“I’ll Tell You What: I’ll Just Steer”: An Examination of Metafictive Narrative Strategies in a Selection of Picturebooks by Mo Willems

by

Natalie Schembri

B.A. (Hons), The University of Western Ontario, 2010
MLIS, The University of Western Ontario, 2011

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Abstract

This thesis explores the use of metafictive literary devices in a selection of picturebooks by author-illustrator Mo Willems as “radical” (Dresang 19), a “construction” (Nikolajeva and Scott 220; Sipe 107), a “puzzle” (Nodelman and Reimer 298), and as “processes of storytelling” (Lewis 92) in which the readers are invited to become essential “creators, interpreters and innovators” (Reynolds 35), and “co-authors” (Barthes 1457) of illustration, text, and meaning. Analyses of the picturebook Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, the early reader We Are in A Book!, and the picturebook That Is Not a Good Idea! examine and explore how reading is a process of building and constructing meaning that becomes an active process through metafictive narrative strategies.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by Natalie Schembri.
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To my family, friends, and fellow readers of Mo Willems.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Origins of Interest

“The picturebook is thus emphatically not itself a genre. It is an omnivorous creature, ingesting, absorbing, co-opting preexistent genres – other ways of speaking, writing, picturing – in order to make its texts.”
—David Lewis (74)

In this curious new world of electronic books and digital devices, I am still profoundly interested in the power of the picturebook as a physical reading format that offers readers the opportunity to dynamically engage in an active relationship with the page and captivating storybook narrative. Throughout my studies in children’s literature, I have become extremely passionate about the curious role the reader takes on when entering into a conversation with both the illustrations and text of the picturebook. During my Master of Library and Information Science degree, I had the occasion to attend the TD National Reading Summit II: Toward a Nation of Readers 2011 in Montreal, Quebec where I had the opportunity to hear the acclaimed Jon Scieszka, author of the The True Story of the Three Little Pigs and The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales. He described his Guys Read campaign, the power of story, and his goal to connect with readers. Scieszka’s address spoke to my passion to become a children’s librarian and children’s literature specialist and further empowered my personal goal to provide young readers with a vast array of reading opportunities that invite reader participation in storytelling. Scieszka spoke of expanding the definition of reading to include “nonfiction, humor, comics, graphic novels, action-adventure, magazines, websites, audiobooks, and newspapers in school reading. Let [readers] know that all these materials count as reading” (Guys Read). His speech, particularly the notion of the value of an expanded
definition of reading—which applies to both boys and girls—continued to resonate with me and inspired me to further my studies in order to expand my knowledge and understanding of the realm of children’s literature in order to effectively support and appreciate the child reader’s relationship with the book and the experience of reading.

I was able to further explore Scieszka’s fiction and the realm of picturebooks in a graduate course, Contemporary Literature and Other Materials for Children, I took during my first semester in the University of British Columbia’s Master of Arts in Children’s Literature Program. I became fascinated with the picturebook’s engagement with postmodern art and culture to encourage audience participation as it envelops critique and playfulness. I researched one of my favorite childhood texts, The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales. I became enthralled with author Scieszka and illustrator Lane Smith’s telling of postmodern stories that are bursting at the seams with parody, pastiche, performance, and playfulness in both text and illustration as they subvert traditional folk and fairy tales such as “Cinderella,” “The Princess and the Pea,” and “The Little Red Hen.” Further, I became intrigued by how the author and illustrator’s subversion of literary traditions is acknowledged by the reader. As suggested by Pantaleo, “[i]n The Stinky Cheese Man, the peritextual information (an aspect of the paratext) communicates much about the nature of the text and about the role and stance that readers should assume in reading the text” (“Scieszka’s The Stinky” 278). I became intrigued by how Stinky Cheese Man exemplifies the postmodern essence of what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv), and further, demands the reader’s participation in (re)creating the story by becoming what Roland Barthes describes as “co-author[s] of the [text]” (“From Work to Text” 1457). I am
particularly intrigued with both the notion, and the role, of the child reader as co-author of the genre of the postmodern story. I have been motivated to pursue, in this study, further research in the nature and aspects of the metafictive picturebook.

David Lewis understands the postmodern picturebook to employ the following strategies and methods to construct narrative: boundary breaking, excess, indeterminacy, parody, and performance (99). Through these postmodern narrative strategies, children’s metafictive picturebooks equip child readers with narrative agency and voice (Sipe 107). Margaret Mackey suggests, “it is possible that reading a metafictional text—a fiction about making fiction—might foster awareness of how a story works without intrusive didacticism” (181). Moreover, the metafictive picturebook enables the reader to develop awareness of the process of storytelling as the reader engages in understanding the devices and conventions of narrative. As Claudia Nelson argues, children’s metafiction “reveals a specific set of authorial assumptions about child-adult as well as child-book relationships” (223), inferring agency in the role of the reader. She continues, “[i]n its exploration of reader-text interaction as the warp and woof of the marvelous, children’s metafiction contemplates the psychology of reading while simultaneously functioning to define what reading should be” (223).

My research interest resides in how the metafictive picturebook provides readers with the opportunity for playful reading, imaginative explorations, and critical engagement with narrative. As Hornik notes, in her discussion of Wiesner’s The Three Pigs, in a metafictive children’s picturebook, “[t]hinking expands, even explodes” (31). Through an examination of a selection of picturebook titles, I will explore how metafiction offers readers the occasion to explore, question and interact with narrative. I have chosen to
focus for my primary texts on the picturebooks and early readers of author-illustrator Mo Willems. Willems’ publications in children’s literature provide his readers with profound agency when serving in the important role of reader. I am motivated to deconstruct and analyze the various metafictive elements of selected Willems’ narratives that speak to the readers not only as members of the storytime audience, but also as participants and *players* in the production of the story drama. I am intrigued by the narrative opportunities of the Willems’ picturebook and early reader formats to provide collaborative moments for child readers.

In an interview with Leonard Marcus, Mo Willems notably claims: “I want you to see my characters for who they actually are, to expose their core jealousy, anger, love, joy, and silliness. I want you to see *yourself* [emphasis added] in them” (272). The essence of Willems’ picturebooks and early readers is the ability for readers to *insert* themselves into his narratives and become active participants of story, playing with and interpreting text and image as they negotiate meaning and understanding. Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott describe how “[b]oth words and images leave room for the readers/viewers to fill with their previous knowledge, experience, and expectations, and we may find infinite possibilities for word-image interaction” (2). As suggested by Perry Nodelman in *Words About Pictures*, the picturebook reader’s interaction with text and image facilitates meaning (199). My motivation accords with Willems’ philosophy of the readers seeing themselves within the story. I am interested in how the reader not only embodies the role of the existing characters, but also through the metafictive elements of narrative, outlines a new role for him-or-herself in the story: as a new character in the plot and process of reading, creating a unique storybook reading experience as Barthes’ “co-author of the
In my research I will acknowledge Willems’ credo, noted in *Don’t Pigeonhole Me!* to his readers: “[a]lways think of my audience, but never think for my audience” (3).

**1.2 Purpose and Questions For The Study**

Bette Goldstone describes a valuable attribute of the postmodern picturebook: “[r]eaders are no longer invisible observers of the story's events. Characters may move into the reader's space and/or talk to the audience. Readers work with the author [and illustrator] to build [emphasis added] a meaningful text” (203). The implied reader of Willems engages in a conversation, or more excitingly, a lively, dramatic role-play, with Pigeon, Elephant (Gerald), Piggie, the very hungry fox, and the chorus of goslings—among other characters—which makes the reading experience especially rewarding. The dramatic relationship across author, reader, text, and illustration transforms the reading experience into a theatrical performance where the reader, too, deserves applause for his or her supporting role in the orchestration of the story. Additionally, the reader participates in a decoding of illustration; the images, too, invite the reader to make connections, fill in the gaps, and construct narrative. Author-illustrator David Wiesner explicates in his foreword to Leonard Marcus’ *Show Me a Story!*, how the picturebook exhibits a unique presentation of narrative:

Picture books tell stories in a visual language that is rich and multileveled, sophisticated in its workings despite its often deceptively simple appearance. It is through the book’s images that a child first understands the world of the story—where it is set, when it takes place, whether it’s familiar or new. They read the characters’ emotions and interactions in facial expressions and body language. They
may notice secondary pictorial storylines happening alongside the main action, like a secret for them to follow. And nowhere is visual humor explored more fully than in the picture book. (Marcus i)

In reading Willems’ stories, the reader is fully immersed in this “rich and multileveled, sophisticated,” narrative where there is room for a dynamic engagement between text, image, and reader. Most importantly, the metafictive aspects of the story invite reader engagement and response. As David Lewis describes in *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*: “[p]ostmodern fiction is not interested in the traditional satisfactions and consolations of story, but it is interested in the nature of fiction and the process [emphasis added] of storytelling, and it employs metafictive devices to undermine the unreflective and naïve reading of stories” (93-4). My research study will focus on how the postmodern picturebook calls its readership forward to engage in active and playful building and constructing of text and meaning. My research questions are rooted in how the postmodern picturebook embeds the reader in the process of storytelling.

Lewis argues that “[p]ostmodern fiction does not accept traditional modes on their own terms and *always* [emphasis added] wants to say something to the reader about the nature of the fictive experience in the midst of that experience” (94). I will focus my research on an investigation of how the implied reader is a central element to storytelling in a selection of Willems’ stories. To understand the notion of the *implied* reader is important to underscore the difference between real readers and readers constructed by the text. In discussion of reader-response criticism and the implied reader, M.H. Abrams references the work of Wolfgang Iser who theoretically entrusts the reader to fill in the “gaps” (266) of a narrative text. Abrams highlights:
Iser distinguishes between the implied reader, who is established by a particular text itself as someone who is expected to respond in specific ways to the “response-inviting structures” of the text, and the “actual reader,” whose responses are inevitably colored by his or her accumulated private experiences. In both cases, however, the process of the reader’s consciousness serves to constitute both the partial patterns…and the coherence, or unity, of the work as a whole…texts always permit a range of possible meanings. (266)

Willems constructs narratives that encourage implied responses from the reader. As Vincent Leitch describes of Iser’s notion of the implied reader, “literary texts provide the foundation for their interpretation, but they also imply the action of the reader. Reading is not passive or static but a process of discovery; a reader questions, negates, and revises the expectations that the text establishes” (1671). Willems’ stories present an implied reader whom the reader is encouraged to respond to in endless play and interpretation. In *Words about Pictures*, Nodelman acknowledges that “we have discovered that verbal narratives demand so much specialized expertise that many critics rightly postulate the experience of an implied reader—a figure implied by the text who possesses the expertise [emphasis added] it assumes” (5-6). I will investigate to determine if and how Willems engages the expert, or more importantly, the agentive implied reader in a relationship with story, play, and the construction of meaning. Moreover, I am interested in how the postmodern picturebook is a powerful vehicle for the reader to move towards critical reflection and reader response through the process of involvement of the implied reader in the creation of the story as they bring forth their social and cultural backgrounds and interests to a reading experience that is uniquely their own.
I have selected three primary texts drawn from Willems’ titles (Appendix A). I will examine them through close reading to determine if they are prime examples of postmodern metafiction with narratives that “want… to say something to the reader about the nature of the fictive experience in the midst of that experience” (Lewis 94).

I ground my research questions for study within Patricia Waugh’s definition of metafiction as:

writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Metafiction invites the reader to develop a relationship with the narrative structure; readers are invited to think outside the box and construct themselves active roles within the story and as makers of meaning. In this study I will conduct a close reading of three texts by author/illustrator Mo Willems: the picturebook Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, the early reader We Are In a Book!, and the picturebook That Is Not a Good Idea! I will analyze the texts using a critical framework of post-structural and reader-response literary theories, which I will develop from the works of Rosenblatt, Fish, Iser, and Barthes. Through critical analysis, I will examine how the metafictive elements of the stories function to invite an implied reader who is critical and, simultaneously, initiate the active experience of the implied reader.

In my study I will ask the following research questions:

2. How do the metafictive elements of the primary texts guide and/or potentially shape the experience of the implied reader?

1.3 Rationale and Criteria For Primary Text Selection

There are many practitioners of postmodernism in contemporary picturebooks. In order to select a picturebook creator to examine in my study, I established a set of selection criteria:

1. Creator is an author-illustrator
2. Creator is recognized critically as postmodern
3. Creator is recipient of awards and favourable book reviews
4. Creator has made a notable contribution to the field of postmodern picturebooks
5. Creator is absent from the scholarship discussion on children’s metafiction

In my selection process, I considered analyzing a selection of works by author-illustrator David Wiesner, but scholarship has already been written on this three-time Caldecott Medal artist, so I did not select him. I also considered the work of Scieszka, but he is not an author-illustrator, and there has been scholarship written on Scieszka and postmodern children’s literature (Pantaleo 2007; Wyile 2006). I considered the work of one of my favorite author-illustrators, Shaun Tan, whose wordless graphic novel \textit{The Arrival} gives the reader agency in constructing narrative, but this has been explored in
criticism that reflects the responses of children (Farrell, Arizpe and McAdam 2010). The metafictive in Anthony Browne’s picturebooks was also contemplated, but Pantaleo (2004) among others, looks at this topic. I decided to focus my research on Mo Willems because his entire selection of picturebooks and early readers appear to embody the participatory, metafictive elements of the postmodern narrative. Further, to date, Willems has been the recipient of three Caldecott Honors, two Geisel Medals, six Emmy Awards, three Geisel Honors, and a Helen Hayes nomination. After thorough research I determined that there have been no theses or dissertations written on Willems. In her article, “Writing the Reader,” Claudia Nelson does consider Willems’ contribution to the field of children’s metafiction in her overview of children’s metafictive picturebooks and chapter books. Nelson describes the reader’s entry into Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! “as an active participant prepared to refuse the title” (223), however this is only an acknowledgment—amongst the many metafictive titles—and calls for further research to understand how metafictive elements shape the experience of the reader. Selecting Willems as the author/illustrator of my primary texts will fill a gap in the critical literature on postmodern children’s literature, in my exploration of his contribution to metafictive picturebooks.

In selecting which of Willem’s titles to examine for this study, after reading the whole of his texts, I purposively chose three titles (Appendix A). I also examined the critical book reviews from notable respected journals to assist in my selection.

In the hilarious story Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, the bus driver exits the scene and a pleading pigeon tries to persuade the reader to let him drive the bus. As the pigeon continues to beg for the driver’s seat, implied readers join in a chorus of “No!” to
abide by the wishes of the bus driver. The *Horn Book Magazine*’s review, amongst others, praises *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* and accurately describes the engaging picturebook: “[a]ssuming that young listeners will take on the role of limit-setting grownups and not identify with the powerless but impertinent pigeon (‘What's the big deal!? .... No fair!’), this well-paced story encourages audience interaction. In fact, like the wide-eyed pigeon, the book *demands* [emphasis added] it” (Flynn 450). *School Library Journal* praises the book, noting the story to be “an unflinching and hilarious look at a child's potential for mischief…Willems has captured the essence of unreasonableness in the very young. *The genius of this book is that the very young will actually recognize themselves in it* [emphasis added]” (132). The passionately insistent and energetic pigeon excitingly brings the reading experience to a new level, and deserves room for discussion in the scholarship on children’s metafiction. Also, it is important to mention that *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* received a Caldecott Honor in 2004.

Told in the style of the silent movie, Willems’ most recent picturebook, *That Is Not a Good Idea!* tells the suspenseful story of a hungry fox who invites an innocent looking goose over for dinner. As the duck continues to accept the fox’s invitations, the chorus of goslings anxiously shouts, “That is not a good idea!” warning the damsel in distress. With a final twist to end the story, Willems both alarms and delights his audience. The *Horn Book Magazine* review notes: “there’s a *trifecta of reading possibilities here* [emphasis added]: an energetic storytime, a read-alone, and a raucous *readers’ theater* [emphasis added]” (Carter 75). *School Library Journal* also praises *That Is Not a Good Idea!* “as an homage to silent movies and the concept of picture books as the ‘theater of the lap.’
Readers will become totally involved [emphasis added] as they watch, along with several chicks, a drama unfolding” (Paulson 146). New York Times Book Review describes Willems’ story: “in the audience a flock of hatchlings react to events with a continuing chorus of ‘That is Not a good idea!’ and ‘That is Really not a good idea!’ and so on, which I found Really fun to read aloud. (And I mean loud.)” (Handy). The reviews of That Is Not a Good Idea! encapsulate the participatory essence of the picturebook reading experience as a drama in which the reader takes on a leading role in the persistent chorus of gosling cries. The critics’ references to the book’s uniquely presented theatricality, and my own experience reading and joining the playful chorus solidified my decision to include this participatory narrative in the selection of texts to be examined. In my reading of the picturebook, and examination of the reviews for That Is Not a Good Idea!, I determined it was an appropriate title to include in a discussion of metafictive postmodern children’s picturebooks.

We Are in a Book! is the most interactive of the Elephant and Piggie series of early reader texts. When Piggie discovers that she and Gerald (Elephant) are in a book—“A reader is reading us!” (13)—the two friends are absolutely delighted. Elephant and Piggie are amused to make the implied reader say “BANANA” (33) and do not want the excitement of being read to end. Piggie comes up with an idea to continue the cycle of fun reading, and Gerald asks the reader, “Will you please read us again?” (56). I think it is important to represent Willems’ incredible duo Elephant (Gerald) and Piggie in a discussion of children’s postmodern metafiction because the two appear together in the notable and highly metafictive story We Are in a Book! which, like my other primary texts, has received high praise and captures the essence of postmodern fictional play.
School Library Journal gives Willems’ early reader a starred review, claiming “the best buddies star in a metafictional romp replete with visual gags, such as Piggie hanging from a speech bubble and Elephant blocking the author’s name on the title page….Mirth ensues as the delightful creatures comprehend a newfound power” (Eames 87). This early reader absolutely encompasses the marvelous realm of metafiction as Elephant and Piggie playfully address the reader, play alongside the paratext, and become self-reflective about their position in the story, and within the artifact of the physical book. We Are in a Book! received a 2011 Geisel Honor (“Geisel”), an award for early readers. A discussion on Willems’ metafiction would be incomplete without the charming and entertaining duo.

1.4 Significance of the Study

I am extending a close reading over the full three primary texts because there is a need for more discussion of Willems in the academic literature so teachers, librarians, and scholars can understand the characteristics and value of metafictive children’s literature. I think there needs to be a closer look at how Willems uses metafictive devices to engage his readers and the relationship of his choices with the critical literature in the field. Willems’ contribution to the field of children’s metafiction is acknowledged by Claudia Nelson who describes the reader’s entry into Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! “as an active participant prepared to refuse the title” (223). Further, in a discussion of the performative value of reading a picturebook aloud, and citing Shirley Hughes’ thoughts on the picture book as theatre (31), Wiam El-Tamami describes how “the [Pigeon] text and pictures are funny and expressive, vividly bringing this character to life, involving the reader directly in its efforts, and encouraging the child to create her/his own response
to throw back at the lovably garrulous pigeon” (27-28). El-Tamami emphasizes the
drama and theatricality of reading a picturebook: “[i]t derives its vitality from the
continuous live exchange between performer and audience which, moment by moment,
actively informs, and transforms, the performance” (28). I would like to extend Nelson
and El-Tamami’s thoughts on Willems by closely looking at how metafictive devices
serve to “actively inform” (28) and engage the reader.

As described by post-structuralist Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “the
text chooses [the reader]” (Barthes 27) to play a part in the construction of narrative.
And, most notably, in “From Work to Text” Barthes underscores how the text “asks of
the reader a practical collaboration” (1457) in the narration of the story and shaping of
characters, and most importantly, the process of meaning making. In a video interview
entitled “Authors Revealed,” Willems too, follows suit in this post-structural
understanding of the role of the reader. Willems emphasizes the profound role of the
reader of his stories: “You are the orchestra and that is very important… be my orchestra,
play my piece… I have to be aware of my orchestra. They are essential to me.” Willems
acknowledges the important role the reader plays in the construction of story; he is very
aware of his audience and the dynamic role they play in the process of storytelling. My
research is significant as this active invitation to the postmodern picturebook and early
reader audience is a subject that should be explored and discussed in relation to Willems’
texts; to date there has been no academic scholarship on Mo Willems, despite his
presence as an agentive force in this postmodern genre.

1.5 Significant Terms

Postmodern Fiction and Postmodern Picturebook
David Lewis defines postmodern fiction as:

inherently metafictive; that is [it] comment[s] upon, or direct[s] attention to, the nature of fiction in the process of creating it. Postmodern fiction is not interested in the traditional satisfactions and consolations of story, but it is interested in the nature of fiction and the processes of storytelling, and it employs metafictive devices to undermine the unreflective and naïve reading of stories. (91-3)

Lewis understands the postmodern picturebook to employ the following strategies and methods to construct narrative: boundary breaking, excess, indeterminacy, parody, and performance (99).

Metafiction

Metafiction is “self-conscious fiction, which draws attention to its fictiveness” (Hunt 207) and provides the reader with the opportunity to assist in the construction of story. Geoff Moss states: “The tendency is for adults to promote closed rather than open texts for children, to cut the child off from the experiment lest it should be dangerous and deny metafiction because it turns the reader into a self-conscious collaborator rather than an easily manipulated consumer” (51). Metafiction gives the reader the ability to explore with curiosity the constructs and devices of narrative. An extremely important aspect of metafictionality is described by Roberta Trites as “the autonomy that the text’s ambiguity gives to its readers…When no single interpretation asserts itself on the readers, they are more likely to escape the type of ideological manipulation that totalizing texts produce” (240) and become more involved in the process of reading and the construction of narrative.
Paratext

Paratext “constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy” (Genette 2). The format and visual design of paratext enables active reader collaboration page-by-page. Paratextual elements include, but are not limited to: the book cover design, book jacket art, the table of contents, ISBN number, dedication page, title page, foreword, footnotes, typography, and endpapers (Nikolajeva and Scott 241-56). In *How Picturebooks Work*, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott claim:

[a]lmost nothing has been written about the paratexts of picturebooks such as titles, covers or endpapers. These elements are however, still more important in picturebooks than in novels. If the cover of a novel serves as a decoration and can at best contribute to the general first impact, the cover of a picturebook is often an integral part of the narrative, especially when the cover picture does not repeat any of the pictures inside the book. The narrative can indeed start on the cover, and it can go beyond the last page to the back of the cover. Endpapers can convey essential information, and pictures on the title pages can both complement and contradict the narrative…the title itself can sometimes constitute a considerable percentage of the book’s verbal message. (241)

The author and illustrator of the postmodern picturebook often play with the paratextual elements to invite reader response, provoke questions and anticipation in the narrative, and ignite playful curiosity in the metafictive.
**Picturebook**

The picturebook is thirty-two pages long (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 91) and combines text and image to tell a story. A picturebook’s reading audience is commonly aimed at young children. El-Tamami describes the picturebook:

constantly stepping outside its own frame and redrawing it, questioning itself from within and without. This is tangibly true in the innovative design of many contemporary picture books. There are picture books, for instance, that are read both right side up and upside down; picture books that employ a 'cutout' technique—a hole in the page which belies some element on upcoming pages; picture books in which the paper is translucent in order for past pages to echo through, following the reader on her/his journey through the book—to give but a few examples. Suffice to say that the picture book, in a dialectical relationship between form and content, is constantly reworking the definitions of literature, of art, and, crucially, of material fit for children [emphasis added]. (39-40)

In defining the picturebook, Carol Lynch-Brown and Carl M. Tomlinson emphasize the inseparable relationship between text and image: “the story would be diminished, and in some cases confusing, without the illustrations, and so we say that illustrations in picture books are integral, or essential, to the story” (91).

It is important to emphasize that the picturebook is not a genre, but a format of reading with many genres contained within. The picturebook combines visual and written narratives—although there are also wordless picturebooks—to present story.

**Early Reader (or Easy Reader or Easy Chapter Book)**

Robin Smith describes the characteristics of the early reader:
The text is plain and predictable, ensuring reading success. In fiction, the plot has one or two characters who encounter similar situations in all the sequels…. Each book has photos or illustrations on every page, which provide ample clues to the text in case the reader gets stuck. (1902)

Some examples of the early reader include: *Frog and Toad* by Arnold Lobel, *Bink and Gollie* by Kate DiCamillo, and, of course, Mo Willems’ *Elephant and Piggie*.

**Post-structuralism**

A feature of post-structuralism discussed in this paper is the Barthean “death of the author.” In post-structural thought, “[t]he decentering or deletion of the author leaves the reader, or interpreter, as the focal figure” (Abrams 249). For Barthes, “the ‘death’ of the author frees the reader to enter the literary text in whatever way he or she chooses” (250) to engage with and interpret narrative.

**1.6 Overview of Chapters**

Starting with the literature review in the following chapter, I describe the postmodern literature landscape that metafictive picturebooks inhabit. The literature review lays a foundation for the analysis of Willems’ titles in the large theoretical landscape of radical change theory, reader response, the concept of the post-structural Barthean co-author, and the engaging process of picturebook meaning making. I proceed to describe how this thesis will engage in an analysis of Willems’ *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, *We Are in A Book!*, and *That Is Not A Good Idea!* to understand the use of metafictive narrative devices as an invitation to the implied reader to engage in active
co-authorship with the author-illustrator. In the subsequent chapter, methodology is discussed. I describe how I will frame my analysis through selected theoretical elements from critical writings of Eliza Dresang, Sylvia Pantaleo, David Lewis, Perry Nodelman, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, and Lawrence Sipe. Methodology also introduces us to Patricia Waugh’s characteristics of metafiction, which will be applied to our analysis of Willems’ titles. Findings Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore each of the three Willems primary texts individually. In the final chapter, the discussions and conclusions, I restate and answer the research questions, connect the primary texts, and provide suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Postmodern Picturebooks

Postmodern art and literature demand the active participation and collaboration of its audience; the readers of postmodern art take on a role akin to that of the author, writing themselves and/or their experiences into the existing narrative to create a personalized reading experience. As posited by Wolfgang Iser, “participation means that the reader is not simply called upon to ‘internalize’ the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge” (1681). The reader of the postmodern picturebook is encouraged to assist in the process and product of storytelling to create an “aesthetic object.” As post-structural literary theorist Roland Barthes suggests, the text “asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (1475) in order to decipher meaning in the text and create a readerly connection. The notion of Barthian “practical collaboration” (1475) is central to the process of reading the postmodern picturebook. “Practical collaboration” creates an intimate connection between text, image, author, and reader that results in a rewarding reading experience.

Reader Response Theory

The reading of the postmodern picturebook incorporates Louise Rosenblatt’s concept of “reading of a text [as] an active event” (Ross et al 52), as readers are invited to decode a collage of visual and textual elements. Rosenblatt describes the reader’s transactional relationship with the text as “active, not a blank tape registering a ready-made message” (Rosenblatt 10). She further states that “reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the
reader…an active process lived” (20). By not reducing the text to a limited meaning or understanding, Rosenblatt’s reader response theory allows the text’s meaning to grow with the reader’s experience. Each reading of the postmodern picturebook unfolds a unique dramatization of narrative, experience, and authorship. Reading the picturebook as an active, collaborative event is central to a reader’s engagement with Willems’ stories. As Iser states, “[w]henever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves…they induce the reader to perform basic operations within the text” (“Interaction” 1676-77). Thus, the reader of the postmodern picture book—specifically those narratives that play with characteristics of the metafictive—is drawn into a realm of imaginative situations and possibilities and is asked to decode narrative, while digesting the postmodern (Sipe 107).

In framing a discussion of metafiction in postmodern children’s picturebooks and early readers, it is important to note the foundational act of reader-response criticism that becomes a part of the postmodern reading experience. In Is There a Text in This Class?, literary theorist Stanley Fish argues that “it is the structure of the reader’s [emphasis added] experience” that creates meaning (152) when reading and interpreting a work. Fish describes a reader-centered model in which the meaning behind the text is secondary to the reader’s social and cultural experiences that are brought into play when reading the text. By focusing on the reader, Fish emphasizes the value of the reader’s role when reading a story. According to Fish, the text does not dictate meaning; moreover, the reader creates his or her own meaning-making, rendering the reading experience a highly interactive and participatory activity in union with the text. In his article, “Readers, Texts,
Contexts,” Michael Benton poses two significant questions about children’s literature and its young reading audience: “Who is the implied child reader inscribed in the text? [and] How do actual child readers respond during the process of reading?” (86). In his critical analysis, he acknowledges the work of such prominent reader-response critics as Rosenblatt, Fish, and Iser, among others, to understand the relationship between children and their experience reading children’s literature. Benton explores the divide between the central theoretical perspective of the reader-response critics and the theories of “the assumed reader” (88) understood by the literary school of New Criticism:

Iser, Holland, Bleich and Fish operate from a philosophical basis that displaces the notion of an autonomous text to be examined in and on its own terms from the centre of critical discussion and substitutes the reader’s recreation of that text [emphasis added]. Reading is not the discovery of meaning (like some sort of archeological ‘dig’) but the creation of it. (89)

The theoretical perspective of the reader-response critics shapes my research in metafictive picturebooks and early readers for children. The understanding of the reader-response critics situates readers in an active position as enablers and creators of meaning. Benton states: “Reader-response criticism accommodates both the reader and the text; there is no area of literary activity where this is more necessary than in the literature that defines itself by reference to its young readership” (98). Reader-response criticism is an important framework in understanding children’s metafiction because of the genre’s ability to enable play and response to narrative.
Radical Change Theory

The notion of the reader taking on an active role in the reading experience has extended itself into discussions of children’s and young adult literature. In her discussion of Radical Change theory, Eliza Dresang claims that “connectivity, interactivity and access in the digital world explain the fundamental changes taking place in the body of literature for young readers” (14). She continues to note the prevalence of “graphics in new forms and formats, words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy, nonlinear organisation and format, nonsequential organisation and format, multiple layers of meaning” (19). Additionally, in her book Radical Children's Literature, Kimberley Reynolds goes beyond Jacqueline Rose’s foundational concepts of children’s literary theory as presented in The Case of Peter Pan, or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction (1984), where Rose understands children’s literature as a “cultural safe-house which preserves an ideal of the innocent child” (5). Reynolds incorporates Dresang’s Radical Change theory as Reynolds develops a more expansive definition of the child reader and its relationship with children’s literature. Reynolds describes a progressive shift from representations of Romantic childhood innocence to the contemporary “extent to which children’s literature participates in redirecting and writing and thinking” (5) in conventional boundaries of text, illustration, style, and format, opens up more room for reader engagement and discussion. Like the foundational post-structural and reader-response literary theorists, Reynolds examines and investigates active narratives and readers. Reynolds pronounces radical children’s literature as an active genre that encompasses Barthean readers who are “creators, interpreters and innovators” (35) of image, text, and narrative. These critical thinkers (Dresang 19; Nikolajeva and Scott 220;
Sipe 107; Nodelman and Reimer 298; Lewis 92) share a common theoretical stance towards the active relationship between reader, art, and text. As Reynolds says: “There are many outstanding examples of picturebooks in particular that not only invite, but require readers to join forces with the author (or author-illustrator) to make meaning” (35). Active readers and their unique dramatization of narrative play an important role in the reading and understanding of postmodern picturebooks—a radical format within children’s literature.

**Picturebooks and Meaning Making**

Lawrence Sipe similarly acknowledges Iser’s reader-response theories in the discussion of children’s literature: “The actual literary work is realized through a convergence [emphasis added] of reader and text….Each reader fills in the unwritten work or the ‘gaps’ in his or her own way, thereby acknowledging the inexhaustibility of the text” (99). Sipe examines the relationship between picturebooks and reader, and the text and illustrations that comprise the narrative:

Picture books, through transmediation give children the opportunity to engage in an unending process of words and pictures. In other words, picture books allow children to have multiple experiences as they engage in creating new meanings and constructing new worlds. (107)

According to Sipe, the picturebook demands from its reader the (re)construction of new worlds and meaning making. In this vein, in his analysis of postmodern metafiction in children’s literature, David Lewis states: “[p]ostmodern fiction is not interested in the traditional satisfactions and consolations of story, but it is interested in the nature of fiction and the *processes of storytelling* [emphasis added], and it employs metafictive
devices to undermine the unreflective and naïve reading of stories” (92-93). This process of storytelling is made alive through the ecology of pictures and words (48-60). Lewis notes, “[t]he picturebook…comes to life during what might be called the ‘reading event.’ The words are brought to life by the pictures and the pictures by the words, but this is only possible in the experience of reading” (55). The reader of Willems’ texts is drawn into the process of storytelling, playing an important role as he or she prevents the pigeon from getting behind the wheel or leading the vocal goslings in their warning chorus. Willems sets up his readers for unique, creative responses to the world of story. I am interested in how metafictive devices support the ‘reading event’ in the selected titles by Willems.

In “Writing the Reader,” Claudia Nelson similarly states that “[i]n its exploration of reader-text interaction as the warp and woof of the marvelous, children’s metafiction contemplates the psychology of reading while simultaneously functioning to define what reading should be” (223). The reader-text-illustration relationship plays a significant, conceivably a central, aspect in the orchestration of story. Sylvia Pantaleo notes that “[m]etafiction draws the attention of readers to how texts work and to how meaning is created” (“Young Children Engage” 19); thus, the reader of metafiction becomes both writer and reader of story. In The Pleasures of Children’s Literature, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer further clarify the relationship of reader-illustration-text in a discussion of picturebooks. Nodelman and Reimer intriguingly describe picturebooks as puzzles. To the child reader, the association of picturebooks with puzzles encourages the active process of reading and constructing narrative as a Barthean co-author. As Nodelman and Reimer point out:
All picture books are puzzles. The details of pictures invite attention to their implications. The unmoving pictures require viewers to solve the puzzle of what actions and motions they represent…. The words and pictures together tell different stories that require readers to solve the puzzle of how to connect them.

*The pleasure of picture books is not just in the stories they tell but also in the game of figuring out what those stories are* [emphasis added]. (298)

The theoretical notion of the picturebook as a puzzle encourages ingenuity in the reader’s construction and deconstruction of image, text, and meaning. As suggested by Nikolajeva and Scott, “[m]etafictional elements in a text deliberately draw attention to its status as a *construction* [emphasis added] and therefore raise questions” (220). The aforementioned contemporary picturebook scholars emphasize the construct of the metafictive picturebook as puzzle that demands reader construction and reconstruction in order to be fully understood.

Scholars of the postmodern picturebook describe an intimate relationship between the art and text of the picturebook and the child reader, as “[b]oth words and images leave room for…infinite possibilities for word-image interaction” (Nikolajeva and Scott 2). Through the devices of metafiction, this relationship between reader and the postmodern children’s narrative becomes a living entity, explored by the reader with deep curiosity and imagination, with a resulting unique pursuit of meaning making.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this study, I will conduct a close reading of three texts by author/illustrator Mo Willems. The titles for analysis include: the picturebook *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, the early reader *We Are In a Book!*, and the picturebook *That Is Not a Good Idea!* I will analyze the texts using post-structural literary theories, which I will develop from the works of Iser and Barthes for analytical discussion. A poststructuralist reading of Willems’ children’s books will open the floor for the notion that meaning does not reside in the text. The inter-reader response theorists—Barthes, Iser, and Foucault—rely heavily on the reader to construct meaning. Through post-structuralism, “[t]he decentering or deletion of the author leaves the reader, or interpreter, as the focal figure” (Abrams 249) in the analysis and construction of narrative. The poststructuralists dismissed the validity of the ‘function,’ or ‘role’ hitherto assigned in Western discourse to a uniquely individual and purposive author, who is conceived as the ‘cogito,’ or origin of all knowledge; as the initiator, purposive planner, and (by his or her intentions) the determiner of the form and meanings of a text; and as the ‘center,’ or organizing principle, of the matters treated in traditional literary criticism and literary history. (249)

Thus, from a poststructuralist perspective, the reader is given agency to build story and construct meaning. As suggested by Barthes, one of the most prominent post-structural figures, in “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” “the ‘author’ is not [emphasis added] the person who invents the finest stories but the person who best masters the code which is practiced equally by his listeners….Narration can only receive its meaning from the world that makes use of it” (115). Through post-structuralism, the
reader is inserted into individually writing and responding to the text; most importantly, interpreting what the author intended of the implied reader. Iser best describes this marriage of reader and text: “participation means that the reader is not simply called upon to ‘internalize’ the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge” (1681). Post-structuralism provides the reader with agency in the reading of a text. By focusing on the experience of the reader, a post-structural narrative, according to the theory of Barthes, decrees, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (“The Death” 148). This authorial “death” frees the reader to make interpretive choices and allows the reader to liberally shape the gaps within the narrative. Through post-structuralism and the “death” of the author, the reader is able to negotiate meaning with the narrative; as suggested by Iser, “[w]henever the reader bridges the gaps communication begins” (1676).

As well as utilizing these theoretical lenses, I will frame my analysis through selected theoretical elements from the aforementioned critical writings of Eliza Dresang, Sylvia Pantaleo, David Lewis, Perry Nodelman, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, and Lawrence Sipe. According to what is appropriate to the individual text I am examining, I will reference their theories and views towards metafiction, picturebooks, and the “radical” relationship between art, text and reader. I will use Waugh’s characteristics of metafiction alongside Barthes and Iser’s literary theory as analytical tools in the analysis of Willems’ books.

Throughout my analysis of Willems’ three titles, I will explore the notion of metafictive picturebooks as “radical” (Dresang 19), a “construction” (Nikolajeva and
a “puzzle” (Nodelman and Reimer 298), and a “processes of storytelling” (Lewis 92) in which the readers are invited to become essential “creators, interpreters and innovators” (Reynolds 35), and “co-authors” (Barthes 1457) of illustration, text, and meaning. My analysis will examine and explore how reading the postmodern picturebook or early reader is a process of building and constructing meaning that becomes an active process through metafictive narrative strategies. I hope to build upon El-Tamami’s discussion of the drama and theatricality involved in reading a picturebook and “the continuous live exchange between performer [or reader] and audience which, moment by moment, actively informs, and transforms, the performance” (28). Further, I hope to perform a close reading of the primary texts while keeping in mind what Willems emphasizes in “Author’s Revealed,” where he validates the profound role of the reader of his stories: “You are the orchestra and that is very important…be my orchestra, play my piece…I have to be aware of my orchestra. They are essential to me.” Willems acknowledges the important role the reader plays in the construction of story; he is very aware of his audience and the dynamic role they play in the process of storytelling. Willems’ understanding of the role of the reader motivates my research interest to analyze the metafictive devices at play in his stories. As distinctly stated by Willems when describing his picturebooks and the aims of his picturebook writing: “I want my books to be played [emphasis added], not to be read. I want them to be sort of a full-on experience” (Patton 54). Elephant, Piggie, Pigeon, and the chorus of goslings, embody playfulness and radiate playful exploration of the text onto the reader. In my research I aim to understand how metafictive elements of the primary texts guide the experience of the reader.
Notably cited in the scholarship on metafiction, Patricia Waugh outlines the characteristics of metafiction to include:

- “the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator” (21)
- “ostentatious typographic experiment” (21)
- “explicit dramatization of the reader” (22)
- “Chinese box structures” or embedded stories (22)
- “incantatary and absurd lists” (22)
- “over-systematized or arbitrarily organized structural devices” (22)
- “total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative” (22)
- “infinite regress” or a circular narrative (22)
- “self-reflexive images that deliberately call attention to themselves” (22)
- “critical discussions of the story within the story” (22)
- “use of popular genres…to draw attention to narrative conventions” (22)
- “explicit parody of both literary and non-literary texts” (22)

A work of metafiction can contain any combination of these aforementioned characteristics that are “aimed at destroying the illusion of a ‘reality’ behind the text and instead emphasizing its fictionality” (Nikolajeva and Scott 220). Waugh’s characteristics of metafiction will shape my analysis of the primary texts. Each of the primary texts for analysis in this thesis has a different set of metafictive elements. I will be looking at what makes each book uniquely metafictive, specifically, what elements and inherent qualities of metafiction shape each narrative. I am interested in analyzing what kind of reader the text is creating, and what kind of puzzle or radical reading experience is being created in Willems’ picturebooks. Because I am not interviewing children in my discussion of
Willems’ picturebooks, I am interested in understanding the “implied reader” or intended audience analysis that the text offers the reader. Importantly, I will be analyzing these three texts from a post-structural Barthean “writerly” perspective where the reader is acting on the story to bring out its meaning through the role of “co-author.”
Chapter 4 – Findings: *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!

*Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* presents the protagonist, Pigeon, and his undying dream to drive the big blue bus. The bus driver begins the story by giving the reader specific instructions not to let Pigeon drive the bus, but Pigeon surely does not take no for an answer and proceeds to beg the reader for permission to take the bus for a spin. Through comical statements, Pigeon actively entertains readers as he works to convince his audience for a turn at the wheel: “How ’bout I give you five bucks?” (n. pag) or “I’ll be your best friend!” (n. pag). Pigeon begs and pleads with the reader throughout the duration of the narrative for an opportunity to drive the bus, but the reader stays true to his promise to the bus driver. At the end of the story, once the bus driver has returned, Pigeon catches a glimpse of a massive red truck and his dreams of driving a bus transition into dreams of driving a much larger vehicle, leaving the reader to imagine a continuous story and new arguments for the Pigeon to declare in order to drive the big red truck. Willems presents a cleverly comedic story through an expressive illustrative style that captures the attention of readers. Pigeon’s passionate voice encourages his readership to follow their dreams.

In *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* the reader is introduced to a playful scene orchestrated by our protagonist, Pigeon, who thrives off his spirited interaction with the implied reader. Through many pleas, the Pigeon eagerly seeks the attention of the implied reader to grant him the freedom to drive the bus. Pigeon’s story falls into the genre of the postmodern picturebook, which provides readers with the opportunity for playful reading, imaginative explorations, and critical engagement with narrative. Further, *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* inhabits the curious realm of metafiction that offers readers with
the occasion to explore, interact, and question narrative; children’s metafictive picturebooks equip child readers with the authoritative tools of narrative agency and voice. Willems’ cleverly constructed picturebook *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*—amongst many other Pigeon titles (Appendix A)—gives young readers the opportunity to assist the bus driver in preventing the pigeon from driving the bus. Upon entry into the story, the implied reader immediately joins forces with the bus driver and creates a pact to ensure the driver’s steering wheel remains out of Pigeon’s reach. Willems’ postmodern story enables readers to become active participants and constructors of story. As distinctly stated by Willems when describing his picturebooks and the aims of his picturebook writing: “I want my books to be *played* [emphasis added], not to be read. I want them to be sort of a full-on experience” (Patton 54). Pigeon’s character embodies playfulness and radiates this playful exploration of the text onto the reader. *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* fully absorbs readers in a curious, yet active, conversation with the bus driver and the pigeon through the frame of postmodern metafiction. In an interview with Leonard Marcus, Mo Willems notably claims: “I want you to see my characters for who they actually are, to expose their core jealousy, anger, love, joy, and silliness. I want you to see *you* [emphasis added] in them” (272). The beauty of Willems’ work is the ability for readers to insert themselves into the narrative and become active participants of story, curiously playing and interpreting text and image as they negotiate meaning and understanding.

Patricia Waugh describes metafiction as
writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and
reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2) Willems’ story invites the reader to develop a relationship with the narrative structure; readers are invited to think outside the box and construct themselves as active participants within the story. Readers engage in a lively conversation with Willems’ Pigeon, reading and participating in the story and performing a role—listening to the bus driver and not letting the pigeon drive the bus. In “Writing the Reader,” Claudia Nelson notes, “[i]n its exploration of reader-text interaction as the warp and woof of the marvelous, children’s metafiction contemplates the psychology of reading while simultaneously functioning to define what reading should be” (223). Before the title page and dedication page—before the story’s narrative begins—the narrator, the bus driver, says: “Hi! I’m the bus driver. Listen, I’ve got to leave for a little while, so can you [emphasis added] watch things for me until I get back? Thanks. Oh, and remember: don’t let the pigeon drive the bus!” (n. pag). Immediately, the implied reader is presented with an important role, aiding the bus driver by preventing the pigeon from driving the bus. This narrative direction is similarly presented in Don’t Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late! where before the commencement of the story the implied reader is told: “Oh, good, it’s you. Listen, it’s getting late and I need to brush my teeth. Can you do me a favor? Don’t Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late!” (n. pag). In Don’t Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late!, similarly to Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! the implied reader is presented with an imperative role and authoritative voice in the narration of the story. As described by David Lewis: “[p]ostmodern fiction is not interested in the traditional satisfactions and consolations of
story, but it is interested in the nature of fiction and the \textit{processes of storytelling} [emphasis added], and it employs metafictive devices to undermine the unreflective and naïve reading of stories” (92-93). Thus, the reader of Willems is drawn into the process of storytelling, playing an important role, perhaps the role of the main character, as he or she prevents the pigeon from getting behind the wheel, or staying up late. Willems sets up his reader as both a co-protagonist to the pigeon and co-author of \textit{Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus}, for unique, creative responses to the world of story.

\textit{Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus} possesses notable characteristics of metafiction outlined by Waugh. Firstly, the story is alive and inviting through the energy and engagement of the “over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator” (21), who desperately wants the implied reader to give him the agency to drive the bus. Pigeon fervently works to justify to the implied reader his yearning desire of driving a bus with many reasons, including how his pigeon “cousin Herb drives a bus almost every day!” (n. pag), and because “[He has] dreams, you know!” (n. pag). The over-obtrusive narrator is critical to the construction of humor and reader engagement in the story. In \textit{Don’t Pigeonhole Me!: Two Decades of the Mo Willems Sketchbook}, Willems describes how the pigeon’s origins once resided within the margins of his sketchbooks. He notes:

Exasperated by his outbursts in the margins of my sketchbooks, I decided to put him in a story. The original idea for the story featured a little boy tasked with the job of not letting the Pigeon drive the bus. But that was no good for the Pigeon. He wanted to star, alone. Turns out, the Pigeon was right. When I cut the kid, the story came to life. (74)

The over-obtrusive starring narrator, Pigeon, promotes communication with the implied
reader and a dramatic reading experience. As acknowledged in the theoretical “death” of
the Barthean author, “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously within [emphasis added]
the text,” (“The Death” 145). This post-structural notion of the reader speaks to another
of Waugh’s characteristics of metafiction, the “dramatization of the reader” (22). In
Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus, the implied reader is invited to play along with the
narrative and respond to the many speech bubbles delivered by the pigeon. Through these
dominant metafictive narrative devices, Willems is able to produce a marriage of narrator
and reader in the telling of his story. When looking at this union post-structurally, we can
infer Iser’s notion that a “literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and
the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author’s text, and the aesthetic is the realization
accomplished by the reader” (1674) into the reading of Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the
Bus. The story invites and engages the reader because of its direct ability for the pigeon
to communicate with the implied reader to create a collective, co-authored product. As
Iser affirms in his discussion of the relationship between the text and the reader:

[T]he work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualisation but
must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in
character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of
reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. As the reader
passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the
different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so
sets himself in motion, too. (1674)

Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus, in the words of Iser, is set in a dynamic “motion”
through the metafictive devices of the over-obtrusive narrator and the dramatization of
the reader as it simultaneously exudes the narrative strategies of boundary breaking, excess, indeterminacy, parody, and performance (Lewis 99).

Bette Goldstone actively describes a valuable attribute of the postmodern picturebook: “[r]eaders are no longer invisible observers of the story's events. Characters may move into the reader's space and/or talk to the audience. Readers work with the author to build a meaningful text” (203). The postmodern picturebook calls its readership forward to engage in active building and constructing of text and meaning. Once the bus driver exits the scene, pigeon immediately confides in the reader: “I thought he’d never leave,” (n. pag) endeavoring to initiate a connection, or rapport, with the reader as he begins to persuade the reader to let him ride the bus. “Please? I’ll be careful,” (n. pag) whines the pigeon. Goldstone’s description of the postmodern picturebook involving a full dynamic reader is especially present in Willems’ story, and stories. The postmodern picturebook as exemplified in Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! truly resembles a performance stage that requires the participation of both actor and audience to elicit a reaction and response to the text. Reminiscent of a monologue, “what someone would speak aloud in a situation with listeners” (Harmon 353), pigeon delivers a request to his audience from the ‘stage’ of the book as he tries to justify why he should drive the bus. As Andrea Wyile discusses in “The Drama of Potentiality in Metafictive Picturebooks,” “[p]icturebooks engage their readers in some level of performance every time they are read” (176). Through his over-obtrusive character traits, Pigeon cleverly engages the reader with his monologue, which consequentially transforms the text into a dramatic interaction. Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus relies on the harmony between the actor—pigeon—and the audience—the reader; the pigeon and the reader are dependent
on the other to create meaning through performance. Wyile furthers, “[t]he effect of participatory theatre, like that of reading these contemporary metafictional picturebooks, is more overtly demanding because the audience is called upon to perform in the production of meaning” (177). “C’mon! Just once around the block!” (n. pag). The pigeon requests a response from his audience; only through the engagement of the reader can Willems’ story produce the possibility of performance. In “Don't Pigeonhole Him,” Cook asks Willems to discuss our over-obtrusive narrator: “So tell me about the Pigeon. He’s just so much desire and so much frustration” (n. pag). Willems responds: “He’s the [emphasis added] Pigeon. The fact is his first name is ‘The.’ That should tell you enough about who he is and where he thinks his place in the world is” (n. pag). Pigeon playfully demands his implied readership to engage in conversation, story, and performance; Pigeon orchestrates a unique reading experience that involves the reader’s participation. Both pigeon, and the postmodern picturebook, seek to maintain a relationship with the audience. This relationship is achieved through the union of narrator and implied reader, and through the prominent metafictive devices that strengthen the reader’s relationship to the story.

Wyile understands how through “metafictive picturebooks the process of becoming engaged in the story is often due to a realization of its marvelous artifice and a negotiation of the playful collision of multiple sign systems readers are confronted with” (176). Willems’ story opens up a new role for the reader; the text asks the reader to fill in the gaps and respond to the pigeon’s questions and declarations: “How ‘bout I give you five bucks? […] I bet your mom would let me […] What’s the big deal!??” (n. pag). Pigeon is eager to elicit a response from his reader. In “Why Books? The Zena
Sutherland Lecture,” Mo Willems describes the nature of his books: “I never know what the book I’ve made ‘means.’ That’s my audience’s job. You, the reader, create meaning out of the story; I just set the table” (12). Willems acknowledges that his work involves a curious engagement in reader-response, where the reader is creating meaning of his or her experience with the narrative. Channeling the reader-response theory of Iser, who describes reading as a polyphonic activity, Willems’ *Pigeon* story asks of the reader to fill in the blanks where “participation means that the reader is not simply called to ‘internalize’ the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other, as a result of which the aesthetic object begins to emerge” (Iser 1681). Reading *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* encourages polyphony of voices and engagement with the speech bubbles throughout the text. The “blanks” or speech bubbles created by the over-obtrusive narrator await a response from the implied reader and “induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text. […] [The reader] is guided to adopt a position in *relation* to the text” (1677). The true artistic product of the postmodern picturebook is revealed through this dramatic interaction between reader and narrator as they negotiate the polyphony of signs and symbols, textual and visual cues throughout the story. Most importantly, as noted by Iser, “[t]he structure of the blank organizes this participation, revealing simultaneously the intimate connection between this structure and the reading subject” (1681). The speech bubbles convey a conversational tone throughout the story that, in turn, creates inferred “blanks” or gaps that the reader responds to and makes the story his or her own; the blanks invite a response and do not allow the reader to take on a passive relationship with the story. Willems also plays with the blank through his illustrations. When interviewed by
Leonard Marcus, Willems revealed: “[t]he first Pigeon book was certainly informed by *Where the Wild Things Are*. I became interested in Sendak’s manipulation of the audience’s response by changing the sizes of images of the course of the story. In my case, I decide to change the background colors instead” (Marcus 269). The solid colored background on each of the pages functions as a blank; the reader is able to imagine himself on the page, or curtained stage, communicating with pigeon. The blank backgrounds invite imagination and illustrative construction on behalf of the reader. Pigeon is often at the borders of the page, running out of the page or peeking in, leaving much room, or blank space, for reader collaboration. Further, Pigeon’s expressive wing, beak, and eye gestures invite a reaction; they too create an opportunity for the reader to engage in the narrative, or, dramatically speaking, get into character. In terms of blanks, the reader is also provoked to respond to the abundance of expressive question marks and exclamation points that follow most of Pigeon’s urgent pleas throughout the narrative, making the story distinctly postmodern as the reader uniquely becomes a conversing character in the story, responding to Pigeon’s desperate cry: “LET ME DRIVE THE BUS!!!” (n. pag).

Willems profoundly asserts:

the book doesn’t work, it *can’t* work, unread […] You invest in them and become part of them. You contribute. They can be read, but they can also be played. I’m not really interested in you guys reading my books a hundred times; read it twenty times and then make *your own* story. Go from consuming a story to creating your own. This is a magical thing to me.” (16-17)
In his description of the function of his picturebooks, Willems emphasizes how the book cannot come to its fruition without the assistance of the reader; the reader must *play* with the words and images on the page, interact with the pigeon, and perform a story of their own. As understood by the Barthean post-structural understanding of the relationship between author and reader:

As an institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; but in the text, in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as he needs mine. (*The Pleasure* 27)

Barthes desires the author as somewhat of a phantom guide to the reading experience, but simultaneously believes that the reader brings the story to fruition. The implied viewer/reader of *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* joins forces with the author-illustrator to create a unique narrative product; the one cannot exist without the other, they inspire one another as co-authors of the picturebook. Once the bus driver delivers his instructions and exits the stage, the reader takes the narrative wheel. Thus, the postmodern picturebook becomes a form of play—similar to the imaginative play acted by children in playing house, dolls, and trucks—and Willems’ narratives take the reader outside the box to enter new ways of storytelling and responding to fiction. It is important to recognize that “only by playing reading games can [readers] make sense of the narration, the pictorialization, and the text as a whole. Although the postmodern uses of metafiction can often be alienating, the active puzzling required of readers in these books
is an empowering experience” (Wylie 191). Role-playing with the Pigeon, and verbally responding to the written and visual prompts, engages and fosters curiosity and decision making in the act of reading. What is the pigeon asking of me? How do I respond to pigeon’s countless pleas? How do I keep Pigeon from riding the bus? Through the assistance and guidance of the narrator, the implied reader is stimulated to engage and analyze constructions of text and meaning. As Iser asserts, “images [and words] hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequence that the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader’s imagination” (1682). Through the postmodern picturebook, the reader is able to develop both character and self-awareness as the text is played and verbally constructed. Geoff Moss highlights the value in children’s metafiction: “it turns the reader into a self-conscious collaborator rather than an easily manipulated consumer” (51). Throughout Willems’ narrative, the reader participates in active engagement with meaning making as he or she is encouraged via a compelled sense of responsibility to the story, and the bus driver narrator.

The most prominent characteristic of postmodern metafiction prevalent throughout Willems’ story is the “over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator” (Waugh 21). Pigeon is extremely in your face, perceptive, and keen on involving the reader in the act of storytelling; pigeon and the reader become communicative, co-constructors of the narrative. Each of pigeon’s statements prompts a response from the reader. As Lewis declares: “[p]ostmodern fiction does not accept traditional modes on their own terms and always [emphasis added] wants to say something to the reader about the nature of the fictive experience in the midst of that experience” (93). Not only is the pigeon eager to get the reader involved in helping him drive the bus, perhaps his central motive is getting
the reader involved in the act of storytelling: *Let the [Reader] Drive the [Story]!* At the end of the story, the bus driver comes back and says: “I’m back! You didn’t let the pigeon drive the bus did you? [leaving a gap for reader response] Great! Thanks a lot.” (n. pag). It is important to emphasize how the reader is given such great agency in the act of storytelling; the bus driver lets the reader drive the story and co-narrate with Willems’ pigeon, yet the reader controls the pigeon’s actions. In an interview with Leonard Marcus, Willems notably emphasizes: “[f]or a story’s text to work, it needs to be *incomprehensible* [emphasis added]. Otherwise you wouldn’t need the pictures. My job is to let the audience figure out what’s going on by themselves” (270). Readers are also left with the notion of “infinite regress” or a circular narrative (Waugh 22). What will Pigeon do with the big red tractor-trailer truck that appears on the final pages of the story? Readers gain a preview into another of Pigeon’s dreams in the final endpapers of the book and are left to imagine Pigeon’s reasons behind wanting to drive this larger motor vehicle. My thoughts are that the paratextual elements of the endpapers in this story serve as an initial and closing invitation, or prompt, for the reader to think outside the box and curiously engage his or her imagination while considering what will happen next in Pigeon’s narrative. The illustrated thought bubbles of Pigeon’s imaginings are echoed on the endpapers and summon the reader to enter this desirable bus driving world, and thought process, in order for the reader to fully understand Pigeon’s dreams. And, without any text on the page, the endpapers of *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* function to illustrate Pigeon’s dreams and insert the implied reader into the story as a persuasive attempt to give the Pigeon voice and agency in obtaining his bus driving dreams. On the front endpaper we see Pigeon dreaming of driving the blue bus, and on
the final endpaper we see him aspiring to drive the big red tractor-trailer truck. The endpapers not only frame the physical storybook pages, this paratextual element of the story serves to illustrate Pigeon’s principal aspirations; further, being the endpapers of the book, with no text following, we can see Pigeon’s dreams to be infinite, yet inspiring to the implied reader. This incomprehensible notion behind Willems’ narratives offers readers the opportunity to explore, play, and manipulate narrative conventions alongside the narrator, creating great fun and pleasure in the reading experience.

As understood by Wyile, “[p]icturebooks, like plays, are informed by notions of presentation as well as representation, of performance and resonance, and of an active presence on the part of the actor that is termed ‘in the moment’ in acting theory” (191). I like to imagine that Willems invites his readers to enter the world of Pigeon and engage in a kind of improv acting with Pigeon; how uniquely postmodern. Willems’ postmodern picturebook is verbally and visually alive with meaning-making opportunity. The text asserts itself on the reader and relies on the reader to give the story meaning because the reader plays an important role in both the process and production of the story.

When considering the power of print books in general, Willems profoundly states:

With all their bells and whistles and word jumbles and assorted narrative killers, after we turn [electronic books] on, they don’t need us. Turn it on and leave the room, and the book will read itself. But a real book is helpless. It needs us desperately. We have to pull it off the shelf. We have to open it up. We have to turn the pages, one by one. We even have to use our imagination to make it work […] suddenly, that book is not just a book; it’s our book. (16)
"Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!" transforms the reading experience into a highly interactive and participatory practice through two valuable metafictive devices outlined by Waugh—the over-obtrusive narrator and the dramatization of the reader—where the reader is highly aware that he or she is a character in the story. As described by Alessandra Balzer, co-publisher of Balzer + Bray and editor of "Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!" emphasizes: "Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! was a game-changer in picture books. It ripped away all adult condescension and sentimentality and channeled pure, glorious, childlike id" (“Don’t Pigeonhole” 75). Through the power of metafictive devices, the reader is able to not simply read story, but freely and actively engage in the process, construction, and narration of storytelling. The reader becomes a central figure in the art of the postmodern picturebook, and in the case of "Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus," drives the narrative and makes the journey his or her story, too.
Chapter 5: Findings: *We Are In a Book!*

*We Are In a Book!* presents a story of Gerald and Piggie from Willems’ *Elephant and Piggie* series of early readers. In the story, Gerald and Piggie excitedly discover that they are characters in a book and that a reader is reading their words and actions on the page. The two friends continue to amuse themselves and their audience, and notably prompt the reader to say “banana” (33), which results in Gerald’s infinite laughter and glee. (32-37). Gerald and Piggie are so pleased they are being read! Following moments of laughter, Gerald becomes worried when Piggie asks: “Do you want a turn before the book ends?” (38-39). Gerald does not want the story to end, he really “just want[s] to be read” (52). No fear, Piggie has an idea; he asks his readers to read the story again! *We Are In a Book!* presents the cyclical nature of story, its infinite life, as the characters continue to be revisited by readers and reread again, and again. Willems’ cartoon-style illustration, stark white page backgrounds, and speech bubble dialogue with various font sizes to indicate the intensity of emotional reactions: “THAT IS SO COOL!” (18-19), come together to create an accessible and animated early reader for everyone to enjoy.

In the introduction to *Don’t Pigeonhole Me!* Willems shares his credo: “I always think of my audience. But never think for my audience” (3). Mo’s motto radiates at the centre of all his picturebooks and early readers. In the Elephant and Piggie series of readers, there is a constant invitation for the implied reader to respond to and contribute to the production of storybook meaning, while being thoroughly amused by Gerald and Piggie’s friendship, their observations, and antics. Willems reminds us about the essential role of the intended child reader of his picturebooks in a recent CBS interview, “For Kids' Book Author Mo Willems, Childhood Is an Awful Time”: “They are my collaborators
Valuably, Willems does not think for his audience, and acknowledges the audience’s role in assisting with the construction of story. The highly metafictive *We Are in a Book!* invites readers to playfully interact with Gerald and Piggie in an entertainingly theatrical reading of Willems’ story. In their discussion of metafiction, Nikolajeva and Scott remind us that “[m]etafictional elements in a text deliberately draw attention to its status as a literary construction and therefore raise questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (230). Gerald and Piggie are extremely self-aware of their status as characters within a book; more specifically, they are aware that they are characters in a book that is being *read* by an audience: “I think someone is looking at us” (5) indicates Gerald. “[A] reader! A reader is *reading* us!” (12-13), declares Piggie after the two characters stare at the implied reader, intriguingly contemplating who is visually staring at the pages where the duo resides. Not only are Gerald and Piggie aware that they are characters in the confines of a book, but also the reader is aware that he is playing an important role in keeping the art of storytelling alive; the implied reader acknowledges Gerald and Piggie as instrumental to their navigation through Willems’ story, and the duo understands the presence of the reader as vital to the preservation of their literary lives.

The illustration of Piggie sneaking up to the foreground of page (7) to investigate the presence of the reader serves to very importantly authenticate the role of the reader as playing a part in the process of storytelling. The role of the illustration plays an important counterpart to the narrative of *We Are in a Book!* (and for the narrative of all picturebooks and beginning-readers). Through the visual narrative, we are able to see Elephant and Piggie move closer to the foreground of the story, authenticating their...
rapport with the reader and establishing the reader as an instrumental role in delivery of story. As Lawrence Sipe emphasizes in *Storytime*, “the illustrations act to fill in gaps in the text, and the text acts to fill in the gaps in the illustration. There is a synergy between text and illustrations: together, they have a potential for meaning that is more than the sum of their parts” (231). The metafictive devices used in *We Are in a Book!* explicitly function to bring the implied reader a fruitful reading experience as he engages in an intimate reading experience with Elephant and Piggie and understands the valuable synergy between text and illustration. The illustrations of Elephant and Piggie looking directly at the reader speak to the value of the visual narrative, as do the illustrations increasing in size and perspective as the figures approach the foreground (7-14) to examine the presence of the reader. The two characters inch closer and closer to the very foreground of the page. Gerlad and Piggie’s presence in the very foreground of the page resembles the act of sitting at a windowsill, peering at the outside world; the two friends acknowledge the implied reader beyond the boundaries of the physical page of the book. This illustrative act of perspective brings the characters in closest proximity to the reader; the visual presentation serves to eliminate the gap between the reader and the characters in the book, who both now work together to tell and experience the act of storytelling. In “Looking, Thinking, Talking, Reading, Writing, Playing…Images,” Nancy Roser describes how “[c]hildren who become expert readers of picturebooks move between levels of communication—between conventional and iconic signs” (406). *We Are in a Book!* engages the implied reader in a highly sophisticated act of communication where the act of reading illustration and written text requires the reader to respond and decipher narrative as they unite image and text into a telling art form. The metafictive elements of
the story function to further emphasize this decoding reading experience for the reader.

Roser furthers:

Helping children take critical stances on literacy…may depend on multiple readings and close looks, on ‘stepping outside’ the story world to consider the picturebook as a crafted object—a series of purposeful decisions made by a set of people, including author, illustrator, editor, and designer, who had the first chances to bring meanings to the work. (409)

The metafictive devices used in *We Are in a Book!* allow the reader to truly understand the picturebook as an object that has been constructed through the united teamwork of the author, illustrator, characters, and, most importantly, the role of the implied reader. The metafictive reading experience of this Willems story allows the reader to step outside the narrative boundaries to understand perspective, character, narrative structure, dramatic play, and most importantly the valuable role of the implied reader.

Through the illustration, the implied reader is able to gain a valuable insight into Gerald and Piggie’s emotions and contemplations, and further the implied reader acknowledges their proximity to the duo as an equally valuable role in the narrative; in fact, the story revolves around the reader. Without the implied reader decoding the images, reciting the narrative, and filling in narrative gaps or responses, the story would not come to fruition. As David Wiesner advocates in his foreword to *Show Me a Story!*: “[p]icture books tell stories in a visual language [emphasis added] that is rich and multi-leveled, sophisticated in its working despite its often deceptively simple appearance. […] [Children] read the characters’ emotions and interactions in facial expressions and body language” (vii). In reading *We Are in a Book!* the reader is especially aware of Willems’
use of space, perspective and the resulting emotional reactions. Without words, but relying on visual cues, (6-7) the reader is able to decipher Elephant and Piggie’s skepticism, curiosities, and excitement (12-13) towards the fact that they are being looked at and read as characters in a book. The two characters are extremely amused by the fact that they are being read and encourage the reader to interact with the duo by prompting the reader to abidingly say “banana” (29), to confirm the two characters are in fact being read. Nikolajeva and Scott indicate “[o]ne of the simplest types of metafiction is direct address to the reader….In picturebooks, it may assume, for instance, the form of an admonition: Do you want to know what happened next?—turn the page” (221). The implied reader of *We Are in a Book!* follows a sophisticated admonition throughout the story, and allows the cycle to continue with each re-reading, as requested by Gerald: “Hello. Will you please read us again?” (56). The implied reader participates in the cyclical nature of storytelling as he enters into Willems’ story; moreover, the implied reader is hyperaware of the elements of the story and his or her role in the construction of the narrative. *We Are in a Book!* is a prime example of metafictional play in children’s literature. The implied reader is intrigued by what Gerald and Piggie will say to each other next, and the reader is captivated by the illustrative gaze which Elephant and Piggie possess as they stare directly at the reader whenever the two reflect on the fact a reader is reading their story. *We Are in a Book!* engages readers in the storytelling experience through metafictive devices, and indicative of the postmodern, the story “wants to say something to the reader about the nature of the fictive experience in the midst of that experience” (Lewis 94).
It is valuable to note that *We Are in a Book!* fundamentally reflects on the cyclical nature of story and the infinite pleasures of a reader immersed in the world of a captivating storybook narrative. The cyclical notion of the story not ceasing to be adds to the richness of Willems’ narrative. Gerald is troubled at the thought of Piggie’s question: “Do you want a turn before the book ends?” (38-39). Gerald, and readers alike, do not want story to end—especially when the implied reader develops an intimate connection with the characters within the story. Yes, Gerald is afraid the story will end and of the death of the narrative life. My thoughts are that Gerald values the relationship he has created with his implied reader and inherently wishes for the relationship to continue, and grow, with each reading and re-reading of the story. Through re-reading and co-authored involvement on behalf the reader, the story remains active and prolific. Our co-protagonist, Gerald, is absolutely amused as he becomes aware of the implied reader reciting the words on the page, and conversing with himself and Piggie. Elephant is so pleased, and surprised, “Oh! The reader said it again!” (34), and bursts into a round of countless laughs and roars with Piggie (35). The overall notion that the book will end frightens Gerald; yet, through the infinite cycle of reading and re-reading, as well as recommending Gerald and Piggie’s story to friends, keeps their existence lively and present. David Plotz of the *Slate Book Review* reflects on the overarching theme of death in *We Are in a Book!*

Gerald and Piggie hatch a plan, about which they are very happy: They ask us to read the book again! But isn’t this conclusion terribly grim? In essence, Gerald and Piggie are begging to be condemned to Groundhog Day: forced to re-enact the same banana joke endlessly, and, in Gerald’s case, forced to relive the mortal
panic of realizing the book is going to end, over and over again. A world of
endless reincarnation and constant recapitulation—that’s the only prospect worse
than the void. All books do end, thank goodness. (n. pag)

In my opinion, Gerald and Piggie are not “forced to re-enact” their story, but crave to
share the intimate emotional connection—laughter and fears—with the reader and the
book through each reading and re-reading of *We Are in a Book!* Plotz adheres to the
statement, “[a]ll books do end, thank goodness,” but this is something that is impossible
to accept with the metafictive *We Are in a Book!*, a book that shares an intimate, co-
authored relationship with its implied readership, a book that re-calls the cyclical nature
of reading into play with each “Thank you” (2) acknowledgment made by Piggie at the
start of each story reading. Plotz’s exhaustive outlook of *We Are in a Book!* as “endless
reincarnation” of the condemned Gerald and Piggie should be reconsidered. Gerald and
Piggie do not cease to be: the duo is alive with story, emotion, and willingness to meet
new readers along the way. If we are to name a “death” in our reading of *We Are in a
Book!* it is the Barthean death of the author that provides the reader with agency in their
reading and response of Gerald and Piggie. Through metafictive narrative devices, *We
Are in a Book!* brings Gerald and Piggie willingly, and infinitely, conversing with their
readership and sharing the pleasures of reading.

As previously observed in *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, *We Are in a Book!*
also exhibits characteristics of metafiction outlined by Waugh. Like Pigeon, our
characters in *We Are in a Book!*, Gerald and Piggie, are the “visibly inventing narrator[s]”
(21) who function to actively engage the implied reader in the process of storytelling—
this is explicitly seen from the beginning of the story through the illustrations of the
characters looking directly at the reader and through their discussion about and with the reader. Gerald and Piggie want to interact with the implied reader and play on the traditional structure and pace of narrative in order to get a reaction from their audience; the two characters work to transform their audience into co-actors on their storybook stage. Piggie declares: “Oh! I have a good idea! I can make the reader say a word!” (22-23). Where Pigeon, in Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, speaks directly at the reader and begs for the reader to let him drive the bus throughout the duration of the narrative, Elephant and Piggie primarily speak to each other and the reader responds through his implied presence in the narrative. The duo only directly verbally addresses the reader once, towards the end of the story, when Gerald humbly asks a favor of the reader: “Hello. Will you please read us again?” (56). Our “visibly inventing narrators” understand that the role of the reader plays a valuable part of the process of storytelling. In “Don't Pigeonhole Him,” Greg Cook writes about his interview with Willems when the author-illustrator underscores how he “only write[s] 49 percent of the book and the audience puts in the rest.” In reading Willems’ picturebooks and early readers it is absolutely evident that the author-illustrator values the role of the reader through the construction of the metafictive story. In We Are in a Book!, the prompt to reader to engage in the story for a second, third, or more reading, speaks further to Waugh’s characteristics of metafiction and the notion of “infinite regress” or a circular narrative (22). When re-reading the story a subsequent time, the reader can now understand why Piggie says “Thank you” (2) to the reader at the beginning of the story; she validates the role of the reader as an integral part of keeping the story continuously alive and read aloud.
Willems uses the characteristic of metafiction, “ostentatious typographic experiment” (Waugh 21), in this beginning-reader in the form of conversational speech bubbles. The speech bubbles leave room for the implied reader to respond to Elephant and Piggie’s ongoing dialogue about the reader and the act of being read by the reader. Iser describes how “the shifting blank is responsible for a sequence of colliding images, which condition each other in the time flow of reading. […] The images hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequence that the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader’s imagination” (1682). The presence of the implied reader assists Elephant and Piggie in connecting the gaps regarding the structure and components of narrative. Piggie ponders (14): “The reader is reading these word bubbles!” (15). Piggie becomes aware of the components of narrative and the valuable voice that the implied reader brings to the table as he brings the word bubbles and narrative to life. This story provides the implied reader with an educative opportunity to acknowledge and understand the construction and components of a narrative through written text, illustration, paratext, and metafictive devices. In his discussion of the contemporary picturebook, Lewis indicates, “[u]nlike writers for more mature and accomplished readers, writers and illustrators of picturebooks address an audience for whom what counts as reading and what can legitimately go into a book are concepts that are still being learned” (77). Through Piggie’s typographic acknowledgment: “The reader is reading these word bubbles!” (15), the implied reader gains insight into their role in the orchestration of story. Further, the acknowledgment brings into play another of Waugh’s aspects of metafiction: the “explicit dramatization of the reader” (22). As we have experienced in our reading of Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, the dramatization of the reader is central to the
telling of Willems’ story. Elephant and Piggie’s probing of each other regarding the subject of who is on the other side of the story, reading and turning the pages, places the reader in a dramatized light: the player acknowledges the audience, and the audience becomes a part of the action. The dramatization of the reader adds a level of play for both the characters and the implied reader of *We Are in a Book!*

From cover to cover, the peritextual features of *We Are in a Book!*—including endpapers and inside title page—highly embed the implied reader into the postmodern construction of reading story. The inside cover page begins by presenting Gerald with his hands in the air recognizing his role, and stating the title of the story, “We Are in a Book!” (1). This illustration of Gerald on this first page of the story covers up the byline of the story—by Mo Willems—which provides room for the implied reader to take on the role of co-authorship in order to tell, and retell, *We Are in a Book!* with Gerald and Piggie. This covering of the byline provides the implied reader with an introduction to the type of story he or she is entering, and the responsibility that the reader will take on in filling in the gaps of narrative, beginning with the byline. On the cover of the book, we see Piggie eagerly peeling back the layer of the page in order to discover what resides within the story. Our “visibly inventing narrators” are extremely aware that they are housed within the book, but that the book comes alive through each turn of the page enacted by the implied reader, the co-author of the reading experience. In his discussion of postmodern picturebooks, *Storytime: Young Children’s Literary Understanding in the Classroom,* Sipe understands that “the purpose of literature is not to seduce the reader into the illusion of having entered another world (Lewis, 2001), but rather to highlight the fact that the text is an artificial construction. In other words, the text calls attention to
itself as a text” (31). *We Are in a Book!* certainly calls attention to itself as a text; Gerald and Piggie identify peritextual features such as the page number (44, 46, 47) and speech bubbles (15) and are aware that they are in a book, as they repeatedly state (16-21). When Elephant learns that books end, “ENDS!?!?” (40) and Piggie looks ahead (45) to see what page number the story will end on, our characters continue to acknowledge themselves not only as characters, but characters in a production that must re-enter the stage and entertain the audience once again. As suggested by Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “[o]n the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader)” (16); the author-illustrator and the implied reader of *We Are in a Book!*, and Willems’ other titles, form a marriage of co-authorship that becomes increasingly alive through the use of metafictive devices. Through its devices, “[m]etafiction draws the attention of readers to how texts work and to how meaning is created” (Pantaleo and Sipe 8).

The metafictive devices used by Willems in *We Are in a Book!* are the tools that strengthen how the reader plays a role in the “puzzle” (Nodelman and Reimer 298) of constructing narrative and how he understands the “processes of storytelling” (Lewis 92). In *Storytime*, Sipe wonders if the “greater challenges presented by postmodern picturebooks may assist children in becoming more active sense-makers and critical readers” (32). The implied readers of *We Are in a Book!*, as well as *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, are invited to playfully interact with story outside the traditional narrative “box” to create a unique reading experience. Importantly, in *We Are in a Book!*, the beginner reader format enhances the metafictive reading experience because the beginner reader is introduced to children at a time of their literary lives when they are beginning to
transform into independent readers and the format provides the reader with a sense of agency and power in their reading and understanding of story. *We Are in a Book!* enables readers to take a step forward in their developing literary lives. The metafictive devices uniquely enhance the reader’s participation in the reading experience. The uses of metafictive devices in the early reader inherently shape the reading experience of the beginner reader into an active engagement with story. Cook asks Willems: “Why do you care about doing early readers in the first place?” Willems perceptively responds:

Part of it really was I had been told by all sorts of authors and people I respected, ‘Picture books are hard, but early readers that’s as hard as it gets.’ There’s an element of because it’s there. I also think it’s a fantastic time in your life when you’re starting to decode. A lot of things happen. You start to lose a lot of your memory, that faculty of being able to remember everything disappears as you start to read because you don’t need to remember everything because you can get it somewhere else. You can access it if you want to. *It also means a great degree of independence. One of the things that’s important to me is that my books are played not just read. So I wanted it to be in dialogue so that younger readers could read a real book even if they’re only reading one character. So that’s the transition* [emphasis added]. I saw that with my own daughter when she was learning to read. I would have to take some of the lines and she would get some of the lines and it would build up that way. But it wasn’t natural in the books. But here mom or dad can say, ‘I’ll be Elephant, you be Piggie.’ You’re working together, but you still have the accomplishment of finishing a real book. It’s 64 circles, it’s 56 pages, it’s massive. (n. pag)
The early reader book format provides the picturebook reader with the next steps towards reading independence, and Willems enables this reading independence and relationship with the book further through the application of metafictive narrative devices. As insightfully described by Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “the text chooses [the reader]” (Barthes 27) to play a part; the reader becomes another interpreter of story, which is a powerful and critical role to take on in the act of reading. The implied reader of *We Are in a Book!* takes on a supporting, yet validating, role to Gerald and Piggie as he or she playfully reads and responds to the speech bubbles and illustrations on the page. Barthes profoundly asserts: “[t]he pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (17); the pleasure of reading the metafictive is initiated when the implied reader transforms into the collective role of reader, viewer, co-author, audience, and performer of story as he responds to Gerald and Piggie’s dialogue. Rosenblatt reminds us:

> In the past, reading has too often been thought of as an interaction, the printed page impressing its meaning on the reader’s mind or the reader extracting the meaning embedded in the text. Actually, *reading is a constructive, selective process* [emphasis added] over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed. (*Literature as Exploration* 26).

Through the metafictive narrative devices, *We Are in a Book!* moves beyond an interaction between reader and the printed page and invites the occasion for the reader to take on the notion of reading as constructive as he understands the dynamics of
storytelling, becomes aware of the features of the book, and allows the reader to play a
leading role in their reading of the story.
Chapter 6: Findings: *That Is Not a Good Idea!*

*That Is Not a Good Idea!* tells the dramatic story of the hungry fox and a very appetizing goose. The story begins with the fox inviting the goose to go for a stroll. Goose coyly blushes, and accepts the invitation. Throughout the story, a chorus of goslings continuously warns her, emphasizing: “That is not a good idea!” (n. pag), particularly when the hungry fox suggests the goose join him to see his nearby kitchen. Despite the warning cries, our clever goose is not oblivious to the hungry fox’s agenda, she has a plan of her own: fox soup for dinner. Through black and white framed pages, and white text, Willems’ story presentation is reminiscent of the world of silent film and, alongside the colour illustrations, elevates the suspense of the story. *That Is Not a Good Idea!* is a dramatic story to visually and textually feast upon.

From the front cover image, a scene signaling panic to an observant front row audience of goslings, Willems draws the implied reader into the imaginative realm of storytelling and responding to story. Predominantly, through the telling illustrations, the implied reader gains unique access to the narrative and inserts himself into the orchestration of this dramatic story. Willems brings readers to the forefront of performance in *That Is Not a Good Idea!* in which the implied reader’s voice is implicated into the chorus of goslings and becomes an agentive force and narrative voice in the telling of the story. Not only is the reader looking at the pages of text—pages of text framed as scene stills from silent films—being a member of Willems’ “audience,” the reader becomes a member of the cast of characters; the implied reader’s voice is valuable to the delivery of this postmodern picturebook. In “From Work to Text,” Barthes underscores how the text “asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (1457) in
the construction of story. Willems’ *That Is Not a Good Idea!* embodies this theoretical notion of practical collaboration as the implied reader takes on an active, and vocal, role within the chorus of goslings in declaring the warning “That is NOT a good idea!” (n. pag). The implied reader’s participatory role in the chorus creates an energetic narrative dynamic. In his discussion of what makes contemporary picturebooks uniquely postmodern, Lewis underscores the importance of performance and participation:

> The more that authorities dissolve and the more authors and artists abrogate responsibility for leading readers and viewers towards sense and meaning, then the more *readers have to write the text they read* [emphasis added]. Much art is now conceived in terms of performance and participation, *the role of the onlooker or participator in the process being deemed as important as any product* [emphasis added]. In such a climate the craft element in art, the idea that the artist possesses superior manipulative and creative abilities, has withered away… (91)

Willems’ implied reader has the opportunity to join forces with the author-illustrator to assist in the co-presentation of story. In a similar manner as that of the chorus of ancient Greece, “offering inter-act comments” in dramatic performances (Harmon and Holman 99), the baby birds and our implied reader serve to inform the happenings of the drama, and play a role in creating meaning in the story. The gosling cry is echoed throughout the narrative as the female goose follows the hungry fox on a stroll through the woods to his nearby kitchen. This story demands the participation and response on behalf of the implied reader because the narrative is fueled by audience-gosling cries. As suggested by Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration*: “[w]hen there is active participation in literature—the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his own responses to
the text—there will be many kinds of benefits” (276). Willems’ story calls for the implied reader to pursue an active voice in the chorus of goslings, which translates into a participatory reading experience as the reader responds to and predicts the narrative.

After each proposition made by the cunning fox, the chorus of goslings—our “over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator[s]” (Waugh 21)—chime in with a warning to signal potential danger ahead. Each time the chorus of goslings appear on their double-page spreads (n. pag), the implied reader engages in an exchange with the narrative chorus, heightening what Barbara Bader describes as suspense of “the drama of turning the page” (1), in which the reader is eager to know what will happen next in the story as the rising action continues to suspend the implied reader in a playful exchange with the narrative.

In That Is Not a Good Idea!, the black background of the pages, the framed white borders, and the sepia-toned illustrated pages of the chorus in which the goslings warn the goose of imminent danger, radiate the essence of the silent film. In the spirit of the silent film, an art form with no spoken dialogue, the reader is invited to imagine outcomes, engage in visual analysis to understand the character’s emotions and thought processes. The written narrative of That Is Not a Good Idea! is reminiscent of the subtitles at the bottom of the screen of the film, the narrative script or guide, to the action on screen or, in this case, on the page. The written narrative translates to a characteristic of Waugh’s definition of metafiction: “ostentatious typographic experiment” (21). A filmic essence imbues the typography and narrative of That Is Not a Good Idea! and calls forward an audience response. The overarching notion of this picturebook recalls the essence of the silent film and its story begs for an interactive relationship with its viewer and readership. In The Pleasure of the Text, Barthes describes the experience the reader
will have when he encounters the text of bliss and the text of pleasure. Barthes defines the text of bliss as

the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the *consistency* [emphasis added] of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

Willems takes his implied reader outside the box of consistency and allows the reader to play with words and pictures and, moreover, become a member of the cast of characters. When describing *That Is Not a Good Idea!* as a Barthean text of bliss, our implied reader moves beyond the narrative and visual language on the page and engages in the dramatic verbal exchange with the chorus of goslings, unsettling a traditional narrative reading to provoke response and co-narratorship of story. *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* and *We Are in a Book!,* too, embody this Barthean “text of bliss,” as they provide the implied reader with the opportunity to read in a new way; Willems’ stories move beyond the “[t]ext of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants, euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading” (14) and take the implied reader on an engaging, interactive, critical, and humorous journey through the use of metafictive devices. The implied reader of *We Are in a Book!* is playfully enticed to say “banana”—an open invitation to coexist with the characters on the page, moreover to participate in a dramatic performance of the page. Additionally, the implied reader of *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* is also invited to become a co-author of a story that “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the *consistency* [emphasis added] of his tastes, values” (Barthes 14), as he
reads the story and inserts himself into the performance scene to verbally battle with the precocious and argumentative Pigeon to prevent him from riding the bus. Through the cleverly implemented metafictive devices, our implied reader of the three Willems texts discussed is “unsettled” from the traditional role of simple reader, to the complex and multitasking role of pursuing the role of reader, co-author, director, and dramatic player of story. As Nodelman declares in *Words about Pictures*, “it is part of the charm of the most interesting picture books that they so strangely combine the childlike and sophisticated—that the viewer they imply is both very learned and very ingenuous” (21) as he or she decodes images and text in their reading of story. *That Is Not a Good Idea!* as well as the other Willems titles discussed in this analysis of metafictive devices, draws out the critical and creative implied reader who is “very learned and very ingenuous” as he or she navigates the metafictive “text of bliss” (*The Pleasure* 14), a narrative heightened with tension and curiosity as to what will happen next in the story.

In *Words about Pictures*, Nodelman notes that “we have discovered that verbal narratives demand so much specialized expertise that many critics rightly postulate the experience of an implied reader—a figure implied by the text who possesses the expertise it assumes” (5-6). Willems’ implied reader takes on an expert role as he negotiates play and meaning of the three stories discussed in this thesis. Rosenblatt understands: “[f]or the experienced reader, much of this may go on subconsciously, but the two-way, reciprocal relation explains why meaning is not ‘in’ the text or ‘in’ the reader. Both the reader and the text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning” (*Literature as Exploration* 27). The text and illustrations of *That Is Not a Good Idea!* guide the implied reader to engage in a reciprocal meaning-making experience; the story
prompts the implied reader to respond to the action on the page in a unique way. As soon as the implied readers enter the covering image of That is Not a Good Idea!—an image reminiscent of a movie theatre screen with the chorus of goslings in the front row of the theatre, witnessing the action—they are drawn into the notion of the silent film, a film that beckons their voices to contribute to the telling of the story. As accented through the bordering frame on the cover page, the goslings are viewing the narrative action and their alarming reactions have something to say about the story being told. Similar to Waugh’s definition of metafiction, “writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact” (emphasis added) in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2), the implied readers of That Is Not a Good Idea! become implicitly aware of their vocal choral role and their valuable responsibility in the construction and telling of the story. Our implied readers of That Is Not a Good Idea! become members of “The Players” outlined on the dedication page—joining the Hungry Fox, Plump Goose, and Baby Geese—as co-characters and co-authors of meaning-making and performance; the illustration of the alarmed gosling on the dedication page visually speaks to the implied reader to assist the chorus in their warning cries throughout the story. As Kelly Booker notes in “Using Picturebooks to Empower and Inspire Readers and Writers in the Upper Primary Classroom,” “[i]n many picturebooks the images complement the text and follow a similar story, giving more detail to characters, settings or conflicts” (1). The illustrations of Willems’ picturebook are an especially important entrance into the discussion of the metafictive reading, and viewing, experience of the picturebook. As understood by Sipe, “[b]y according illustrations equal importance with the text, teachers [and librarians] encourage this
diversity of interpretation, and also facilitate [children’s] abilities to integrate visual and verbal information” (*Storytime* 232). The illustrations draw the implied reader of this metafictive picturebook into a realm of imaginative situations and possibilities as it asks readers to decode narratives while digesting the postmodern product. On the title page of the book we see the title of the story on the black and white, silent film backdrop, stating: “Mo Willems Presents: *That is Not a Good Idea!*” This notion of Willems presenting the story opens up room for co-authorship and participation on behalf of the implied reader. Eliminating the byline creates an increasingly participatory environment for the implied reader to chime into the chorus.

The black and white and sepia-toned film-like stills represented throughout the story establish opportunities for the readers to anticipate action and draw conclusions to the rising action and the resulting outcome of the story. Willems’ story calls for a “dramatization of the reader” (Waugh 22). These moments of sepia-toned illustrations without text, or white-colored text on a black backdrop without illustration, create “blank” moments when the implied reader can fill in the gaps of the narrative. As described by Iser:

In order to spotlight the communication process we shall confine our consideration to how the blanks trigger off and simultaneously control the reader’s activity. Blanks indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously prompt acts of ideation on the reader’s
part. Consequently when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks “disappear.” (1677)

In this story, Willems’ “blank” moments provide the implied reader with an opportunity to insert themselves into the narrative. These blank moments, coupled with what Waugh describes as the notion of “infinite regress” or a circular narrative (22), speak to the reader’s opportunity to connect with the story and become active players of the script. The repetition throughout the story of “That is NOT a good idea!” (n. pag), “That is REALLY NOT a good idea!” (n. pag), and so forth, takes the implied reader outside the realm of the story and into a dramatic aside with the audience or readership of the picturebook. As previously stated, through a post-structural lens, “[t]he decentering or deletion of the author leaves the reader, or interpreter, as the focal figure” (Abrams 249) in the telling and understanding of story. As Rosenblatt emphasizes in Literature as Exploration:

> Meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page. As the text unrolls before the reader’s eyes, the meaning made of the early words influences what comes to mind and is selected for the succeeding signs. But if these do not fit in with the meaning developed thus far, the reader may revise it…or may start all over again with different expectations. (26-27)

The implied reader of this picturebook is in an ongoing conversation with the illustration and written narrative on the page; the implied reader reads and works to understand the asides of the chorus and the rising action, thinking about what will happen next and who might be served in the pot of soup for dinner: the sly fox or the cleverly cunning female goose. In her discussion of postmodern picturebooks, Booker alludes to the work of
David Wiesner and reflects on how “postmodern picturebooks allow deep, novel responses from children. They provide playful and insightful opportunities to develop literary understandings and comparisons with other texts” (3). As the implied reader of That Is Not a Good Idea! engages in the give-and-take relationship with the author, Willems, a playful construction of meaning is experienced. In her article, Booker also cites Sipe’s article, “The Construction of Literary Understanding by First and Second Graders in Oral Response to Picturebooks,” in which he outlines what inspires children’s reactions to literature “the hermeneutic impulse or the desire to know; the personal impulse or the need to connect to one’s own life; and the aesthetic impulse where children can experience the story as if they were there” (3). The metafictive picturebook engages Willems’ implied reader to desire to play a role in the construction of story and meaning making as they serve as co-authors and supporting roles to their over-obtrusive narrating counterparts.

Through the “processes of storytelling” (Lewis 92), the implied reader of That Is Not a Good Idea! engages in the construction of a narrative or piecing together a “puzzle” (Nodelman and Reimer 298). Waugh’s metafictive characteristics of narrative support the implied reader in their understanding of the “processes of storytelling.” As Nikolajeva and Scott describe in their article, “The Dynamics of Picturebook Communication:”

Most picturebooks are characterized by what we have termed symmetrical relationships and those we call enhancing or complementary. When they are enhancing or complementary, with words and pictures supporting one another by providing additional information that the other lacks, the additional material may
be minor, or quite dramatically different. (229)

In my reading of Willems’ picturebooks and early readers, I understand the words and pictures to valuably support one another, and heighten the metafictive reading experience. In That Is Not a Good Idea! the implied reader is able to connect to the complementary relationship between words and pictures; Willems presents the pages of this story in a balanced manner in which the implied reader fills in the Iserian “blanks” or words on the illustrated pages and mentally visualizes the drama unfolding on the stark black pages imprinted with white written text.

As previously discussed in the analysis of Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, the notion of the “processes of storytelling” (Lewis 92) becomes increasingly alive in That Is Not a Good Idea! through the drama of the page—this drama also thrives in We Are in a Book! That Is Not a Good Idea! exudes the essence of the big screen and impresses upon the reader the responsibility to become not only a spectator, but also an actor in the performance of the telling of this silent film; the story encourages the reader to narrate the subtitles and offer asides and commentary in response to the chorus of goslings and the unfolding action. In her discussion of metafictive picturebooks, Wyile reminds us: “[i]n metafictive picturebooks the process of becoming engaged in the story is often due to a realization of its marvelous artifice and a negotiation of the playful collision of multiple sign systems readers are confronted with” (176). Willems’ implied reader collaborates with the authorial voice to respond to story in a creative and dramatic way as he decodes illustration and written story. When thinking of That Is Not a Good Idea!—and also with reference to the other titles discussed in this thesis—Wyile’s description of the dynamic of the metafictive picturebook dutifully resonates:
Readers are drawn in, pushed back, or allowed to participate from a comfortable distance by the pictures’ focus, layout, and detail. The narrative engagement in these books is overt; readers engage in an active puzzling together of information, clues, and cues: the drama of potentiality, which results from the interanimation of narration and pictorialization, is a sensory and literary mind game for any number of players. (176)

Wyile’s description of metafiction in picturebooks is absolutely true of the Willems titles discussed in this paper; the radiating theatricality of That Is Not a Good Idea! beckons readers to engage in a collaborating storytelling effort that calls for players, or readers, to play a role from the onset of the cover and dedication pages. Willems uses the paratext to immediately hook the reader into the drama of the reading experience; “[i]f the cover of a novel serves as a decoration and can at best contribute to the general first impact, the cover of a picturebook is often an integral part of the narrative, especially when the cover picture does not repeat any of the pictures inside the book” (Nikolajeva and Scott 241). Through the inviting cover of the picturebook, the drama begins; the dedication page rolls the credits of involvement and the title page further invites participation; the paratext speaks directly to the implied co-authors of performance and meaning-making. As Wyile underscores:

Both picturebooks and dramatic productions inevitably affect their audiences on more levels than they may be aware of. The effect of participatory theatre [emphasis added], like that of reading these contemporary metafictional picturebooks, is more overtly demanding because the audience is called upon to perform in the production of meaning. While there is a drama of potentiality in all
picturebooks, it differs significantly in degree and scope depending on the word-picture relationship. (178)

The collaboration of words and pictures, author and implied reader, the page and the metaphor of the big screen or the acting stage, create an interactive, engaging, and unique reading experience that is heightened by the metafictive literary devices throughout Willems’ story.

Wyile’s metaphor of the reading of the metafictive picturebook as an act of participatory theatre resonates in all of the Willems titles discussed in this thesis—although most overtly presented in That Is Not a Good Idea! through the distinctly theatrical presentation of the black-and-white-silent-film visual and textual thematic layout that radiates from cover to cover. Each of the Willems titles in this paper are alive with theatricality and over-obtrusive characters who demand the attention of the implied reader: Pigeon really, truly wants to drive that bus; Elephant and Piggie enjoy playing with the implied reader on their storybook “stage;” and the goslings drive the storybook plot with their alarming asides. These narrating characters have taken on the responsibility of guiding the implied reader through the drama of the page as they eagerly await anticipated responses from their implied reader. Wyile reflects on the drama of the metafictive picturebook through a Barthean perspective:

To follow on Roland Barthes’s distinction between the work and the text, we can say that the work has potential and the text has potentiality because the full drama comes into being in the act of reading—in the interaction between the reader and the page; yet that drama is subject to change with every performance. Actors bring characters to life in a similar process from the page to the stage and also rely
on their audience’s response and energy. (190)

The beauty of the metafictive picturebook is that it provides an open playground for interpretation and meaning-making; with each reading, reader, and performance the story becomes alive with potential for engagement and response. This opportunity for dramatic play transforms the picturebook into a “radical” (Dresang 19) reading experience that is ignited through the metafictive devices strategically utilized in the construction of story. Wyile’s observations of the metafictive picturebook continues to lend itself in our understanding of That is Not a Good Idea!, and in the cases of Pigeon and Elephant and Piggie’s stories discussed in this paper. As Wyile notes:

> metafictive picturebooks demand active participation of their readers on a number of converging levels: only by playing reading games can they make sense of the narration, the pictorialization, and the text as a whole. Although the postmodern uses of metafiction can often be alienating, the active puzzling required of readers in these books is an empowering experience [emphasis added]. Because they present us with a positive and playful view of plurality and of irony and require us to play various roles in their dramas of potentiality, the construction of recognition, alignment, and allegiance to characters in picturebooks can be made accessible to readers of all ages. (192-3)

Through its cinematic appearance, That Is Not a Good Idea! allures the implied reader into the story as Willems plays upon one of Waugh’s characteristics of metafiction: the “dramatization of the reader” (22). The dramatization of the reader, a characteristic that is alive in many of Willems’ stories, enables the reader to actively participate in storytelling. The act of becoming co-author of story, as the implied reader becomes
dramatized into a narrative role, ignites an element of imaginative play that enables the reader to take up creative ownership in their relationship with the metafictive picturebook. Similar to when children engage in imaginative play where they relinquish reality and become immersed in a playful realm of storytelling and creativity—reading of the metafictive picturebook takes the implied reader on a journey of authorship and imagination, and results in a fruitful product. This notion of the metafictive picturebook as a playground for meaning-making is reflected in the writings of Lewis who acknowledges “the special relationship that exists between picturebooks, the child reader and the concept of play” (76). Lewis continues, “[t]he implied reader of many picturebooks is the one for whom reading and the world of fiction are only gradually taking shape, and this open-endedness in the learner, this state of perpetual becoming, is matched by an open-endedness and freedom from constraint in the picturebook” (76). Willems’ use of metafictive narrative devices further supports what Lewis describes as “perpetual becoming” as Willems’ implied reader transforms to Barthean co-author and negotiates their role in the chiming chorus, their role in Gerald and Piggie’s conversation, or as protectors of the bus. Roser, too, acknowledges how children (delightedly) become near co-creators of the text. And when presented with picturebooks that use such metafictive devices as nonlinearity, multiple narrators in both text and illustration, and deliberate contradictions, readers must move between visual and verbal features to test their notions of what is in play [emphasis added]. (409)

The implied reader of That Is Not a Good Idea! has to negotiate, as Roser points out, multiple narrators understood through both the text and the illustration. The reader has to
enter into narrative and be able to negotiate the many asides chanted by the chorus of
goslings. This negotiation is also observed in Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! when
the reader steps inside a world of story and is first instructed by the words of the bus
driver, but later must negotiate meaning and understanding in the persuasive arguments
proclaimed by the Pigeon. The Willems’ titles discussed in this thesis cleverly draw out
the dramatic reading experience of the implied reader through the use of metafictive
literary devices.
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Discussion

7.1 Discussion of Findings and Limitations

In “Revisiting the Relationships between Text and Pictures,” Sipe emphasizes: “[p]icturebooks are highly sophisticated aesthetic objects, worthy of study and research by readers and viewers of all ages. As aesthetic wholes, picturebooks combine words and visual images (and occasionally other modalities) in complicated ways to produce this unity” (4). Willems’ titles embody the sophisticated marriage of text and illustration, directed by metafictive narrative devices, to invite the implied reader for a playful interaction with story. In the analysis of three titles by Mo Willems: *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*; *We Are in a Book!* and *That Is Not a Good Idea!*, I have been able to further understand how picturebooks form the unification of words and visual images, implied reader and author, and the page to implied stage presentation of participatory reading. Through the supportive literary devices of metafiction, Willems leaves room in the narrative for playful reading as his readers simultaneously serve the co-authored Barthean, agentive role of actor, director, and audience. This study is significant to the understanding of how metafictive characteristics of narrative in children’s literature support critical engagement with storytelling and the enriching process of meaning making. To recall Nelson: “In its exploration of reader-text interaction as the warp and woof of the marvelous, *children's metafiction contemplates the psychology of reading while simultaneously functioning to define what reading should be* [emphasis added]” (223). In this analysis of Willems’ titles, I was able to decipher that the role of the implied reader is an agentive, playful, and influential contributor to the delivery of the story. Looking at Willems’ titles using the narrative device of metafiction defines the
reading experience as explorative, inventive, and unique to each reader interaction and response. As distinctly stated by Willems when describing his picturebooks and the aims of his picturebook writing: “I want my books to be played [emphasis added], not to be read. I want them to be sort of a full-on experience” (Patton 54). Elephant, Piggie, Pigeon, and the chorus of goslings, embody playfulness and support a lively exploration of the text onto the implied reader; resultingly, these characters become fully alive through the implementation of metafictive play. Willems fully absorbs readers in an engaging, yet active, conversation with narrative through the frame of metafiction.

In my study I set out to ask the following research questions:

1. Are Mo Willems’ primary texts analyzed in this research paper postmodern and metafictive? How do they employ metafictive postmodernist strategies outlined by Patricia Waugh—in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984)—to engage the reader in the process of storytelling?

2. How do the metafictive elements of the primary texts guide and/or shape the experience of the implied reader?

In the analysis of three primary texts by Mo Willems, I have come across variations in the means by which Willems implements metafictive devices to engage the reader. Each story provides us with an “over obtrusive narrator” who guides us through each narrative story. This metafictive device plays a critical role in absorbing the reader into the reading and performance of story. In this thesis I worked to understand what kind of reader Willems’ stories created, and what kind of puzzle, or radical reading experience, resulted in the engagement with his picturebooks and early readers. Through each reading of the selected stories, the implied reader becomes an actively involved performer on the
storybook stage, completely invited to engage in the words, illustrations, and oral storytelling evoked in each of Willems’ books. The “radical” reading experience, the “extent to which children’s literature participates in redirecting and writing and thinking” (Reynolds 5), is alive in the Willems titles analyzed because they serve to prompt and promote reader participation and response. Willems’ stories are “radical” because they demand co-authorship, a collaborative effort with his readership, which Willems continues to voice as his innovative picturebook philosophy where he “only write[s] 49 percent of the book and the audience puts in the rest” (Cook).

Each of the stories discussed in this thesis adheres to the characteristic Waugh outlines in her definition of metafiction, as they are “interested in the nature of fiction and the process of storytelling, and [the stories] [employ] metafictive devices to undermine the unreflective and naïve reading of stories” (Lewis 93-4), and engage the implied reader to participate in vibrant storytelling. Further, as understood in Nikolajeva and Scott’s “The Dynamics of Picturebook Communication,” “[i]n enhancing interaction, pictures amplify more fully the meaning of the words, or the words expand the picture so that different information in the two modes of communication produces a more complex dynamic” (225). The metafictive narrative devices observed in the selection of titles by Willems become increasingly apparent and alive through the relationship of text and illustration. As the reader sees Piggie and Gerald peering into the foreground to observe the reader, or the Pigeon dramatically dancing around the various pages of his story to get the implied reader’s attention, the metafictive literacy devices become increasingly pronounced and animated.

This study does have limitations. Firstly, I only discussed three of Willems’ titles to
highlight my understanding of the use of metafictive narrative devices. Observing another selection of Willems’ picturebooks or early readers could have yielded a different analysis because each of his stories invites the reader to engage in story in a unique manner with a different set of narrative devices. Additionally, this thesis applies Waugh’s comprehensive definition of metafiction as the foundation for the discussion of narrative characteristics in Willems’ stories; other definitions might have limited the scope and richness of the analysis. Further, the study was limited by the notion of the implied reader. Interviewing children, librarians, and educators would have provided an additional perspective on how Willems’ stories are received with an audience response.

7.2 Further Research

It would be valuable to perform a storytime, or engage in a one-on-one reading time with children, and then interview the children to better observe and comprehend their relationship with, and understanding of, a picturebook that introduces metafictive narrative devices. I would like to see, through storytime and one-on-one reading observation, children’s engagement and comprehension of Willems’ story. How would a child reader respond to the role of the adult in a readaloud session of Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!? It would be valuable to observe and analyze a readaloud session of Willems’ titles to see how the animated Pigeon or chorus of goslings comes to life for the intended child audience. In Storytime, Sipe understands five conceptual roles that educators play when sharing readalouds: readers, managers and encouragers, clarifiers or probers, wonderers or speculators, and extenders or refiners (201-2). I would like to see how the readaloud session functions to enable the child reader to become co-author of metafictive stories. An observational study would be beneficial to librarians, educators,
and parents looking to understand the relationship children have with metafictive narrative devices in picturebooks and the narrative responses that result from metafictive picturebook readings. As also understood by children’s author-illustrator Anthony Browne in a response to Janet Evans about the Barthean “death of the Author,” he maintains to provide his child reader with the authoritative expression in the process of meaning making. Browne says: “I’m very rarely asked what my books mean. But if I am asked then I much prefer to turn the question back towards the child—‘What do you think it means?’ I’ve had some fascinating answers” (196). Children’s responses to Willems’ titles discussed in this thesis, and other metafictive picturebooks, would not only provide researchers and educators insight into the interpretation and meaning making process of the various child subjects, but it would provide further insight into how metafictive devices (Waugh 21-2) can work to entice and challenge the child reader. Further observations of children’s picturebook meaning making will give educators increased access to how children are responding to and interpreting narrative devices and story. To follow what Lawrence Sipe discusses in Storytime, I am interested in seeing further research analyzing what children do with and how they respond to texts. Sipe describes what children do with texts as an “action” (185). He notes:

They may (1) analyze a text as a self-contained unit, discussing and interpreting its structure, its characters, its plot, or its setting. They may also discuss the form and content of the illustrations, as well as the media used in producing them. Children may also relate the illustrations to the verbal text; “read” various illustrational conventions and codes; predict what may happen; or apply particular items of literary knowledge such as foreshadowing. (185)
Future research should observe how Willems’ readers interact with metafictive devices and what they actually “do with texts,” or how they respond to the selection of stories. Although this thesis analysis, using the lens of an implied reader, is valuable to understand the function and value of the metafictive narrative devices in Willems’ stories, it would be constructive for further research to capture the reactions, interactions, and interpretations of story through the reflections of Willems’ intended primary audience: children. Sipe suggests other actions children may “do with texts” such as: link or relate several texts to each other, personalize texts, merge with texts, and/or perform on texts (185-6). To further understand metafictive narrative devices, it would be significant to observe first-hand how young children receive Willems’ stories discussed in this thesis.

After engaging in research on a selection of picturebooks and early readers by Mo Willems, I would also like to see further research in postmodern or metafictive children’s literature in the format of the electronic book app. I am interested in understanding what the metafictive reading experience is with an app versus physical picturebook or early reader. How does the over-obtrusive narrator capture the interest and engagement of a child interacting with the electronic book or supplementary book-related apps? Are metafictive narrative devices presented in a unique or strategic manner to support the implied audience of an electronic metafictive book app? In this discussion, I think it would be valuable to interview child readers to better understand and analyze their relationship with physical and electronic book apps. How is the child’s reading experience different? How does the electronic book app change the read-aloud experience in the library, classroom, or home? This study would rely on qualitative
interviews with parents, children, teachers, and librarians to understand and analyze the postmodern book app experience. I am particularly interested in understanding how the book app *Don’t Let the Pigeon Run This App!* compares with the storytime or individual reading relationship a child has with the physical book of *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* The app provides users with the opportunity to create their own version of *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* and follow selection prompts to create amusing versions of the story. The app complements the post-structural reading of the stories in this thesis, and it would be interesting to follow up research on how children engage with the participatory elements in this electronic format. As posited by Pantaleo and Sipe:

> by reading and discussing books with narrative diversity and metafictive devices, students may become aware of their own (and others') thinking and reasoning strategies, making them better problem-solvers in general, which may lead to greater metacognition. If teachers understand the complexities and opportunities afforded by picturebooks that feature diversity in narrative structure, they can scaffold students' meaning-making. (13)

I am curious to understand and see future research that addresses the level of meaning making that happens in interactive, metafictive book apps for children.

This analysis of three metafictive picturebooks is valuable to educators who are interested in understanding the function of the metafictive narrative devices used in contemporary picturebooks. Knowledge and understanding of the use of metafictive narrative devices can assist educators and librarians in selecting stories to share that
probe the reader and invite active participation from their child audience. Librarians who perform storytime, and elementary school teachers who incorporate picturebook stories into their curriculum will benefit from understanding the complexity of metafictive literary devices to engage groups of children towards fruitful discussion. The findings of this analysis of metafictive picturebooks by Mo Willems suggest the metafictive narrative devices of the primary texts guide the experience of the implied reader for critical engagement and reader response.
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Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


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Appendix A


