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A is for Aesthetics: The Multisensory Beauty of Baby Books

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Abstract

This introduction presents the special issue on baby books, and summarises the various articles.

Keywords Baby books · Children's literature theory · Picturebooks

Introduction

It is perfectly possible to live a peaceful life as a normal person, i.e., a picturebook scholar, and never think twice, or even once, about baby books. I used to be such a person. I loved picturebooks, studied them and considered myself an expert of sorts on the matter. I knew many things, like my recto from my verso, or the fact that sophisticated picturebooks are postmodern, referential, break the fourth, fifth and sixth walls if possible, and have many, *many* gaps. I could tell you things like: “young readers co-construct meaning with the iconotext”. I could reel off Barbara Bader's definition of picturebooks by heart, putting on the appropriate thespian voice at the “drama of the turning page” moment (1976, p.1). I knew my Nikolajeva & Scott hierarchy of text-image relationships (2001), with counterpoint and contradiction as the highest signs of distinction. I knew that endpapers are crucial thresholds of interpretation. Look closely at endpapers, everyone! They may contain important clues....

But one day, something happened in my life that led to my colliding with picturebooks that did very little of all that. Those picturebooks had fur and scales, played music, squeaked when poked, were shaped like fluffy toys, and, most egregious of all, did not fit on the Picturebook Shelf in my office. These picturebooks (shudder) did not have endpapers. These picturebooks (shiver) did not have text-image relationships of counterpoint or contradiction. Some of those picturebooks, I'm sorry to say,

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even stated things like: “This is a chair”, next to a picture of, unambiguously, a chair. And in lieu of clever twists, many of those picturebooks’ dramatic dénouement was a mirror that rather pitilessly reminded this adult co-reader of how very, very tired she now looked.

So there I was, staring at those picturebooks and also at the tiny co-creator of meaning with whom I who was supposed to make a multiliteracy event out of them, and I didn’t have a clue what to do with my hands, voice, or picturebook analysis toolkit. Therefore, I reacted as one does in a life crisis: find appropriate keywords to Google-Scholar it.

I found many articles about baby books and developmental psychology, mental health, literacy, and paediatrics, as well as book history, which already had a calming effect. But some lingering anxiety remained: what about aesthetics? There was, of course, Perry Nodelman’s landmark “The Mirror Staged: Images of Babies in Baby Books” (2010), and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer’s pioneering work on emergent literacy (2011) and early-concept books and concept books (2017); as well as a number of articles about bedtime books (Pereira, 2019; Bernstein, 2020) or book-chewing (Beveridge, 2017). Still, for a field as vibrant as picturebook theory, it was surprising to find that babies and toddlers (in this special issue, most articles consider books addressed to the under-3) and their literature were so absent from the research landscape.

This reflects the relative scarcity of general research on babyhood from the point of view of the humanities and textual studies, especially when compared with research on childhood and adolescence. The etymological revelation that “infant” means “speechless” seems to have contaminated theory itself: what is there to say on the baby? There seems to be so little subtext! Psychoanalysis, of course, is still the most significant theoretical discourse on that slice of life, stamping the construct of babyhood with its own concepts, probing the linguistic depths below the seemingly “speechless” surface. By allowing the baby – this being of pure presence – a *past*, by (h)arming it with a personal history, by intuiting the early links between language and the body, psychoanalytical discourse gave us tools to think of infancy as full of words. This strand of thought has fruitfully inspired children’s literature scholarship, for example in Karen Coats’s remarkable article on poetry for babies (2013).

Yet psychoanalysis is but one of the many ways we can think about babies and text. Coats’ analysis also derives from cognitive poetics, another useful theoretical field, which penetrated children’s literature criticism some fifteen years ago, and had the side-effect of foregrounding babyhood and toddlerhood, because it required scholars to think of textual and pictorial features of picturebooks (including, crucially, their aesthetics) in relation to the physiological and cognitive development of their implied audience. As Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer’s 2013 exploration shows, cognitive approaches to picturebooks, by making it impossible to discard the characteristics of their implied readership’s brain, densifies and enriches our *literary* understanding of those books.

In her monograph on the topic, Nikolajeva (2015) defines “novice readers”, who can be adults or children but are more likely to be the former than the latter, as having, among other things, “limited real-life experience”, “limited encyclopaedic knowledge”, “limited capacity to distinguish between fact and fiction”, “limited capacity

for causality, prediction, problem-solving and decision-making”, “limited theory of mind”, limited “linguistic skills” and mastery of figurative language, and “limited system of beliefs and values” (pp.16–19). This word, “limited”, becomes vertiginously close to “none” the younger one is, and, as Nikolajeva shows, influences both the aesthetics of the literature given to children, and what they may learn from it.

Most importantly for our purposes, novice readers simply have limited experience of engaging with books, full stop. This statement is not as trivial as it sounds. Babies don’t just have “limited” experience of books, they actually have *zero* experience of them for at least some time of their life, a time which can vary between a few hours and many months depending, often, on exposure at home. For literary scholars, that obvious fact is somewhat disconcerting, because we are trained to think of human beings as always-already bathed in language; but of course it is irrational to assert that they are always-already bathed in *books*. ‘I is not an innocent subject, anterior to text’, says Roland Barthes (1970, p.16, my translation); but is that true? The existence of babies and baby books forces us to accept that there is in fact such a thing as a First Book, and then a second one, a third, and so on, in one’s personal life. As Björn Sundmark demonstrates (2018), this individual history of coming into contact with the form of the codex is also to a large extent dictated by the kind of literature offered at different ages, and shapes literacy as much as it is shaped by it. Baby-book criticism is thus also crucial in recuperating something of this anteriority to text and of those very first contacts with text.

The articles in this special issue adopt such literary and artistic perspectives, though, as will become clear throughout, the baby’s body is never far away. We are talking about aesthetics, namely the senses; not just abstract beauty, but the whole sensory engagement entailed by any reading experience of a baby book. Judging from the response to our call for papers, it was clear that there was enormous interest in both what baby books do to babies’ bodies, and what baby’s bodies do to baby books. That interest is often better answered by phenomenological analysis, reader-response approaches or cognitive poetics than by straightforward literary theory and picturebook analysis. Aesthetic approaches to baby books also involve deep reflection on materiality, editorial trends and authorial decisions, an angle reflected in our special issue.

Foregrounding aesthetics means that you will not find any article with ideological or political analysis as its *main* focus in this special issue; nor did we allow much space for empirical research with babies, with one notable exception. There are obvious gaps, too: you will not read about books shaped as toys, for instance, nor about baby-book apps and other digital books, activity books or magazines for babies. The corpus overall is also Minority-World dominated, reflecting the general landscape of our contributors’ countries: the United States, France, Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, China, Germany and Spain. Bearing these limitations in mind, I will delve now into the contents of the special issue, which is divided into three parts.

Goodnight, Clocks! Baby Rhythms and Baby Time

The first part of this special issue revolves around considerations of rhythm, time and temporality in baby books. Carl Miller and Eric Tippin's fascinating article "Haptic Prosody and the Aesthetics of Baby Books" fuses haptic and poetic analysis to encourage us to think of touch as an effect, or perhaps a partner, of the poetic text. By categorising types of haptic engagement in baby books as "demanded", "invited" or "implied", their article provides scholars of children's literature and beyond with conceptual tools for much wider study. It also forces us to acknowledge, in line with Debbie Pullinger's work on children's poetry, the entanglement of text, tongue and touch in our foundational encounters with poetic verse.

Cécile Boulaire's article provides one of the first insights in English of her groundbreaking research project on reading picturebooks to babies in a French neonatal unit. In "Rhythm and Musicality in Baby Books", Boulaire merges observations of premature and very young babies' reactions to picturebooks with hypotheses regarding the poetics of baby books. Her analysis foregrounds the importance of rhythm, both verbal and visual, in early engagement with picturebooks, proposing a taxonomy of "elementary" baby-book rhythms which may be seen, in some respects, as the baby equivalent of archetypal narratives.

Our third contribution explores the ultimate fantasy for every child-expecting person in the world who doesn't live in Finland: the baby box. While Finnish baby boxes have been well-studied from sociological and political perspectives, Maria Lassén-Seger and Mia Österlund provide us with a pioneering study of the picturebooks given with every baby box in the country, focusing on the peculiar "infant temporalities" they delineate. As they argue, calling upon Hartmund Rosa's concept of resonance, baby-box books often incite the adults to adjust to a kind of baby time characterised by deceleration and presence; though that promise, as they show, is ideologically ambiguous.

More than Words and Pictures

The second part of the special issue tackles questions of materiality in baby books, moving on from the poetry of words and the entrancement of pictures to thinking about aesthetics in the larger, multisensory understanding of the word. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Rebecca Rouse offer us precious framing for this exploration with their historically deep and generically wide "Understanding the Design Values of Baby Books: Materiality, Co-Presence, and Remediation". Baby books, they show us, have always been in the avant-garde of material innovation in terms of printing, binding, and other characteristics of book fabrication. Partly in response to their implied consumers' fondness for tearing, biting and throwing, baby books' imperatives of solidity and durability have led to important textile and paper-engineering advances on a large, commercial scale, as well as paved the way for more audacious experiments such as Bruno Munari's PRELIBRI series. Reid-Walsh and Rouse's historical, artistic and phenomenological approach highlights the benefits of methodological flexibility when thinking about baby books from a materialist-aesthetic perspective.

Focusing on board books in particular, Elizabeth Dulemba's "The Art of Board Books and the Question of Intended Audience" goes deeper into questions of implied readership. Of course, baby books always have a dual audience: the adult and the baby, or rather the adult-baby dyad. But what about board books that simply adjust "older" picturebooks to their own format? And what about those board books full of offensive words or nuclear physics, that seem to be about things that babies cannot possibly find interesting? Dulemba, from her double perspective as a picturebook author as well as an academic, discusses the phenomenon of age-bending books that adopt or mimic the material traits of books for babies, for better and for worse.

Materiality is also at the heart of Ying Zou and Xudong Tan's "Musicality of Childness in Babies' Song Books", which seeks to develop analytical tools for the study of this widespread type of literature for babies. The authors highlight how song books for babies intertwine material, visual, verbal and musical elements to generate a kind of readerly playability that gives agency to the implied baby reader. As they persuasively argue, song books may be an excellent counter-example to the Roseian view of the powerless child of children's literature, as they stage a reading experience where the baby or toddler is more knowledgeable and more active than the adult.

Mother Tongues: From Aesthetics to Politics

The final section groups three articles that more explicitly bridge the gap between aesthetic analysis and political or ideological considerations. Reka Barton and Veronica González's "Los Babies are Bilingüe: Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, Language, and Age in Baby Books" explores a corpus of Spanish-English bilingual picturebooks for babies in the United States, using multimodal analysis but also Critical Race Theory and Critical Language and Race Theory perspectives and a phenomenological approach. Through this hybrid critical lens, bilingual baby books reveal the white, Anglophone hegemony of US society more generally; Barton and González issue a striking call for more transgressive works that would acknowledge bilingual babies' "linguistic genius" and address the full extent of their racial and cultural identities.

Can a special issue on baby books ever be Good Enough without an article on Mothers? Juan Senís and Montse Pena Presas's study tackles that tricky topic by identifying and analysing an intriguing corpus of baby books they call "Maternal Picturebooks for Babies". These picturebooks, typified by lyrical writing and natural allegory, focus on the mother-baby bond as an object of sentimental celebration. They propose maternal picturebooks as a genre within baby books, with an ambiguous lyrical voice and plenty of paratextual information seeking to make the reading performance a formal and literary assertion of mothers' natural and unconditional (in theory) love for their babies.

We close this special issue with an article by the pioneers of baby-book research, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer. "On Photos and Drawings in Baby Books" provides a compelling comparative analysis of baby books using photographs and baby books using illustration to represent dinner scenes, proposing analytical tools for similar studies to come by placing those different representations on a scale from avant-garde to kitsch. The authors conclude that real babies are far less

cute than painted ones; or, at least, that photographs of real babies have much to tell us about modern domesticity, education and hygiene, while illustrated baby books tend to be more concerned with kitsch kitchens and chubby cheeks. This study, again, paves the way not only for more studies of baby books, but also of photoliterature in general.

All special issues ambition to be, as the formula goes, both cutting-edge and generative of future research, and we gladly admit it to be the case for this one too. We are particularly excited by the methodological fluidity and hybridity within the different articles, which altogether seems to call for the development of baby-book specific analytical tools, receptive to their idiosyncrasies and respectful of their differences from picturebooks for older readers. However, the articles also show that they are not a completely separate continent: we take away from the selection, discussion and editing process the key notion that baby books, because they condense or exacerbate central questions of our field – implied “readership”, power relationships, links between physiology, psychology and aesthetics, materiality, didacticism, etc. – have much to tell us about children’s literature in general. So may this special issue be the beginning of a larger intellectual conversation around baby books as things of beauty. Albeit, quite often, a little dribbly.

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Clémentine Beauvais
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