has a history, and while the stated goals of literacy programs may look similar over time, alphabetization is a historically specific phenomenon” (7). It is this understanding of the term that is used for the purposes of this research.

1.2.3 Alphabetization (Poetics of)

“The Poetics of Alphabetization” is Crain’s term to describe the complex relationship between the alphabet, the culture that produces it, and the individual reader. This term acknowledges that representations of the alphabet (I use “alphabet” to refer to alphabet picturebooks) are created in a specific way, with specific characteristics. The poetics of alphabetization refers to *how* the functions of the alphabet, and by extension, how the alphabetbooks themselves, work. *How* is difficult to define, but includes a constellation of activities, and begins at the foundation, with the inherent functions themselves.
1.2.4 Contemporary

Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines “Contemporary” as “Happening, existing, or coming into being during the same time.” I use the term contemporary to describe alphabet picturebooks published in the last ten years (circa 2001-2011).

1.2.5 Function

In this study, the term “function” is understood as a combination of “purpose” and “result,” which brings together both the intentionality of a characteristic and the result of this intended function. This could be considered the “how” and “why” of an inherent function. Crain understands functions as “actions or behaviors” (84).

There are four inherent functions that apply to the alphabet book: representation, internalization, order, and naming. Each of the four functions will be considered within the context of the metafictive contemporary picturebook in order to establish how the functions work.

Internalization

“Internalization” is one of the four functions identified by Crain. In traditional alphabet books, according to Crain, internalization is represented by tropes of absorption and consumption (85). The main focus of this function is the action involved in taking “in,” or absorbing, the alphabet. Crain connects this to the emergence of the alphabet: “The Catholic alphabet, headed by the cross and accompanied by oral ritual, implied sacramental consumption” (85). The alphabet is intended to be ingested, to be
incorporated into/as the self. Crain terms the historical depictions of this function “Swallow Alphabets” (85).

**Representation**

The alphabetic function of “representation” impersonates human action and the human body (Crain 88). Unlike internalization, which is focused on the act, representation is concerned with the result. Traditionally shown as images of bodies bent to display the letters of the alphabet, this function works as another insistence that the person must interact with language, that the self and the letters that comprise the spelling of the self must be considered together. Crain terms the historical depiction of this function “Body Alphabets” (88).

**Order**

Crain describes the last of her four functions, “order,” as depicting “arbitrary arrangement” (91) in a meaningful way. Traditionally this function is used as a teaching tool, as B always follows A in this particular depiction of English letters. This dependable sequence of letters is similar to the idea that one plus one always equals two, and B always follows A.

**Naming**

The alphabetic function considered by Nodelman to be most important is “naming.” He considers the development of the “naming” skill in the child’s trying to guess the name of a visual image to be the most critical in, and of lasting relevance to, alphabet books. This
game playing, or “puzzle-solving” (Nodelman 243-48), is connected less to the process of learning to identify letters, and more to the skill of selecting the correct “names” for images and representations. The visual literacy then leads outward to the potential for other skill developments. According to this model, the function of naming in this research study is considered to be a guessing game and a potential act of creation. As David Lewis aptly notes, by naming something, we “call it into being” (Lewis 2001, 268).

1.2.6 Literacy

The term “literacy” will appear frequently throughout this research and so it is important to be very clear about the role of the term in my research. I am not interested in whether or not alphabet books contribute to literacy acquisition. However, I am interested in separating the intention behind the creation of alphabet picturebooks (literacy)—from the inherent functions of alphabet picturebooks in order to get a clear view of how these functions operate. Crain’s “Alphabetization” is the umbrella term used for (but not exclusive to) the social process of “the getting and giving of literacy” (Crain 6).

1.2.7 Metafictive and Metafiction

Although there are many interpretations of “metafiction,” as it applies to children’s literature, the most important aspect for the purposes of this study is the self-awareness that characterizes metafictive texts. My primary texts were chosen because they are self-aware in the presentation of language as both a character in the story, and as part of the language that facilitates reading the story. In Jon Agee’s Z Goes Home, for example, “Z” is represented as a character in the story, a protagonist trying to find his/her way home, as
well as existing as a letter in the alphabet used as a means of transmitting story. I did not choose the parallel term “postmodern” due to the fact that postmodern and postmodernism have historical and cultural connotations (Lewis 100). “Metafictive,” by contrast, is more descriptive and appropriate for my purposes.

1.2.8 Picturebook

The use of the compound word “picturebook” in this research study is intentional; Lawrence Sipe, in his article “Picturebooks as Aesthetic Objects” (2001), notes that "...the spelling picturebook – as one word – is utilized intentionally in order to emphasize the unity of words and pictures that is the hallmark of this type of book" (Sipe 23). A definition that incorporates the complexity of picturebooks is credited to Arizpe and Styles, from their book Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts: “We are talking about picturebooks composed of pictures and words whose intimate interaction creates layers of meaning, open to different interpretations and which have the potential to arouse their readers to reflect on the act of reading itself” (22).

1.2.9 Shadow text

This term refers to the “unspoken” meaning present in alphabet books. Nodelman defines it in the following way: “[t]he simple text is accompanied by an unspoken and much more complex shadow – a text not actually there but implied and required in order to make sense of the actual text” (Nodelman 243). The concept of the shadow text is especially relevant for texts of relative simplicity (notably alphabet picturebooks) as they “make their best sense only in the context of an unspoken complexity that they evoke and
that they require the reader/viewers to know in order to make sense of them” (243).

Examples of these unspoken complexities are: “knowledge of the nature and meanings of the places, people and events they refer to,” and, “the linguistic patterns and conventions that make language comprehensible” (243). According to Nodelman, the simpler the text is, the more complex its accompanying shadow will be.

**1.3 Research question**

My research study interrogates assumptions surrounding the purpose and nature of alphabet books. In researching my question, each of the four primary texts is examined with one of the four functions as a focus. In a close reading of each of my selected alphabet books, I examine the ways in which the specific function works within the metafictive context. My research question is:

**How do the four functions of (1) internalization, (2) representation, (3) order and (4) naming operate in a selection of contemporary metafictive alphabet picturebooks?**

This research question indicates that alphabet books are not yet fully understood, and thus could benefit from further research. They are still published, purchased, and shared with children, and yet, the purpose of alphabet books and their functions remain a relatively unexplored research field. Nodelman expands on this view by stating: “Understanding what the eye meets in the context of culture and language always requires more than meets the eye. That applies pointedly to children’s literature, whose
relatively simple texts make their best sense only in the context of an unspoken complexity that they evoke” (243).

My research focus is not on whether alphabet books facilitate learning to read, but rather on how the four inherent functions of alphabet books operate beyond the aim of literacy development. Do the four functions examined in this selection of metafictional texts provide insight into the “unspoken complexity” of the alphabet picturebook?

1.4 Rationale and criteria for text selection

I selected four primary texts from sixty-five that I examined from holdings in The University of British Columbia’s Education Library, the Vancouver Public Library and local bookstores. The Appendix lists all the titles that I examined in my original sample pool. My selection of texts was purposive, i.e., I chose them due to their meeting my set of criteria, which is listed below. The most difficult aspect of the selection process was to ensure that I was selecting true alphabet books (not picturebooks about the alphabet), and that the alphabet books be metafictive—that the books were manipulating the alphabet in order to tell more than one story (specifically that the books both presenting the alphabet and be about the alphabet). I also chose titles that highlight one of four of the alphabet functions in order to pair each text with a different function. I read sixty-five alphabet books during the selection process, but most were themed, or had more narration than true concept books. The books listed in Appendix A are those I considered when selecting the four primary texts.
Criteria for primary text selection

1) Contemporary alphabet books (published between 2001 and 2011).
Selecting from alphabet picturebooks published in the last decade provides both a manageable scope, and a large enough sample size to enable me to choose primary texts selectively.

2) Books that address the alphabet directly as the primary content, rather than through a theme in which the alphabet focuses on a broader topic, such as found in The Dinosaur Alphabet Book or Animal Babies ABC. Alphabet books that have an alternate theme are often just a means to organize and present information about a topic. They are not necessarily created specifically with young children as the intended audience. I am interested in alphabet books that have as their main focus the alphabet itself.

3) Books in the English language.
The rationale for English is twofold: firstly, it narrows the scope of selection dramatically, and secondly, English is my first language, and therefore I am in a position to study it with competence.

4) Books published in Canada or the United States.
This narrows the potential texts to a manageable group for both selection purposes and enables me to discuss the findings in a specific context.

5) Books with metafictive qualities.
I have chosen this particular characteristic (metafiction) because it has not yet been examined in the context of contemporary alphabet picturebooks.
1.5 Titles chosen as primary texts

*Individual functions of the alphabet book examined within each of the primary texts*

1.5.1 **Internalization:** Delessert, Étienne. 2005. *A Was an Apple Pie*. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions.

*A Was an Apple Pie* plays with the concepts and design of the alphabet books that preceded it. I chose it because it met my criteria and it contains references to the “A is for Apple” alphabet books that came before it, such as the classic *A Apple Pie* by Kate Greenaway, published in 1886. Delessert’s title is a modern version of “A Apple Pie” and incorporates subtle acts of rebellion in relation to earlier publications. When conducting the close reading of *A Was an Apple Pie*, I use images from Greenaway’s *A Apple Pie* to highlight the metafictive qualities of Delessert’s text, and as a means of closely examining the function of internalization.


The letter featured in *Z Goes Home* is the last letter of the alphabet, and is therefore already a departure from the standard presentation of alphabet books—a departure from the order of things. “Z” is represented as both a letter in the alphabet, and is simultaneously the main character in the narrative. The question of what is real and unreal (“fact” vs. “fiction”) is in play throughout the text. This picturebook is beautifully designed and possesses a metafictive awareness of itself as artifact. I chose it because it
met my criteria and specifically is valuable to explore how the function of representation is displayed.


This alphabet book begins with an empty room. The text reads: “A long time ago, before there was anything, there was a small, empty yellow room.” The reader understands that in order for things to exist, the alphabet needs to be introduced. This questioning of whether language is created, or whether it has always existed, is a very sophisticated premise, and there is much room for analysis. The letters in *Alphazeds* are all performers on stage, stumbling in and out of the scene in random order. I chose this text because it met my criteria and specifically is valuable to explore how the function of arbitrary order works in this self-aware alphabet book.


Kalman’s work has been a personal favourite for a long time. The quality of the artwork and the sense of humor in this text make it very appealing. *What Pete Ate from A-Z* introduces itself as “an exploration of the English alphabet.” This examination is presented as an unorthodox list (from A to Z) of what Pete the dog eats (beyond his permissible foods). This alphabet book is metafictive in that it is an untraditional representation of a traditional form. Kalman uses the functions of the alphabet
(specifically naming) to parody the alphabet itself. Pete the dog eats his way through the very thing the book presents: the alphabet. I chose this text because it met my criteria and specifically is valuable to perform a close reading of how the playful act of naming operates in this alphabet picturebook.

1.6 Overview of thesis chapters

In Chapter one, I introduce the topic of research, my motivation for the area of research and the specifics of the research question.

In Chapter two, I present my Literature Review, which is organized under the following headings: the changing nature of the alphabet picturebook; the inherent functions of the alphabet picturebook; the postmodern alphabet picturebook; metafictive alphabet picturebooks; and the ecology of the picturebook.

In Chapter three, I present my theoretical framework and methodology. My theoretical framework focuses on the work of Crain (2011), Nodelman (2001) and Lewis (2001). My methodology discusses the ways in which I apply the theoretical framework to analyze the primary texts.

Chapter four is divided into four sections, each dealing with one of four primary texts: Jon Agee’s Z Goes Home (2003), Shirley and Milton Glaser’s The Alphazed (2003), Étienne Delessert’s A was an Apple Pie (2005) and What Pete Ate from A-Z by Maria Kalman (2001). I undertake a close reading of each picturebook to determine how one of the four functions (internalization, representation, order or naming) operates in the metafictive environment of a single text.
Chapter five presents my conclusions and discussion of the findings as they relate to the research question.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning to read must always start with knowing the letters

- Zipes, “Alphabets”

The literature review that follows documents earlier research in the general area I am investigating. It will also create a foundational discussion of the topics necessary to contextualize the analysis of the primary texts; the significance of the alphabet book, their inherent functions, postmodern alphabet picturebooks, metafictive characteristics, and the ecology of the alphabet book.

2.1 The changing nature of the alphabet book

In the words of children’s literature scholar Lissa Paul, since the Comenian alphabet, “alphabet books have functioned almost as barometers, reflecting and constructing images of children, society and culture” (2011, 142). The Visible World is the English translation of the title Orbis Sensualium Pictus by Johann Amos Comenius. Published in 1658, Orbis Pictus was the first “picture book” for children (Crain 2000, 19). Orbis Pictus is described in The Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature as “a child’s picture encyclopedia. . . .Initial letters relate not to objects but to sounds” (Zipes 2005, 7). Comenius decided learning should be pleasurable, and, in efforts to accomplish this, the Comenian alphabet utilizes illustrations to capture the imagination of the child. The objective of this picturebook was to bring the world to the reader, to make the world visible, and to make transparent the line between image and text.
While this first illustrated alphabet book was published in the seventeenth century, the title is surprisingly relevant when considering the nature of contemporary alphabet books. Alphabet books were, and still are, primarily considered to be tools for literacy instruction. *The Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature* introduces its chapter on “Alphabets” with the following statement, “Learning to read must always start with knowing the letters” (Zipes 1). Comenius’s title, *The Visible World*, invites consideration beyond simply learning the letters of the English alphabet. The alphabet could be a gateway for much more—the world made visible. At the very least the title indicates that the reality of the physical world itself is linked to language. This view echoes critical literacy theorist and practitioner Paulo Freire, who is widely quoted as saying “reading the word is reading the world” (Freire 1987, 8). For Freire, literacy “is part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one’s experience. To be able to name one’s experience is part of what it meant to ‘read’ the world” (7).

Alphabet books are steeped in a didactic history—whether teaching spiritual and moral lessons (Crain 20), or teaching children to recognize the letters of the English alphabet. William Moebius makes a statement about picturebooks which I apply to alphabet picturebooks: “[w]ether in the service of nation, culture, or religion, the picture book has tended, no matter where it has emerged as a medium for children, to be identified with public decency and right-thinking, even if the message…seemed to be subversive” (2011, 171). Moebius points to a process much larger than the picturebook as a material object, but rather that picture books are considered to have a social purpose. His statement reveals that all picturebooks (and thus alphabet books) have a social value.
attached to them—whether in the past or present, alphabet books are thought to play a role in the shaping of children.

While it is true that my research does not directly address the aim of literacy development, an awareness of how literacy is connected to ideas about the alphabet book will be relevant as a means of understanding how the intention behind the creation of alphabet books contributes to their presumed purpose. To this end the research of Lissa Paul is illuminating: “[l]earning to be literate begins with the alphabet. From the ‘Christ-cross row’ of letters on a sixteenth-century hornbook to the animated letters and alphabet sounds from the twentieth-century children’s television program Sesame Street, ABCs initiate children into reading. Teaching children their letters has always been the bedrock on which literacy is founded” (2011, 142).

While it is true that alphabet books have been considered as teaching tools, exactly what is being taught is not all together clear. Perry Nodelman’s “A is for…What?” is a discussion of “why they [alphabet books] exist at all” (245). Alphabet books have remained culturally significant; however, the belief that alphabet books actually aid in literacy instruction is one that Nodelman questions (235). He cites research by C. Cooper (1996) concerning “whole language approaches” to literacy that indicates “knowledge of the alphabet is not all that important a part of learning to read, particularly in the early stages with which we tend to associate alphabet books” (Cooper, quoted in Nodelman 236). Jacquelyn Ardam makes a similar point when she comments on critics writing about how alphabet books work. She argues that they “sidestep the simple fact that reading the text of an alphabet book required knowledge that the book presupposes doesn’t exist” (2011, 589).
The significance, then, of alphabet books both past and present, is their didactic nature, their intent to teach. Lerer states in his article “Children’s Literature and the Stories of the List”:

The didactic quality of texts for children is apparent to all who write about the subject, and the academic legacy of children’s literary study almost seems to beg for an acknowledgment of pedagogy as the primary effect of children’s literature. Such emphasis creates what I believe to be a false distinction between instructing and entertaining…..The issue is, of course, not whether children’s literature teaches but just what it teaches, and to whom…(31)

If this statement is true of all types of children’s literature, as Lerer claims, then it can be considered true for the most transparently didactic of all types of children’s literature—the alphabet picturebook.

### 2.2 The inherent functions of the alphabet book

The various “functions” of the alphabet book are those structural elements that create form and purpose, and that lend authority to the alphabet. Separating “function” (the how) from “purpose” (the why) is key to discovering the ways in which meaning is created. While the intended purpose of alphabet books may change dramatically—from book to book, and throughout the years—the actual functions, how they work, no matter their aim, remain constant. The key point here is that these inherent functions were traditionally intended to support the aim of literacy, but, if the goals of alphabet books change, and literacy can no longer be assumed to be the goal of all alphabet picturebooks, how are these traditional functions working in nontraditional texts?
Patricia Crain, in *The Story of A*, emphasizes three of these key functions: order, internalization and representation (97). *The Story of A* is a complex study of a cultural artifact, the alphabet, and concerns “the alphabetization of American culture” (4). She examines the social practices surrounding literacy training and the impact of this cultural practice: “the alphabet is the technology with which the American culture has long spoken to its children and within which it has symbolically represented and formed them” (4).

Crain undertakes her analysis by looking at something she calls “the poetics of alphabetization” (96). Her study of poetics outlines how key information about the alphabet is revealed: “[t]hese poetics reveal discursive patterns that allow us to eavesdrop, so to speak, on the conversation American culture has with itself about literacy in its formative decades, and that reveal the cultural origins of strongly held beliefs about the value of reading and books” (5). Crain reaches far beyond the alphabet book, but she does begin by tracing its history, and she also presents a way of reading the poetics of the alphabet as a means of discovering how it works. In “The Poetics of Alphabetization” (96), she further addresses this for the reader.

Crain’s analysis is not limited to the functions of the alphabet in and of themselves; rather, she presents a detailed, complex analysis of how functions and tropes interact together to create meaning. She distinguishes between the function of the alphabet, and the way the alphabet is represented. She terms the interaction between function and representation as a “trope-function pair” (96). While this is fascinating, my focus is on the functions alone: the purposes of the alphabet, how alphabet books are made to work—those structural elements that are unchanging. Crain’s three key
functions: order, internalization and representation, are defined clearly in my definition of
terms in Chapter 1.

Perry Nodelman’s research reveals the fourth inherent function—naming. Nodelman
mentions various functions of the alphabet that could be credited with enabling
children to learn to read, such as “[s]equencing, matching, classification, rhyming, recall, memory …” (235). Nodelman, however, does not really see these functions as critical to the true importance of alphabet picturebooks. His interest is in the function of naming (247), and how naming translates as much more than letter identification.

Nodelman believes (as does Crain) that learning to read the pictures in an alphabet book precedes the ability to read the words. Nodelman says about this process:

Once having looked at and understood the picture, child viewers must determine which one specific part of whatever it represents is what specifically requires attention….They must also understand that while many different parts of an image can be isolated as separate figures and named—not just the bird, but also the wing and the beak—only one such figure and name is the relevant one in the context of the intended alphabetical learning. (238)

In Nodelman’s view, this task of identification, the function of naming, is the key to alphabetic learning.
2.3 The postmodern alphabet picturebook

*Postmodernism* destabilizes the boundary between real and imaginary leaving readers to ponder where fictions’ truths lie

- Philip Nel, “Postmodernism”

The discussion of postmodern alphabet picturebooks is important to this research due to the fact that children’s literature scholars have identified this type of picturebook as different from more traditional picturebooks. While my research makes use of the term “metafictive” for the reasons outlined in my definition of terms, research regarding the postmodern picturebook is relevant as it anchors the discussion of contemporary alphabet picturebooks in terms of both cultural and historical contexts. Postmodern picturebooks are characterized in part by metafictive qualities. Thus, an understanding of postmodern picturebooks allows one to comprehend the nature of the metafictive qualities present within the primary texts.

George Bodmer, in “The Post-Modern Alphabet: Extending the Limits of the Contemporary Alphabet Book, from Seuss to Gorey” (1989), claims that “[f]rom its overtly didactic beginning, the alphabet book has always reflected the time and culture from which it springs” (115). Bodmer also suggests that alphabet books have changed a great deal from the early years of children’s literature: “Didactic almost by definition, the alphabet book has evolved in our time into a statement of the lack of faith in didacticism” (115). These statements indicate that not only can information about culture be found within alphabet books, but also that this information will change as cultural beliefs change. Bodmer examines a selection of the most experimental creators of postmodern
alphabet books for children, such as Edward Gorey and Dr. Seuss, among others, available in 1989, at the publication of his article. As Bodmer’s article was written two decades ago, one might assume that the rejection of a didactic focus in his examination of alphabet books continues in those published today.

Children’s literature scholar Karen Coats, in her article “P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imagining the Alphabet” (2000), asserts that instead of the traditionally masculine model, i.e., “A is for Adam,” alphabet books are becoming more performative and playful (90). She suggests, rather than language being presented as something tangible, alphabet books actually call into question the very nature of how we construct language and reality. Like Bodmer and Crain, Coats states that alphabet books are evolving, and that this evolution is mirrored by the culture that creates them (88). In Coats’ opinion, “[t]he alphabet defines what we can know and gives shape and order to our experience” (92).

Postmodernism, defined by children’s literature scholar Philip Nel, “denotes an historical period, a style, or a cultural logic” (81). In his view, the distinction between postmodernism and modernism is blurred, but as he observes, the difference focuses on production (a postmodern quality) as opposed to the value placed on certain narratives above others (modern). Nel goes on to describe how postmodernism took form in children’s literature in three characteristic ways (181). The first is “Narrative fragmentation—simultaneous narratives that both compete with and complement one another” (181-182). The second is characterized by self-conscious awareness of the very form of the book, and Nel terms this “metafictional” (182). This is the characteristic I am most interested in, and is also one of the characteristics of my primary text selections. The third is termed “metapictures” (182). The term “metapictures” indicates that a page
can be read in different ways when the placement of the book is changed (e.g., turning it upside down). Nel explains that the goal of postmodern picturebooks is to challenge expectations. There is, however, a problem inherent in this: “[t]he central problem of postmodern representational strategies: they presume that the reader, having perceived the irony or made sense of the ambiguity, will then arrive at an enlightened conclusion” (185).

2.4 Metafictive alphabet picturebooks

Books which require children to engage in the process of constructing the story are metafictional, for they are fiction about the creation of fiction

- Roberta Seelinger Trites, “Manifold Narratives”

In his book Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text, children’s literature scholar David Lewis claims that the element all postmodern picturebooks have in common is that they “are all inherently metafictive; that they comment upon, or direct attention to, the nature of fiction in the process of creating it” (2001, 93). Arizpe and Styles go further, suggesting that the very form of the picturebook itself is a metafictive form for the following reason: “we are talking about picturebooks composed of pictures and words whose intimate interaction creates layers of meaning, open to different interpretations and which have the potential to arouse their readers to reflect on the act of reading itself” (22). Lewis is more specific about what constitutes metafictive picturebooks in his article “The Constructedness of Texts: Picture Books and the Metafictive” (1996). In this article he identifies three features of the metafictive
picturebook. The first feature is “excess” and he defines this as “going too far,” or “an accumulation of extravagant imagery” (273). The second quality he terms “indeterminacy,” referring to the gaps and absences of logic in a picturebook. The third quality is “boundary breaking,” and Lewis describes this as “all metafictive devices involve the transgressing of boundaries since, by definition, the metafictive draws attention to conventions by breaking them” (274). These three characteristics point to a shared playful manipulation of their identities and the awareness that the author-illustrator can construct so that the book can, in some sense, be self-aware.

Children’s literature scholar Roberta Seelinger Trites states: “[B]ooks which require children to engage in the process of constructing the story are metafictional, for they are fiction about the creation of fiction” (1994, 231). This definition is particularly relevant, as the alphabet books selected for the purposes of this research do require from readers an awareness of the “constructedness” (Lewis 1996) of language itself. The metafictive texts I have selected often demonstrate a sense of humor towards the very form they take.

Another layer is added to this definition of metafictive identity by Trites in her article titled “Manifold Narratives: Metafiction and Ideology in Picturebooks.” She states the following about metafictional picturebooks that “develop more than one narrative line” (225): “Whether someone reads a picture book or hears it aloud, the experience involves a complex dialogue process of making meaning from multiple discourses” (226).

In order to determine how texts are metafictional, Geoff Moss, in “Metafiction and the Poetics of Children’s Literature” (1990), explains the opposite, the characteristics
of a non-metafictional text. This distinction is useful to keep in mind when considering traditional alphabet books. He describes the format of non-metafictional texts as follows:

Technique and structure are backgrounded so that the message of the text is conveyed through an apparently neutral or transparent medium which allows the utmost identification with the author’s intention…it aims to deny the plurality of meaning…. Such texts assume a form of innocence, especially about the medium of language, on behalf of the reader who is invited to accept, without question, an established relationship between signifier and signified. (50)

Moss claims it is this “assumed innocence” of the reader that is important. By contrast, it is my position that metafictional alphabet books do not assume innocence on the part of the reader and instead, “letters become performers in and of reality rather than simply pointers to something outside themselves” (Ardam 586).

In the article “It's Not all Black and White': Postmodern Picture Books and New Literacies,” Michèle Anstey outlines many metafictive qualities. I have selected two of these characteristics in order to define and recognize the metafictive elements of the primary alphabet picturebooks under examination. Anstey defines these two metafictive qualities as:

1) The texts are “consciously constructed and have particular social, political and economic purposes” (2002, 448).

This self-conscious quality is the most important for my research, and, in my view, facilitates the second:

2) “[T]here is a need to consider the possible meanings of the text [and image], how
they are constructing the reader and the world around him or her in particular ways and
why this construction is being made” (448).

2.5 The ecology of the picturebook

While the classification of “metafictive” is useful to a degree (certainly for the
purposes of selecting primary texts), many children’s literature scholars note the
impossibility of determining the exact classification due to the complexity of each
picturebook. William Moebius, in his chapter “Picture Books” (2011) in Keywords for
Children’s Literature, states:

Linking the words “picture” and “book”…, some academic specialists have
attempted to zero in on a particular configuration or historical modality of books
for children in which pictures and words together are treated as semi-autonomous
and mutually attractive chains of meaning, rather than as fixed images servicing
as supplement to meanings fixed in words. (169-71)

This statement makes clear the fact that image and text cannot be considered apart from
the other. I will undertake the close reading of my primary texts with this philosophy
clearly in mind. Moebius goes on to quote Barbara Bader’s definition of the picturebook
(also quoted at the beginning of Davis Lewis’s Reading Contemporary Picturebooks),
which he claims, “is still the most comprehensive, making room for the child reader’s
experience while acknowledging the books physicality” (171). Bader’s definition is as
follows:

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and
commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and, foremost, an
experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. On its own terms its possibilities are limitless. (Bader 1976,1)

Lewis emphasizes the complexity and diversity of each individual picturebook (picturebook being the category and genre that incorporates the alphabet book). Rather than using the classification of divisions and types of picturebooks, Lewis posits an ecological view, one that brings word and image together in a complex relationship. In his words: “what we need is a way of looking at picturebooks that in the broad view recognizes the interanimation that always occurs when words and pictures are intertwined… [and] that also posits the flexibility of the relationship” (44).

Lewis claims we can understand the meaning of picturebooks by a combined approach which considers both the ecological elements and the functions of those elements: “The meaningfulness of a picture for any particular viewer will not depend solely upon his or her ability to read off its representational sense – but will also depend on the function, the use to which the picture is put” (130). Lewis’s concept of picturebook “ecology” will frame my close readings.

In Chapter three I outline the theoretical framework that structures the close readings of my primary texts. These theoretical concepts are the inherent alphabet functions of the alphabet as posited by Crain and Nodelman, and, the ecology of the picturebook according to Lewis. The term metafiction will also be reintroduced and elaborated upon as part of my methodology.
CHAPTER 3: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction to theoretical framework

*In telling tales of learning how to read and write, children’s books make the child the student of the world and make the world a book of signs*

- Seth Lerer, “Stories of the List”

My critical lens, through which I examine my primary texts, is framed by adapting elements of several critical sources. Significant to my framework is Lewis’s *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks: Picturing Text*, specifically his concept of the “Ecology of the Picturebook” (Lewis 46-59). Crain’s “Poetics of Alphabetization” (Crain 96-101), informs my chosen methodology, as it explains the inherent functions of the alphabet. Nodelman also contributes to this discussion with his concept of the “shadow text” as it relates to picturebooks (Nodelman 243). This “shadow text” implies that picturebooks in general, and alphabet picture books specifically, have layers of meaning that are shadows, suggestions of meaning that exist beyond the visible content of images and text. This notion of the shadow text has implications for the function of naming, as it implies that this function can work to communicate multiple meanings beyond the obvious content (243-245).

Crain’s “poetics of alphabetization” and Nodelman’s “shadow text” are appropriate partners to Lewis’s “ecology.” While Crain, Nodelman and Lewis use different methods for focus and analysis, their concepts are compatible, and each
contributes equally to my framework for investigation of how the functions of the alphabet work within contemporary metafictive alphabet picturebooks.

In their discussions on the functions of the alphabet, both Crain and Nodelman have similar views regarding two key points; the first: how alphabet books are intended to work, is a fundamental part of the genre. Secondly: both Crain and Nodelman assert that the nature of the image is critical to understanding alphabet picturebooks. According to Crain: “In representations of the alphabet, it is the alphabet that must be anchored, the image (italics mine) does the anchoring” (49). I elaborate on these two perspectives under the following headings. The first is titled: Inherent functions of the alphabet. This section focuses on the workings of alphabet books themselves. I discuss Crain’s “poetics of alphabetization” as it relates to three of the four functions of the alphabet book, followed by Nodelman’s “shadow text” and the function of naming.

The second heading, Lewis’s “ecology of the picturebook,” deals with how I perform a close reading of the primary texts.

3.2 Theoretical framework

3.2.1 Inherent alphabet functions

If what follows seems to be more about images than about text, that is because learning to read means first and foremost learning how to look.

- Patricia Crain, *The Story of A*

In analyzing what children’s literature scholars consider to be alphabet books’ various aesthetic and literary “functions” (functions being those structural elements that
combine to comprise form, and express intention, lending authority to the alphabet), I determined that four functions in particular merited discussion: internalization, representation, order, and naming. These functions are specific and unique to the genre of alphabet books.

An explanation of the functions of the alphabet will help to frame the close reading, in terms of knowing how functions usually operate, and to consider if they operate in the same, or different ways in their new metafictive environment. Crain says the functions of the alphabet are always present in each representation of the alphabet (97). Crain’s umbrella term for how the functions of the alphabet work is called “The Poetics of Alphabetization” (96). I will reintroduce the three functions outlined by Crain, and Nodelman’s fourth function, naming, will follow.

**The poetics of alphabetization: internalization, representation and order**

Crain describes the various representations of the alphabet as having been “made a certain way” (6)—as having a particular type of poetics centered in the inherent functions of alphabetization. Crain goes on to argue that the ability of the alphabet to be meaningful depends on two things: “it must respond to the symbolic requirements of its culture” (97), and “must fit in with the current status of literacy—both its desired and real range—in that culture” (97). To clarify, Crain explains that the act of reading is not really an inherent function of the alphabet itself—the existence of an alphabet doesn’t mean it needs to be read—but that the components of reading are inherent to how alphabets work. These components are those she terms functions—the actions and behaviors necessary to facilitate the act of reading. Crain identifies three functions: internalization and
representation and order. She discusses how these functions have worked historically in alphabetic depictions, and her umbrella term for this is the poetics of alphabetization. This concept is important to my research because it suggests that the meaningfulness of alphabet picturebooks depends on how they are intended to work within the context of literacy education and, as I have posited with the research question, how they are intended to work may not relate entirely to how they actually work.

According to Crain, each inherent function of the alphabet is present in every “figure,” or depiction of alphabetic text (97). This is a valuable component of my theoretical framework because it asserts that each of the functions can be isolated and examined in any alphabet picturebook. Crain’s morphology of the alphabetic text is “grounded in the alphabet’s inherent functions” (9), and this indicates that the functions of the alphabet are meaningful, and a worthy object of study.

To reiterate, the three functions of the alphabet Crain identifies are: representation, internalization and order. How each function is meant to work is revealed by how that function is visually depicted—the form their image takes. Crain’s three functions are depicted in three corresponding “types” of alphabet books. The type of alphabet book Crain terms “[s]wallow alphabets,” highlights the function of internalization. “Body alphabets” (88) are the type of alphabet book that features representation, and the function of order is shown in the type of alphabet book Crain calls “worldly alphabets” (91). The notion that is most impressive to Crain is that the functions of the alphabet determine the very form their representations take—the power of creation is within the alphabet itself (87). This is relevant to my research because it indicates that
the visual depictions of alphabets are not simply communicating the intended purpose of teaching literary skills, but that they have within them the power of creation.

*The shadow text: naming*

Crain has stated that representations of the alphabet “look a certain way to work a certain way,” (6) and that the intended meaning of the alphabet’s functions are grounded in the image those functions take. Nodelman’s alphabetic function, naming, is more abstract and can’t be identified visually by the form or depiction of a particular alphabetic representation, but only by the overall environment of an alphabet book. Nodelman explains further: “On its own, a picture of an apple might suggest a whole range of emotion and ideas. In the context of an alphabet book and on the A page, the image correctly connects with just one word, apple…” (247). To clarify, the alphabet book that presents the apple in connection to the letter A, does want the reader to name “apple”. That being said, if many images one could associate with the letter “A” are also present, the function of naming becomes a more complex task.

Exactly how the function of naming works is most easily understood when explained in terms of Nodelman’s concept of “the shadow text” (243). According to Nodelman, alphabet books have very simple texts that “make sense only in the context of an unspoken complexity that they evoke” (243). He explains that this simple text “is accompanied by an unspoken and much more complicated shadow—a text not actually there but implied and required in order to make sense of the actual text. Alphabet books represent one specific form of this combination of simple text and implied shadow” (243). Simply put, alphabet books contain layers of meaning, simple and complex: “all
alphabet books require knowledge more complicated and more extensive than the knowledge they purport to teach” (249). This is valuable to my research because it means alphabet books can be examined for information beyond their imagined and perceived intent.

Alphabet books are meant to work this way; thus the function of alphabet books, according to Nodelman, is naming. Naming works in the following way: the viewer is required to determine which specific part of the image requires attention. Once that element is singled out, viewers must now “name” it. This means they must already know its name. As Nodelman points out, this is complicated by the fact that “they must name it as the people who made the book expect them to name it” (238).

By examining how these functions work, i.e., the mechanics, we can then study why they work in that particular fashion. What can be gathered from both Crain and Nodelman is that each inherent function is always present in every type of representation of the alphabet, and some types of alphabetic representations highlight one function above others. Also, Crain and Nodelman agree that we can recognize the individual functions by the way alphabet books are visually represented.

For this reason—the centrality of the image—I utilize Lewis’s theory of the “ecology of the picturebook” as a lens through which I examine the selected primary texts. My theoretical framework combines these critical perspectives and applies them to the four inherent functions present in every alphabet book. I examine each function within the ecology of a single metafictive alphabet book.
3.2.2 The ecology of the picturebook

*Picturebooks can be and are seen under a number of different aspects: they deliver up their meanings to us in a number of different ways.*

- David Lewis, *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*

While Crain and Nodelman are aware of the anchoring role of the image, they also acknowledge the various additional elements that come into play concerning how alphabet picturebooks work to communicate meaning. Crain says: “I am examining an artifact that has properly been claimed by an array of disciplines: anthropology, art history, communications, education, graphic arts, history, linguistics, literacy studies, literature, media studies, rhetoric, semiotics, typography” (7). Crain’s work *does* draw from all of these disciplines, and this is important to point out because it highlights the fact that the alphabet can be separated out from its context and examined, but not without acknowledging the varied context in which it lives.

David Lewis’s concept of the ecology of the picturebook is fitting as a framework for the close reading of metafictive alphabet books because, on the one hand, it focuses on the physical quality of the picturebook—i.e., it realizes its material and static quality, and yet, on the other hand, it is aware of the overall “environment” of the picturebook.

Lewis aims to clarify “the nature of the picturebook and what it means to read one” (1). Along with his own close readings of modern picturebooks, he synthesizes, criticizes and incorporates research from some of the key theorists in the field of children’s literature. His own theory regarding how to understand picturebooks combines both visual semiotic and reader response theories. His resulting “[e]cology of the
picturebook” (46) affirms the “flexibility” (48) and “complexity” (52) of the symbiotic relationship of text and image in each individual picturebook. This ecology also takes into account the response of the reader and Lewis terms this “the ecology of the reading event” (54). Also, Lewis’s conception of the picturebook privileges image and text equally. For these reasons, his is the most useful framework with which to assess the functions of metafictive alphabet picturebooks: “an ecological perspective on picturebooks can refresh our understanding of how pictures and words interanimate each other...how an enlarged view of an ecological metaphor might help us to see how picturebooks are better understood when we consider them as text-as-read rather than as texts-in-themselves” (47-48). The four features of his ecology are: interanimation, flexibility, complexity, and the reading event.

**Interanimation**

Lewis describes the text and images in a picturebook as interrelated and reliant on each other: “the words are pulled through the pictures and the pictures are brought into focus by the words…in ecological terms, words come to life in the context (the environment) of the images and vice versa” (48).

**Flexibility**

Lewis presents this as a “shift in responsibility” (50) between texts and images—at times one or the other can be more responsible for the narrative and/or meaning of any given page: “[w]ord and image, organism and environment, mutually shape each other but there
is no reason to suppose that the dynamics of this relationship remain the same from page to page, let alone from book to book” (48).

**Complexity**

As Lewis describes it, complexity of the picturebook “has everything to do with what the different kinds of pictures ask of the different kinds of words and vice versa” (53).

**The Reading Event**

Lewis explains that part of reading, and learning how to read, involves learning that “the text itself is in control and that not just anything will count as an appropriate response to it” (58). There is an active relationship between reader and text, and each must bring something to the experience to make it meaningful. Lewis explains: “words are brought to life by the pictures and the pictures by the words, but this is only possible in the experience of reading” (Lewis 55).

My close reading of the primary texts relies on this theory of ecology, “in ecological terms, the text—a specific combination of particular words and pictures—can only function, can only ‘live’ in the supporting context of a reader’s engaged and active attention” (58). My methodology combines the following principles. From Crain, I make use of her theory that inherent functions of the alphabet book are present in *every* alphabetic representation. From Nodelman, I utilize the function of naming as a key function of alphabet books. From Lewis’s theory of ecology, I apply the view that each picturebook must be considered as a unique and complex environment.
I begin the methodology section by redefining metafiction as it is critical to the selection process of the primary texts. The characteristics of metafiction create the environment in which the texts will be examined.

3.3 Methodology

[However we go about our reflections and analyses, we will always weaken our understanding of picturebooks if we remove them from the natural and normal context of their use.

- David Lewis, “The Constructedness of Texts”

3.3.1 The metafictive picturebook

The characteristics of metafiction in picturebooks are relevant to the study because of how metafiction/metafictive characteristics dictated the criteria for how the four primary texts were chosen. The decision to study metafictive alphabet books was due to the fact that metafictive books, in contrast to traditional alphabet books, facilitated separating the functions of alphabet books from their presumed intent of literacy instruction/acquisition. Metafictive alphabet books do not have an obvious intent, and so are likely to reveal the functions of the alphabet in a new role. Contrary to traditional alphabet books, which introduce language as a concept that is “real,” how do the functions of alphabet books work when the alphabet itself is called into question?

The term “metafictive” is used when talking about “devices” used in fiction to “undermine the unreflective and naïve reading of stories” (Lewis 2001, 94). This type of fiction (Lewis refers to it as “postmodern”) “does not accept traditional modes on their own terms and always wants to say something to the reader about the nature of the fictive
experience in the midst of that experience” (94); language is presented as both real, and as a type of fiction.

There are three key metafictive elements to be aware of in picturebooks, according to Lewis: Excess, Indeterminacy, and Boundary-breaking (Lewis 1996, 273-274).

**Excess**

Excess according to Lewis, is “[g]oing too far” (273). Whether describing textual narrative, or visual imagery, this characteristic, over the top quality, makes the fabricated quality of the picturebook components more difficult to ignore, i.e., it “resists a too rapid and easy entry into the decorum of the storybook” (274).

**Interdeterminacy**

This is a specific characteristic of the word/image relationship, present in every picturebook, but some rely more than others on the distance, or lack thereof, between text and illustration. Picturebooks that do not attempt to create a parallel development with the textual and illustrative elements are pushing the “gaps” (274) further apart. The result is that the reader/viewer must work harder to build bridges joining textual and pictorial information.

**Boundary-breaking**

This metafictive device “involves the transgressing of boundaries....The metafictive draws attention to conventions by breaking them” (274).
All three of these techniques work together and contribute to the “author’s unwillingness to permit the reader to enjoy an uninterrupted illusion of a secondary world” (Lewis 93). Lewis states: “an examination of the metafictive in the picturebook can lead to a way of framing the subject so that we see the picturebook grounded in the inseparability of texts and readers and constituted as a compound and flexible form” (275). Most important to this research study is the concept that metafictive books are self-aware. These alphabetbooks recognize themselves as concept books, and use the common expectations accompanying alphabet books to communicate with the reader.

3.3.2 Structure of analysis

Analysis

My methodology is close reading, and combines the following: from Crain’s theory of poetics— the focus of function as key to the creation of meaning, and from Lewis’s theory of ecology— the view that each picturebook must be considered as a unique and complex environment.

I analyze each text by looking at one of four of its alphabetic functions within their metafictive environments, considering the “context of their use” (Lewis 136).

Visual representations and textual representations are closely read with equal importance and I consider the information communicated between the two. For the purpose of my close reading, I first define how the specific one of the four functions I am addressing is intended to work, and then I continue with a close reading of the primary text (image and text read as an ecological and metafictive environment as explained by
Lewis) to determine how each of the four functions (internalization, representation, order and naming) operates in its metafictive environment.

**Introduction to the analysis**

In achieving the objective of this research study, to examine how the four functions of order, internalization, representation, and naming operate in a selection of contemporary metafictive alphabet books, a sample of four alphabet picturebooks published between 2001 and 2005 are analyzed. These texts constitute a metafictive environment in the sense that they all call attention to their own assumptions, values, and existence, rendering their own identities subject to examination.

The analysis is organized by a systematic discussion of the four inherent functions of the alphabet (order, representation, internalization and naming) within each primary text, and a focused discussion of how one highlighted function works in that text. Each section has the following areas of discussion:

1) Definition of function
2) Function as presented in primary text
3) Close reading and discussion of three images in each text
4) Summary of the function as it works in its metafictive environment

Chapter four is the findings chapter and is comprised of the close readings and results.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter is divided into four sections, each dealing with one of four primary texts. I undertake a close reading of each picturebook to determine how one of the four functions (internalization, representation, order or naming) operates in the metafictive environment of a single text.

Crain demonstrates that all functions are present in every depiction (or figure) of the alphabet, but that one function in particular will always be the focus (Crain 97). Therefore, while all four functions will be present (and interacting together) in each text, it is possible to isolate and examine a single function. I conduct a close reading of the four primary texts, with each text selected as representative of one of the four functions.

In each section, I establish how each function is meant to work (according to Crain or Nodelman) and then examine, through a close reading, the primary text to determine how each of the four functions operates in its metafictive environment. Both image and text are examined as ecological and metafictive environments, as discussed by Lewis in Chapter 3.

4.1 Internalization

4.1.1 Definition of internalization

According to Crain, the function of internalization works as follows: “[t]ext is internalized by the reader, consumed with the eyes, to encourage an intensely visual, internal form of reading” (Crain 87). Internalization operates as the reader absorbs the alphabet, making it part of his or her self. Like any form of consumption, one does not necessarily need to be attending to the act in order for it to occur. As is true of all Crain’s functions, the key to how internalization works lies in how the text is visually depicted.
Crain applies the term “[s]wallow [a]lphabets” (Crain 85) to the type of alphabet book illustrations featuring internalization. These illustrations show tropes of consumption: “[l]etters eating other letters, letters being eaten by children, letters in the mouths of animals, letters pictured with, or as, food” (87).


*A Was an Apple Pie* begins with an illustration presenting several strange and otherworldly creatures in the midst of preparing an apple pie. They are not identifiable, not of the ‘real’ world, and so the reader is instantly distanced from the characters—both from the creatures, and from the letters they are meant to “stand for” (Crain 98). Alien-like characters are wearing tee shirts depicting letters of the alphabet, rather like a sports team with numbers; they are united in a common purpose by their similar garb. The letters on the shirts are often obscured by the actions of the creatures—this “alphabet” team is busy, actively engaged in cutting apples, laying the slices in the crust, measuring flour, and attempting to snatch the finished pie away from one another. These illustrations show an entirely different scene than in the *A Apple Pie* themed texts that predate it. First published in 1750, the rhyme “A Apple Pye” appeared (without illustrations) in *Child’s New Play-Thing* (Crain 65). Perhaps a more recognized version is Kate Greenaway’s illustrated *A Apple Pie*, published in 1886. *A Was an Apple Pie* makes use of its own history while featuring the function of internalization.

The actions of *eating*, and *longing*, are focal elements of the function of internalization, and thus worthy images of discussion. Due to the fact that Delessert’s
reworking of the original tale is the crux of its metafictive nature, Greenaway’s traditionally styled illustrations from the 1800’s are discussed to provide contextualization and contrast. Because Delessert has remained primarily close to the text of the original rhyme “A Apple Pye” (1750) and to the composition of illustrations (similar use of colours and white space) from Greenaway’s *A Apple Pie*, the few changes that have been made are revealing.

In *A Was an Apple Pie*, the illustration showing the letter E, “E Ate it” (See Figure 4.1) is a very different scene than the corresponding illustration in Greenaway’s text (See Figure 4.2). The first difference is the tense of the action with which the letter is associated. Delessert’s letter E reads “Ate it” and thus breaks the rules of the alphabet book- providing the past tense of the action, and without a sound that matches the featured letter. Greenaway’s “E Eat it” illustration shows a young girl, sitting down to eat a slice of pie. She is in the midst of cutting into the piece of pie that sits on a plate before her. She is very “proper”—no elbows on the table for instance. A cat sits at her feet, looking hopefully at the girl. This illustration does not show any movement; it is more like a traditional snapshot in time. The letter E is the largest symbol on the page, bigger (or the same size) as the giant pie. The letter is capitalized, and is a vivid red colour, this indicates to the reader that the letter is the focal point of the page.

Delessert’s creature, presumably wearing an “E” tee shirt (though only part of the letter is visible) is shown with a slice of pie in hand, half of it already in its mouth. The meaning of the text matches the action captured in the illustration: E “ate” it. This slight manipulation of the text does imply that E is the creature, because “E” can’t stand for
“Ate”, and so the obscured letter worn by the creature is assumed to be the E reference that is otherwise missing. This confirms the impression gleaned from the text to this point: that the creatures are meant to iconically represent the personae of the letters. The alphabet then is connected via characters to the surreal and unfamiliar illustrative character population, rather than to the text on the page.

The image of “L” is another use of internalization, the act of yearning to be able to consume. Greenaway’s young girl is shown with hands clasped in front of her, gazing at the pie (See Figure 4.3). She is wearing long white gloves, thus already deterred from handling the pie she wants so badly. Two girls are shown in the background, playing happily with two balls, blissfully unaware of the distress induced in their friend by her desire to consume the pie. The pie is placed in the center of the page, perfect and untouched.

The girl in Greenaway’s image is passive. There are very few boys in Greenaway’s text; it is mostly the women in this alphabet book that yearn for, long for, and actually eat the pie and, by extension, consume the letters represented by the pie. Delessert’s “L” creature (See Figure 4.4), by comparison, is not gendered (none of his creatures are given identifiable genders) and is engaged in an imaginative act as it envisions the pie. The creature L points up towards its imagination bubble (shown filled entirely with pie) and smiles, with its tongue hanging out—this particular pie is a product of L’s imagination, and L longs for it, but is not defeated, not oppressed as Greenaway’s girl is. By contrast, Delessert’s “L” has actively conjured this pie into being.
This final spread of *A Was an Apple Pie* marks the greatest change from Greenaway’s traditional version. Greenaway’s final image satisfies her readers—all are fed and put to bed, full of the alphabet consumed during the day: UVWXYZ “All had a large slice and went to bed” (See Figure 4.5). The final image is a culmination of the internalization the text features—the actions of the children are connected to the existence of the pie, the letters are introduced as tools to know and understand the subject of the pie. The children are in bedclothes, about to end their day with sleep, drawing a parallel to the beginning and end of the alphabet.

Delessert’s illustration depicts a very different scene. Letters X Y and Z are empty-handed, and peering longingly to the other side of the spread (See Figure 4.6). Delessert foregrounds the lack of consumption, and thus, the lack of the internalization and fulfillment present in Greenaway’s version. X,Y,Z and Ampersand “All wished for a piece in hand.” Ampersand is pulled from the unconscious level of a mere symbol to the page, and becomes a character instead, legitimized by the uniform of the tee shirt, along with X Y and Z. As a result, the reader must consider not only the letters of the alphabet, but the nature of the visual sign itself, and the fact that ampersand has been added to an otherwise unchanged listing of alphabet letters. This metafictive element invites considerations of future creative manipulations of sign and signification.

### 4.1.3 Internalization in its metafictive environment

In the metafictive environment of *A Was an Apple Pie*, the letters are read as the active consumers of the pie, rather than following the literary tradition of picturebooks representing letters themselves as signs to be consumed. The alphabet employs
internalization, problematizing its role, which is normally and traditionally to be
internalized by the reader. The roles of language, reader, creature and pie, are all
generatively problematized. Delessert’s *A Was an Apple Pie*, leaves the reader empty,
unfulfilled and without the satisfying consumption that has been teasingly offered. The
textual inversion at its conclusion—no pie is eaten—is an implicit undermining of the
authority the text has honoured to that point. The alphabet, as the pie and object of desire,
is dropped in the end (See Figure 4.7)—only crumbs of it remain. Unlike the very proper,
very Caucasian nineteenth-century British children and adults of Greenaway’s *A Apple
Pie*, Delessert’s characters work in opposition to the internalization his illustrations and
text mimic. The Greenaway text feeds its readers, who are human, with knowledge of the
alphabet and of the embedded social codes embedded in the alphabet: *A is* apple pie, in
the present tense, and we are to eat it, to make it and its letters, a part of ourselves.

The language of Delessert’s title is the first clue: *A was* an apple pie, in the past
tense. Are we as readers too late—is the apple pie no longer? While the authority of the
text in Greenaway is supported by images that *illustrate* its content, so that the black and
white text preserves its omnipotent status, the black and *grey* text in Delessert’s text is
less authoritative, and is undermined by the images that play off its textual content.

The end result is that *A Was an Apple Pie* depicts consumption as something that
never actually occurs, undermining the “function” of the book in the same way the text is
undermined by the illustrations. As a result, what is actually internalized is something
much more complex than mere pedagogy. The picturebook itself remains an idea,
something happening to someone/something else. A mouse, the only “real” world
character, is seen nibbling on the fallen pie, while X, Y, Z and ampersand look on
longingly (an echo of the letter “L”’s relationship to the alphabet-pie). This final denial subverts regulations and authority, the social rigidity of Greenaway’s properly dressed children, and even the anarchic rambunctiousness of the *A Was an Apple Pie* creatures. In this sense, the process of internalization is as much the subject of *A Was an Apple Pie* as characters, pie, or alphabet letters.

### 4.2 Representation

#### 4.2.1 Definition of representation

According to Crain, the function of representation is embodied in how readers identify with—how readers *form* and *mold* themselves to the alphabet. If internalization is defined as taking language into the self, representation enables the self to *become* language. Fittingly, this alphabetic function impersonates human action and the human body (Crain 88). Crain defines the visual depiction of this function with the term “[b]ody alphabets” (88). Letters appear as human bodies, and the bodies are mostly bent and shaped to display and portray the letters of the alphabet. This function insists that the person must conform to language, that the self and the letters that comprise it must be considered together. Representation links the form of the self to the form of language, for example: L is for Lara, I am Lara, L is me. Unlike internalization, which is focused on the process of the consumption of language, representation is concerned with the *result* of that consumption; a parallel concept might be, “you are what you eat.” The reader becomes a part (or a function) of language.

Before one begins “reading” the text, we see in the paratextual front matter visual representations of “Z” as someone like ourselves, although he looks to be (deceptively), just a letter. “Z” is the main character, and we follow him as he makes his way home from work. Each turn of the page shows “Z” through his passage to home as he journeys and passes by and through a series of places and locations. In each place and setting, the reader observes in the scene a shape that looks like a letter of the alphabet, and a word beginning with the letter of interest that describes the landscape. For instance, “Z” passes over a bridge, and this bridge is shaped like a B. Z Goes Home features the function of representation by drawing parallels between language and landscape.

The illustrations on the end pages (shown before the title page) depict a ladder pushed up against a sign spelling “City Zoo” (See Figure 4.8). The ladder rests just under the Z. “City Zoo” is the only text on the page. The sign sits on top of a large cage, and inside we glimpse the side/rear view of a bear. The scene depicted is a very realistic one, and nothing seems to be out of the ordinary. This image sets the tone, and our expectations; it locates the reader in a specifically realistic environment.

The reader turns the page, and instead of the title page, another additional end page appears (See Figure 4.9). The image on this page is, at first glance, identical to the first, but something has been altered and the eyes search for what could be amiss. “Z” has descended from the sign spelling “zoo,” abandoning the two “o’s” left on their own, perilously perched without a “Z” to anchor them in a textual meaning. In that moment, “Z” becomes an active participant in the textual and visual narrative, and any prior
expectations of normalcy, and sense of a “realistic” genre are abandoned. The reader/viewer’s expectations both of signage, and of language, are altered.

No longer on the page, “Z” has begun his (or her) journey home. While absent from the scene, “Z” still remains in our mind’s eye, as his continuity of meaning continues on toward another, more abstract level which mimics the cognitive leap readers of alphabet books make from natural signs to linguistic signs. “Z”’s disappearance thus articulates the alphabet’s representative function.

The illustration in Z Goes Home featuring the letter “L” is matched with the corresponding word “Labyrinth.” The letter leads to the word in which that letter is grounded—the landscape, which is what the word describes, a twisting, L-shaped labyrinth. The walls of the labyrinth are simply walls, or are letters, or both, depending on how one perceives the illustration (See Figure 4.10).

Like traditional alphabet books, letters are featured, meant to be attended to, but unlike traditional alphabet books that feature the letters prominently on each page, and as letters, Agee happens upon the alphabet: they are constructed as imaginatively “found” in the “real” world. “Z” is bright red, and stands out against the grey walls of the maze (See Figure 4.11). Two letters are featured in this spread, “Z” as an active character, and “L” as the place where “Z” exists. “Z” navigates this odd landscape, echoing the way we as readers must navigate the landscape of language.

“Z”’s journey arrive home is odd and disjointed. Z encounters many objects on his journey that are either prosaic parts of the landscape or, more unexpected, slightly surreal elements, such as the doughnut he eats his way through on the page showing a crumbing letter “D.” Like the personification of an alphabetic letter, abstract
engagements mingle with more realistic social activities and behaviours. This alphabetic journey through the abstract makes the final illustration of the book all the more surprising.

In the final spread of the text, the illustration shows a door flung open wide with “Z” standing in the doorway. The letters in this domestic setting are positioned as family members awaiting his return, which he announces by saying “Hey everybody, I’m home!” (See Figure 4.12)

The letters O, W, E, I, Z and (significantly) an exclamation mark (!) rest on the couch, ride a skateboard in the living room, or play with a toy train (See Figure 4.13) Once untangled and re-arranged, the letters spell “ZOWIE!” though there are no instructions to do so.

The individual reader has the opportunity to choose which representation of “Z” they prefer: character or letter, signification or sign. Regardless of the potential excitement in discovering the word “zowie!,” one might not wish to part with the idea of “Z” as an individual who has arrived home safely, if the alternative meaning is of merely linguistic value.

4.2.3 Representation in its metafictive environment

The value of the function of representation in the metafictive Z Goes Home is that letters resemble found objects and that to the extent our character “Z” resembles ourselves, language resembles landscape. Z Goes Home reverses the concept of Crain’s “body alphabet;” instead of bodies forming themselves into letters, these letters behave as
bodies might. In other words, bodies do not “freeze” into the forms of letters, but letters become mobile bodies interacting in and with a familiar landscape.

That “Z” is simultaneously represented as both a letter in the alphabet and a character in a *narrative* calls into question what is real and unreal, what is fact and what is fiction; the reader is invited to question something far more significant than the name or sound of a letter. Language is explicitly represented as a sign with specific values, for instance, a letter “z” in the signage “City Zoo,” and then, in a single turn of the page, language becomes representative of a different value all together, as an agent with the ability to move, to descend a ladder. The question of what is real and what is an abstraction follows “Z” home.

### 4.3 Order

#### 4.3.1 Definition of order

In Crain’s view, order works primarily as regulator—its job is to make the “arbitrary arrangement” (Crain 91) of the alphabet appear to be necessary. The order of the letters of the alphabet is without inherent meaning, but is presented as intrinsic to, and inevitable for, the purposes of literacy instruction— as essential to mastering the meaning of the alphabet.

Crain applies the term “worldly alphabets” (91) to the type of alphabets that depict this function in their illustrations. According to Crain, the function of order, as seen in “worldly alphabets” does the following: “[w]hether objects, animals, or body parts, this alphabet represents, in words or images, the world at large, arrayed through the
arbitrary but powerful order of the ABC’s, forcefully producing a world that is knowable, graspable, and, most strikingly, obtainable” (91).


*The Alphazeds* is a tale depicting the way its characters (the letters of the alphabet) perform the alphabetical order. The traditional order of the alphabet is largely adhered to in the text. *The Alphazeds* begins with A and ends with Z. All the letters in between are introduced in their proper order. Nonetheless, the function of order is manipulated by letters who find themselves fighting each other for space on the “stage” of order where they have appeared to perform. *The Alphazeds* has a confused and chaotic quality that produces a desire for order within the reader/viewer. The alphabet is personified; each letter has a voice and a distinct persona. The personality of each letter is indicated by the formation and construction of each letter’s appearance and behavior. Echoing the functions of the alphabet themselves, the letters of *The Alphazeds* visually present and perform themselves in a certain way to communicate something specific.

The first illustration of *The Alphazeds* is a doublepage spread of an empty room. Only a bare light bulb is shown, hanging from the ceiling. A dark doorway is visible on the left, and there is a tiny triangular window on the right hand side, where we can just glimpse a hint of cloud and sky (See Figure 4.14, Figure 4.15). This is in contradiction to the expectation that readers have of an alphabet book— which is that it will begin with the presentation of the letter A. The text reads “A long time ago, before there was anything, there was a small empty yellow room.” The reader knows very little beyond the
presentation of this empty room, only that something is about to happen; the stage has been set, and the performance is about to begin.

The next double spread does introduce the letter “A,” who confidently enters the room through the doorway “Hi,” says “A” (See Figure 4.16). The text corresponding to the illustration reads: “Suddenly, out of nowhere, a fat pink-and-green thorny leg burst through the doorway. It belonged to Angry A—the first Alphazed.”

“A” is described as “the first Alphazed,” and so order is maintained. Despite this adherence, however, this personified presentation of the alphabet seems to emphasize the performative nature of language. Because only half the letter is shown, its complete entrance remains anticipated and therefore signals the commencement of the processional, performative aspect of order. The expectation to see “A” as soon as the picturebook was opened was not met, and the empty room that begins The Alphazeds story indicates that there is a world behind the scene of the alphabet, a stage. Because of the surprise beginning, in which the “announcement” of the initial letter is incomplete, each turn of the page feels uncertain and confusing.

The final double spread illustration of The Alphazeds shows “Z” arriving last. At this point, things reach a climax of confusion as the final letter joins the book’s “stage,” and the alphabet, as the players on the stage, are pushed too far, the effect is cramped and chaotic. The caption reads, “Vain V, Wise W, Xenophobic X, and Yelling Y all pushed in just before Zigzag Z, always the last to arrive” (See Figure 4.17). The reader/viewer experiences a feeling of claustrophobia as the letters argue with each other, either aggressively pushing, or meekly cowering for space. Furthermore their behavior seems to
depend on the personalities implied by their names, which the Glasers have constructed using elements of personification and alliteration. “Zigzag” Z is the last to arrive, apparently as confused as we are, and asks, “Should I come in or go out?”

Above this scene, the ever-present window acts to remind the reader that the world outside still exists, that this impression of chaos is contained within a fictive room, and that while events that take place inside can change dramatically, there is a greater outside world that is not altered (at least visibly, in the rectangle of unchanging blue sky) by the events taking place within (See Figure 4.18). The final page invites the reader to consider the turmoil and upheaval that often accompanies an effort to “make sense” of concepts and signs, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion of a privileged order in the physical world that encompasses the intellectual or creative realm.

4.3.3 Order in its metafictive environment

As a creation tale told via a pageant of alphabetic performance, The Alphazeds ends with order triumphant over chaos. At the conclusion of the “performance,” a meaningful word is spelled. Fittingly, for a book introducing language, the climax of the story is that the word spelled is: w, o, r, d. In this ending, the arbitrary order of the alphabet is not arbitrary after all, and order is born out of understanding the complex workings of the alphabet.

The most interesting aspect of order working in this particular metafictive environment is the emphasis on performance. Both the alphabet and its order are presented as performative. Alphazeds is metafictive in that the letters are not visually personified – they still retain the appearance of letters – but they are given human personalities. They thereby call our attention away from their otherwise textual essence.
Rules of order are followed, but they are put forward as a performance of order, not as an inherent quality of the alphabet. Alphazeds’s metafictive qualities are manifested through the way in which its own identity, as a picturebook conveying a message about the order of the alphabet, is questioned by its content. This complex and somewhat contradictory theme and message invite further discussion, not only of the nature of the alphabet – its constituent letters and nominal order – but also the alphabet’s role as an expression of the often arbitrary nature of order itself.

4.4 Naming

4.4.1 Definition of naming

According to Nodelman, the function of naming is a game involving puzzle work. Naming is meant to encourage creativity, and “a strategy specific to the intended decoding of alphabet books” (238). Naming is precipitated by visual literacy and depends on “pictorial knowledge” (Nodelman 238), specifically, knowledge of “the reality the sign represents” (238). Naming is a very active function, requiring participation and awareness, in contrast to the more passive act of internalization, for example. Naming can be limiting in the sense that “understanding” the nature of the sign inherently and implicitly limits the sign’s ability to change and evolve. Contrastingly, it can create possibility by establishing a relationship between the object that is named and the individual reader who has the liberty of choosing how, or what, to name.


What Pete Ate from A-Z presents the alphabet by exploring lists and categories of items that the dog, Pete, is to abstain from eating. The reader/viewer, in a playful and
active way, uses the function of naming because the reader is required to participate in
the creation of narrative meaning and to interact with the images. While there are
recognizable features of the typical and traditional alphabet book (the presentation of
letters in alphabetical order, the way they are featured on the page, the use of alliteration
to repeat the sound of the letter and to establish a rhythmic continuity from page to page),
there is simultaneously a rebellious and subversive tone that encourages a parallel reader
response. Because of the inconsistent use of grammatical rules and the haphazard
presentation of text, *What Pete Ate from A-Z* reads as a hastily constructed school
assignment might, very playfully (and not very dutifully) completed. Much like Pete,
who eats the things he should not, we as readers might well name things “incorrectly,”
for the fun of it.

The first double-page spread of images introduced to the reader following the title
page is wordless, and a wallpaper-like mess of items and objects (See Figure 4.19, See
Figure 4.20), rather like a chaotic version of Richard Scarry’s themed and itemized
picturebooks (known for categorized images of common, everyday items). The reader is
not given any textual cues, and so is allowed to name and identify the various objects
freely. This introduction before the “beginning” of the story, serves to give the
illustrations more meaning than they would carry otherwise, thereby emphasizing the
pictorial knowledge Nodelman argues as essential to the act of naming. This illustration,
showing an array of images (people, objects, actions) drawn in black on a pink
background is a quintessential example of the function of naming at work, yet it is
stripped of the supports naming generally relies on: a featured letter and an image with a
name/word beginning with that featured letter.
The illustration spread presenting the letter “E” is extremely interesting when considering the function of naming. The left side of the spread is rather standard (See Figure 4.21): there are images of objects shown with their corresponding names, “Egg slicer,” “Egg beater,” “Egg sandwich,” but the scene on the right side is more complicated. With this illustration, the associations we are meant to link to the letter “E” are not actually visually represented; instead we have two lists of text without corresponding images, and our minds are meant to conjure how the items might look (See Figure 4.22). The caption reads “Egads! Doesn’t Pete know the difference between edible and inedible?”

On this page the reader is shown a blue floor in a room, empty save for Pete, who sits under the lists (labeled “Edible” and “Inedible”) looking back at the reader. A poster of an egg hangs on the wall above the blue floor (which serves as the background on which to present the lists) and this simple visual gesture (in combination with the lists) and the dubious look on Pete’s face - who is turned around to commiserate with the audience about the annoying authoritative text, intent on trying to “teach a dog new tricks” - indicates we are in a classroom. The edible items list reads as follows: “apple, bread, cake, cupcake, egg sandwich, honey, ice pop, jelly beans, veal roast.” Beside it is the list of inedible items: “accordion, ball, camera, doll, eggbeater, fez, glue stick, homework, money.” The inclusion of “homework” confirms the pedagogical trope. And yet the proportions are all irregular; the lists float inside the “room,” related to, but not really part of, the scene. The reader/viewer is left to determine the kind of environment being visually depicted, and so the reader is granted some autonomy, freedom, and
participation, even in the pedantic environment of the text’s classroom: the reader chooses to enter it.

This is the reversal of how naming typically works—with an image the name of which begins with the letter we are meant to consider. For example, a traditional alphabet picturebook might incorporate the image of a bird, to help the reader link to, and focus on, the letter “B.” Images from the visible, “real” world are shown to help us comprehend those abstractions that comprise language. “E” becomes all the things that might be edible (none of which start with the letter we are meant to pair with the letter “E”), which here pairs with an abstract adjective rather than the concrete nouns alphabet books usually rely on when presenting the function of naming. This depiction leaves the reader/viewer to “conjure” the items in our mind’s eye or visual imagination, and construct the real as imagined rather than the imagined as real.

The illustration featuring the letter “H” has parallel features to the illustration featuring “E”—the classroom theme, and similar layout and page design.

The floating lists of “Edible” and “Inedible” that exist in a liminal space, between a posited and imagined environment, are reconstructed on the page “H” (See Figure 4.23). The classroom environment is more explicit in this illustration; students sit in chairs around an adult figure. This figure resembles a witch more than she does a teacher. The representations of “H” are shown on a chalkboard at the back of the classroom, and so are anchored in pedagogy, rather than floating in the space of an empty room. Pete is seen peering in through the window, homework in his mouth, disobeying his instructions not to eat homework. He peers in from the outside, interrupting the formal classroom, drawing our eyes away from the lesson. The text reads: “He ate half (1/2) of my
homework. But did Mrs. Hoogenschmidt believe me? HA! (Hardly.) Horrible dog.” Add to this the fact that a math class is taking place in the scene, and yet, here we are playing with the alliteration of the letter “H.” “H” is abstract again, as well as being shown as a noun (Hat, Hips) and so we can think of “H” in a number of roles, even as a thing (homework) that exists no longer, eaten by Pete.

4.4.3 Naming in its metafictive environment

Kalman’s What Pete Ate from A-Z is an example of a metafictive alphabet book that creates creative possibilities through the function of naming. Kalman’s text privileges the abstract possibilities of language (adjectives, verbs) over the knowable, material nouns usually used for texts that feature naming. Each of Kalman’s images in her illustrations has a myriad of options for naming, and one does not feel compelled to choose a “correct” name. Without the typical support, the reader is able to name each item freely and without reprimand, claiming ownership of the act independent of the text. “A” can be for apple, but it can also be for anything. Alphabets, as stories of list making, “may be thought of as devices that assist the interpretation or construction of reality” (Lerer, 28). Because Kalman does not present naming in the traditional way, the reader of What Pete Ate from A-Z has a role in fabricating that reality.

4.5 Findings summary

In this chapter I discussed the findings as they relate to the research question. I outlined how each of the four alphabetic functions works in their metafictive environments:
**Internalization** in the metafictive environment of *A Was an Apple Pie* is employed as a plot device, problematizing its role, which is normally to function so that the alphabet is internalized by the reader. The process of internalization itself, is as much the subject of *A Was an Apple Pie* as characters, pie, or alphabet letters.

**Representation** in the metafictive environment of *Z Goes Home* reverses the concept of Crain’s “body alphabet;” instead of bodies forming themselves into letters, these letters behave as bodies might, i.e., bodies do not “freeze” into the forms of letters, but letters become mobile bodies interacting in and with a familiar landscape.

**Order** in the metafictive environment of *The Alphazeds* works to introduce the seemingly inherent order of the alphabet as merely a *performance of order*, not as a necessary authority.

**Naming** in the metafictive environment of *What Pete Ate from A-Z* promotes the playfulness of naming, and creates creative possibilities through the function of naming.

The final Conclusions and Discussion chapter is organized into the following sections: a comparison and contrast of the findings; discussion and conclusions; summary of the findings as they relate to the research question; a discussion of the research limitations and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter consists of three sections. I first revisit the purpose of the research in order to summarize my findings as they relate to its aims. Secondly, I address the limitations of the research and the implications for further research. Finally, I conclude the research with a brief discussion.

5.1 Research Question and Summary of Findings

**Research Question:** How do the four functions of (1) internalization, (2) representation, (3) order, and (4) naming operate in a selection of contemporary metafictive alphabet books?

My research question sought to query assumptions surrounding the purpose and functions of alphabet books. I examined each of the four primary texts with one of the four functions of alphabet books as the focus of that examination. In a close reading of each alphabet book, I examined the ways in which the specific function works within its metafictive environment.

**Summary of findings**

5.1.1. Internalization in *A Was an Apple Pie*

In the metafictive environment of *A Was an Apple Pie*, the function of internalization works to emphasize a lack of consumption. This is in opposition to its traditional use, which encourages a reader to internalize language, to take it into the self. If non-metafictive alphabet books encourage readers to “consume with the eyes” (Crain...
86), then the metafictive alphabet book encourages one to go without, and to be aware that language can take you in, as you take it in.

The authoritarian nature of language—the fact that learning to read a language requires the existence of texts (i.e., alphabet books) that instruct us how to understand the meaning of texts—distinguishes it from the representational nature of images and illustrations. The authority of text exists in part because it is arbitrary in nature, especially as compared to pictures, which are more easily accessible (Nodelman 237). This authoritative element, according to Coats, has the result that “the absorption of language by the child is really the absorption of the child into language” (89).

Metafictive alphabet books such as A Was an Apple Pie, which utilize illustrations to signal to pre-literate readers the complexity of the reader-text relationship, are instructively subversive in that they encourage readers to retain a sense of autonomy while becoming socialized by language and reading.

5.1.2 Representation in Z Goes Home

In the metafictive environment of Z Goes Home, representation works to emphasize the arbitrary nature of signs and symbols. Representation, rather than merely serving to link abstract meanings (such as those conveyed by language) to the physical world in a linear direction, is shown in this environment to be malleable and changeable. The relationships between the abstract and material worlds are blurred, and representation itself is demonstrated to be of a fluid, rather than a fixed, nature. If traditional alphabetical imagery sought to ground the reader in the real and knowable world, then
metafictive representations of the alphabet remind the reader that what is “real” remains undetermined.

Crain describes representation in traditional alphabet books as an “imitation of human action” (Crain 88), in which illustrative depictions of events, characters and landscape in a text have the same objective qualities as our own actions and behaviors. By calling attention to its own methods of representation, Z Goes Home emphasizes the inherent unreliability of perception that is often glossed over in alphabet books: that what we “see” does not necessarily bear any correlation to what “is,” and that the boundary between the abstract and material worlds is not impermeable. By combining and re-combining representations of the abstract and the material, this metafictive alphabet book encourages the reader to explore the relationships between image and text, between sign and signified, and between representation and “reality.”

5.1.3. Order in The Alphazeds

The function of order, as demonstrated by The Alphazeds, both supports its traditional role and subverts it. The letters of The Alphazeds are personified in that they are given human-like descriptors (e.g., angry, bashful, etc.) and they are shown as players on a stage, performing their roles. This emphasis on performance encourages the reader not to take the subject too seriously; after all, the theater set is abandoned at the end of the show - it is not a part of any kind of “sustained” reality. The alphabet in the metafictive environment of The Alphazeds is lowered to our level, given a human quality, and like us, subject to imperfections.
The order of the alphabet is a traditional, mnemonic device that allows someone gaining literacy to be easily taught; the order is put to a musical tune. It can be taught and, therefore, tested. However, this order of the alphabet is also arbitrary, and quickly loses its ordered meaning once the alphabet has been mastered. The danger that a reader might conceive of order as something fixed and changeless, and therefore having an inherent meaning that can be extrapolated to larger conceptions of the world and the self, is called into question by *The Alphazeds*’ challenge to its own self-concept. The letters do appear in order (and for this reason, maintain the traditional function of order) but the way they appear in order, the environment, is clearly presented as a performance. Instead of the traditional function of order, which encourages the reader to *live* by the rigidity of order—to normalize it and to accept order as inevitable—the metafictive order of the *Alphazeds* acknowledges that while order is indeed inevitable, it is also a performance.

### 5.1.4 Naming in *What Pete Ate from A-Z*

In the metafictive environment of *What Pete Ate from A-Z*, naming (to correctly find one name corresponding to one image) works in a non-directive way; in fact, it uses didactic associations (images of classrooms and homework) to undermine the traditionally didactic use of the function. Acts of naming in non-metafictive alphabet books claim an “authority resting in an outside referent, and truth is measured by the perceived degree of correspondence to that referent” (Coats 90). The task of the reader is to recognize and categorize objects and items accurately by memorizing their names.

In contrast, the metafictive mode of naming promotes its creative aspect as much as its limiting nature. The act of naming simultaneously calls something “into being”
(Lewis 1996, 268) while fixing its nature and therefore denying its potentiality – its ability to change, evolve, or be anything other than what it is understood to be in its name. *What Pete Ate from A-Z* emphasizes naming’s creative power in its playfulness. The possibility of using the wrong name is as pleasurable as the possibility of being “right,” and so the equivocal nature of naming is stressed at the expense of its restrictive utility.

**Comparison and Contrast**

The four inherent functions of the alphabetic representations (components of reading) share a role in encouraging the normalization of language to the point that it becomes inevitable and ubiquitous. The resulting ordered relationship with authoritative language is important to the goal of literacy and language acquisition. The fact that the processes of textual literacy development are so valuable and necessary means that it has been too easy to overlook the other possibilities inherent in language acquisition, specifically those present in alphabet picturebooks. The role of the image/text relationship (the dynamic between the two) appears to be the crucial element of how and what is communicated to the reader.

**5.1.5 Comparison of primary texts**

There were three common elements found in the four primary metafictive texts:

1) The functions themselves, not necessarily the goals they are meant to facilitate, have inherent meaning and wide ranging possibilities. The metafictive environment of the primary texts manipulated the traditional forms of alphabetic instruction, often satirizing
them, but nonetheless, by utilizing the alphabet book form to communicate this satirization, the alphabet book and its purpose (to introduce the concept of the alphabet to reader) retains its legitimacy.

2) The primary texts manipulated the *material* form of the book itself, the structure (such as the paratextual end pages, cover and placement of copyright info). This indicates that the material structure of the alphabet picture book (and the alterations to that structure) is, in and of itself, an important tool of communication. The exact role of the material form of the book thus could be an area warranting further research, especially given the value placed on technological literacy. What do we gain, if anything, through our relationship with the form of the “book”?

3) In each of the primary texts, a tension is present in regards to following the “rules” of the English language (grammar and the traditional presentation of the alphabet) as compared with breaking those “rules.” Each text must make use of expectations and regulations related to alphabet books and notions of literacy acquisition in order to have a playful means of disrupting those same rules and expectations.

**5.1.6 Contrast**

The primary texts are generally more similar than they are different, but one alphabet book function did stand out from the other functions: order in *The Alphazeds*. The functions of internalization, representation and naming did not adhere to their traditional use. In fact, each text was rebellious and subversive, intentionally disrupting expectations. By contrast, in *The Alphazeds*, the function of order only tentatively toyed with its traditional function, and in the end adhered to its traditional utility.
It may be surmised that this is the case due to the fact that the alphabet books featuring order are the most enduring and popular of the alphabet book types, and comprise the visual form that readers typically expect from traditional alphabet books (Crain 91). The purpose of order (to make the arbitrary seem regulated and ordered) appears in this example to retain its importance. This is likely due to the fact that, while the ability to recognize order as arbitrary can be valuable for many aspects of life (such as political change, notions of ethics and philosophy, creative discoveries—anything that retains potential in departures from the status quo), the departure from order is not particularly valuable when it comes to the essential purpose of language: shared meaning. Language requires order and adherence to the rules of that language to communicate meaningfully.

5.2 Limitations of the research and suggestions for further research

5.2.1 Limitations of the research study

The first limitation of this research involves the sample of primary texts chosen. I looked only at contemporary alphabet books (published after 2001), and of the initial sample, I chose only four texts to examine closely. Research with a more comprehensive sample of primary texts, and/or with a sample of contemporary alphabet books compared and contrasted with alphabet books published before 2001, would provide a wider social, cultural, and historical discussion. Also, the books I chose were subject to my personal biases, as I self-selected due to my interest in metafictive texts. The implications of this bias relate to the value I place on alphabet picturebooks, and metafictive alphabet books in particular. My findings indicate that metafictive alphabet books are beneficial to those
who read them, yet because this research was precipitated by my initial fondness for alphabet books, there is a personal aspect to the research.

The second limitation is that I looked only at English-language alphabet books. The selected English-language texts published between 2001 and 2011 are not representative of all metafictive alphabet books in the North American publishing market. Both Canada and the United States are home to many unique language-speaking populations. A comparative study of the metafictive alphabet books produced in and by those populations in a range of languages would offer the potential of rich insights into linguistic differences of alphabet books.

The third limitation of my research is that I did not include translations of alphabet books into English originally published in other languages. Such a study could offer insight into the way the Canadian or American publishing industry considers cultural artifacts such as alphabet books and picturebooks to be suited for English-language populations, and as such could provide economic and political perspectives, in addition to socio-cultural insights.

Finally, the fourth limitation involves the fact that I did not look at the evolving media employed to produce, distribute, and disseminate alphabet books. Digital publishing is changing the landscape of literacy, and the inclusion of digital literacy in my study would potentially complicate and problematize my findings. EBooks or tablet readers, for example, might well involve an entirely different set of alphabetic functions and range of behaviors of those functions.
5.2.2 Suggestions for Further Research

In his article “The Constructedness of Texts: Picture Books and the Metafictive,” David Lewis argues that we are limited in what we can say about picturebooks by the terms of the field: by the ease of, or familiarity with, the ways we think, talk, and write about them (1996, 268). If we are able to become critically aware of alphabetic picturebooks and their purposes or functions, then it will be more difficult to take them at face value, to consider them only in light of what we have historically and traditionally accepted to be their “purpose,” to promote literacy education. The research here suggests alphabet picturebooks offer much more than their presumed traditional singular role, but this research is far from exhaustive. Topics conducive to further research include: experience, authority, intention, and the poetics of the alphabet picturebook.

Experience

Concept books and metafiction are inherently opposed, which means that the study of metafictive concept picturebooks has some inherent contradictions. Metafiction requires a level of expectation that is based on literary experience; whereas concept books assume a lack of expectation and experience in the reader. One needs to understand the processes and outcomes of the rules in order to find pleasure in breaking them. The study of metafictive texts begs the question then—what role, if any, does the experience of the reader play in the comprehension of metafictive alphabet books?

A corollary to this issue is the question of audience age and experience, and whether the messages relayed by the metafictive alphabet picturebooks actually reach
their intended audience. This conflict suggests some type of functionality of the
metafictive concept book that may not yet be articulated.

Authority

A recurrent theme in these findings is the undermining of the authoritative quality
of text, even as the book relies on text as a means of communication. Many traditional
alphabet books intentionally focus on the power derived from the static quality of letters.
Coats argues that “Written representations…remain powerful and active precisely
because they are in written form and can be passed along from hand to hand, culture to
culture, resisting the continual revision of an oral text” (Coats 89), and goes on to claim
that what she sees as this static, changeless quality of language is necessary to its
pedagogical function: “Language is not material, it has no body; rather it is an
epistemological tool, an abstract way of ‘knowing’ the concrete world” (90, 91).

Coats identifies the mute, unresponsive, even resistant qualities of text. If we
accept this point of view, we must consider the price of such a relationship. Learning to
read is an acceptance of the arbitrary power structure of the dominant culture. In
metafictive alphabet books, however, the sounds paired with letters and the various
objects those letters name, allow metafictive alphabet books to make a counterargument
for the power of the image against, or over, the power of text. Via illustration, readers are
primed to react against the text instead of with it, and so the power dynamic shifts to
favor image over text.

Coats’s critical perspective is a feminist lens, and is critical of the text as a tool of
patriarchy and domination. My intention in including this view is not to invoke a
criticism of the authority and power of text, but rather (and more simply) to note its essence as different from that of the image. While text is, in my view, necessarily authoritative because of its utility as a means of communication, in its engagement with images and illustrations the “authority” of the text can be lessened, even transformed. This notion of authority can be linked to the function of order, and the question of why order is much harder to reconstitute than the other functions of alphabet picturebooks. Why the function of order retains importance, and how it is related to the authority of text, is a question that could benefit from further study. The dynamic relationships of authority versus rebellion, and image versus text, found in alphabet picturebooks warrants further research.

**Intention**

Perhaps the most challenging of all areas of future research in metafictive alphabet books (and picturebooks or concept books in general) would be the intentions behind the creation, production, and distribution of metafictive texts for children. Many factors, ranging from the marketing of these products to adult consumers, to an author’s political or even spiritual desire to prepare a young reader for the unexpected, to a goal of producing simple playfulness and joyfulness, must be considered to arrive at a hypothesis of a metafictive text’s “intention.” That young children may lack the experience to understand how the metafictive devices are working; that the creators of these alphabet books certainly did have the necessary experience to “break” the traditional boundaries of alphabet books; and that these aspects work in conflict and concert, are all worthy of attention and examination. One possible way to examine this topic in depth would be to
conduct a study that includes research concerning literacy acquisition in more traditional alphabet books, and evaluate how the functions of traditional alphabet books work in comparison to the working of the same functions in non-traditional texts.

**Poetics of the alphabet picturebook**

The terms “the poetics of alphabetization” (Crain 96), and Nodelman’s “shadow text” (243) imply that there are elements in the process of meaning-making related to alphabet picturebooks that have not yet been fully articulated. Both Crain’s “poetics” and Nodelman’s “shadow text” indicate there is a relationship *between* text and image that plays a role in generating meaning. I suggest the term for this could be “the poetics of the alphabet picturebook,” and further research focused on deconstructing the workings of this interaction is of value. Perhaps this would lead to better understanding of the changing role of alphabet picturebooks in North American culture, both in terms of meaning-making and in the changing views of literacy in an environment increasingly dominated by technology.

**5.3 Conclusion**

It is important to stress that I am not privileging metafictive texts *over* non-metafictive alphabet books. My research is not a critique of traditional alphabet books, but rather it indicates that the functions associated with the components of literacy skills have broad implications. My examination of metafictive alphabet books has revealed more information about the *mechanics* of the functions of the alphabet then about the presumed results of those functions. As Nodelman demonstrates, interacting with even
the simplest of alphabet books is a metalinguistic process, requiring abstract thinking (239). Mostly readers can remain unconscious of that metalinguistic process, but metafictional alphabet books use the conventions of social and literary forms to call into question how real that reality actually is. Perhaps most importantly, without an intention to teach literacy skills, the functions, those components of reading, are highlighted in different ways, stripped to their essence. Without that traditional intention, metafictional alphabet books isolate and emphasize their operational structures (the functions).

If traditional alphabet books instruct: “A is for Apple,” then the metafictive alphabet book communicates the following sentiment: “A might be for apple, but A is not real, though you still need to pretend as though it is.” This wavering sense of reality is a lesson in itself.

It seems likely that alphabet books are so satisfying and popular because they are a simple expression of something complex. They embody a composite of beliefs, values, assumptions, and projections expressed so efficiently in this genre that they can be difficult to parse. The other side of that coin is that those who read alphabet books are learning skills of conceptualization that often have nothing to do with their perceived value or function.

Lerer states, “The skills gained in reading, in compiling, and in studying the alphabet and its myriad combinations are skills in moral literacy” (30). My findings suggest there may well be truth to this claim. At the very least, do

The poetics of the alphabet picturebook book originates in its visual imagery, and the life-like qualities the visual images mimic. Metafictive alphabet books privilege their illustrations; they look a certain way in order to work a certain way. In the words of
Crain, “The wide world is produced by the very forms in which it is represented” (101). The alphabet book, then, as Comenius first suggested in the seventeenth century, is that wide world made visible.
FIGURE 4.1: A Was an Apple Pie (Page [8]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.2: *A Apple Pie* (Page [5]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.3: *A Apple Pie* (Page [11]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.4: A Was an Apple Pie (Page [15]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.5: A Apple Pie (Page [20]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.6: A Was an Apple Pie (Page [27]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
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X, Y, Z, and ampersand
All wished for a piece in hand.

FIGURE 4.7: *A Was an Apple Pie* (Page [28]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.8: *Z Goes Home* (Pages [i]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.9: Z Goes Home (Page [ii]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.10: Z Goes Home (Page [12]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.11: Z Goes Home (Page [13]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.12: Z Goes Home (Page [25]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.13: Z Goes Home (Page [26]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
A long time ago, before there was anything, there was a small empty yellow room.
FIGURE 4.15: *The Alphazed* (Page [2]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
Suddenly, out of nowhere, a fat pink-and-green thorny leg burst through the doorway. It belonged to Angry A—the first Alphazed.

FIGURE 4.16: The Alphazeds (Page [3]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
Vain V, Wise W, Xenophobic X, and Yelling Y all pushed in just before Zigzag Z, always the last to arrive.
FIGURE 4.18: The Alphazed (Page [24]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.19: What Pete Ate from A-Z (Page [i]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.20: What Pete Ate from A-Z (Page [ii]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.21: *What Pete Ate from A-Z* (Page [9]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
FIGURE 4.22: What Pete Ate from A-Z (Page [10]) – reprinted with publisher’s permission
He ate half (½) of my homework. But did Mrs. Hoogenschmidt believe me? HA! (Hardly.) Horrible dog.
REFERENCES

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


APPENDIX A: Sample alphabet books


Buser, Jeanette. 2010. *I'm a Flea from A to Z*. US: Tate Publishing.


