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## Following the pictures: wordless comics for children

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AQ1

Comics publishers as well as children's book publishers are turning out increasing numbers of comics created especially for children and young adults. Amongst these is a striking number of wordless comics. This article explores how wordless children's comics relate to and differ from 'conventional' children's picture books and comics more broadly; it discusses the reading strategies that these comics invite, including a focus on character building through body language and non-verbal communication. The comics form of these texts assumes a certain amount of literacy on the part of its readers, and consequently teaches literacy habits even in a wordless context. This article also notes that academic writing on children's picturebooks tends not to engage with comics, but that, when they do discuss comics, these are frequently silent comics. Silent picturebooks and comics can be very far apart, stylistically, but in sharing storytelling and representational techniques they inspire one another to tell new stories.

**Keywords:** Raymond Briggs; children's comics; graphic narrative; narrative theory; Shaun Tan; picturebooks; Sara Varon; David Wiesner; wordless comics

In the last five to ten years, comics publishers as well as traditional children's book publishers have produced increasing numbers of comics created especially for children and young adults. This may seem like an odd statement, since comics have so long been considered children's fare, but that stereotype is somewhat misleading. Perhaps the public at large thought of comics as being for children, but in practice the actual readers of these comics ranged in age from childhood well into adulthood. Many comics were conceived and created for older audiences, and not meant for children at all. Certainly, children's comics were created throughout the twentieth century, notably comic books like *Donald Duck* and *Archie*, and strips like *Peanuts*. They were produced and sold alongside comics for adults – to their detriment, since the failure to distinguish between audiences gave credence to alarmists fearing the effects on children of reading comics, and may in part have led to the Comics Code. Parents and non-comics-readers in general who assumed the comics were for children were shocked when they saw the actual content of some of these comics, as the outcry against comics in the 1950s United States demonstrates. The Comics Code, which effectively censored what comics could represent, also codified the idea that comics were stuff for children, but I would argue that the creators of comics in the ensuing period had very different artistic concerns from those we usually expect of people who write or draw books especially for children. For example, I doubt that Stan Lee thought of himself as a children's author, even if the narrator of the Spider-Man comics addresses the audience with 'Hey Kids'.

In the recent shift towards comics that are carefully and specifically created for children, it is evident that there is more consideration of how children's texts are

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commonly consumed: for education as well as entertainment. Françoise Mouly's Toon Books line includes pedagogical statements and ranks the books according to reading level, while First Second offers teachers online lesson plans for a number of their children's comics. One striking development in recent comics publishing for children is the turn to wordless comics. Since they do not require traditional reading of text, these comics fit less comfortably into an educational conception of children's books, and yet they connect to that realm in several ways. First, wordless comics can be seen as a challenge to written literature while at the same time foregrounding processes of literacy that go beyond recognising letters and words. Second, and perhaps because of this, in scholarly literature about children's picture books, the wordless comics get a relatively large share of the attention. With wordless children's comics, the lines between picture-books and comics are being blurred, but at the same time both still rely on certain traditional elements of their form to signify that they are either a picturebook or a comic.

### Wordless history

AQ2 Wordless comics are not a new form, of course. Early newspaper and magazine comics, such as the strips in the *Chat Noir* magazine of the 1890s, discussed by David Kunzle in *The History of the Comic Strip. Vol. 2: The Nineteenth Century*, were frequently wordless. In another precedent to current wordless comics, the early twentieth century saw the creation of the woodcut novel, in which wordless narratives were built from single-image-per-page sequences. David A. Beronä (2008) gives an overview of the major artists and styles in this form in *Wordless Books: The Original Graphic Novels*. He says the form developed under the influence of German Expressionism, silent cinema and the newly popular comic strips. Woodcut novels such as Frans Masereel's *Passionate Journey* (1919) and *The City* (1925) were made for adult audiences and tended to have strong political or social messages. These works showed the potential of image sequences to create narrative, but in other ways barely resembled comics, mainly because they lacked the all-important iconic solidarity of comics, in which several images appear together on the page. Beronä chooses to call woodcut novels 'the original graphic novels', but one could just as easily call them picturebooks for adults.

AQ3 Lynd Ward, an important practitioner of the woodcut novel format, perhaps best known for his depression-era *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932), created work for children later in his career. *The Silver Pony* (Ward 1973) stands out, because, while it uses painted images rather than woodcuts, it has the same structure of one silent image per page that Ward's woodcut novels used, but this time he uses them to tell a children's fantasy, in which a boy escapes the hard work on his parents' farm by riding a winged pony around the world. While the premise is fantastical, the book can also be seen as a social commentary in the tradition of Ward's earlier work, this time addressing child labour by implying that the main character should be allowed to have a childhood instead of already having to pull his weight as a fully fledged farmhand. The picturebook qualities of the woodcut novel are foregrounded and fully expressed here.

### Picture stories

Another early and much better-known example of the crossover between silent comics and children's books is found in the work of Raymond Briggs. In 1978 he created the book *The Snowman*, about a snowman who comes to life. In an essay called 'Picturebooks, Comics and Graphic Novels', Mel Gibson points out *The Snowman*,

seen as a “classic” picturebook that uses comic strip form, offers a number of challenges to definitions of each medium, as it can simply be seen as a wordless comic’ (2010, 106). *The Snowman* was a much-hailed children’s book, despite using traditional comics ‘vocabulary’ such as panels. Briggs was already a popular creator of children’s books, and reviewers did not seem to want to associate his work with the still stigmatised and lowbrow form of comics. Gibson mentions: ‘picturebooks have usually, although not exclusively, been seen in a positive light within the discipline of education. In contrast, comics ... have frequently attracted concern within that same disciplinary space’ (103). She continues:

In relation to readership, ... the picturebook is seen as something that can help foster a child’s understanding, especially when shared with an adult. Comics, in contrast, are seen as one of the first types of text that a child owns, to be read either alone or shared with friends; they are seen as more a part of children’s own culture. Moreover, it is of note that comics are seen as independent reading, whereas picturebooks are usually enjoyed with assistance from an adult, suggesting that the former are for those with superior reading skills – although, ironically, comics are often stigmatized. (104)

In the late 1970s, comics were assumed to be aimed at children, but they were also seen as less desirable reading for children. In the course of the 1980s that stigma faded, as comics became less associated with children’s culture, through the influence of works such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s *Watchmen*,

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By the 1990s, the rise of the graphic novel had made it possible for at least certain kinds of comics to be seen as literary achievements and important cultural expressions. In 1998, Briggs created a book about his parents, *Ethel and Ernest*, in a similar artistic style to *The Snowman*, this time incorporating text and speech balloons, and clearly aimed at an older audience. This book was lauded as a graphic novel. The course of Raymond Briggs’s career underscores several points regarding comics and children’s literature: picturebooks are assumed to be for quite young children; books that have picturebook qualities but are aimed at older readers are problematic; in order for them to make sense, such books are reframed as artists’ books, as woodcut novels were, while non-fiction books will be seen as reference works, such as illustrated encyclopaedias or David Macauley’s *Castle* and *City* books. Briggs’s work also demonstrates some of the assumptions about format and form that distinguish, or, rather, used to distinguish, comics and picturebooks. While *The Snowman* was laid out in panel sequences, it did not contain speech balloons, which are an iconic shorthand that spells comics. The very wordlessness of this book allowed it to be safely categorised as a picturebook. In addition, it was created in pencil crayon and printed in full colour, distancing it from American and British comics of the day, which tended to be inked outline drawings with cheaper colour options. Thus the example of Briggs’s work shows some of the assumptions that existed about children’s books and comics, and some of the shifting trends over time.

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### New silence

Traditionally, wordless children’s books have been created mostly for very young children, children who have not yet reached an age when they are expected to be able read. The recent harvest of wordless comics is generally aimed at an older audience, judging from the narratives and themes. Examples of such works by traditional children’s books publishers include the *Polo* series by Régis Faller (2003–, Roaring Brook), Sara Varon’s *Chicken and Cat books* (2006–, Scholastic), *Flotsam* by David Wiesner (2006, Clarion),



and *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007, Arthur A. Levine). Wordless comics produced by comics publishers include Andy Runton's *Owly* series (2004–, Top Shelf), *Robot Dreams* by Sara Varon (2006, First Second), *Korgi* by Christian Slade (2007–, Top Shelf), and *Ojingogo* and *Jinchalo* by Matthew Forsythe (2009, 2012). Based on this small corpus of texts, there are a few straightforward observations to be made regarding the differences between wordless comics that come from a picturebook background and ones conceived from a comics background. 135

The wordless comics produced by traditional children's book publishers are printed in colour and are less likely to use outline drawings. The wordless comics coming out of a comic-book environment do tend to use outline drawings and are often printed in black only. Furthermore, the comics are more likely to use traditional gutters and panels, while the 'picturebook' wordless comics efface those. *Polo* has wider than normal gutters, creating a sense of spacing on the page that is 'not quite comics'. In *Chicken and Cat*, Varon uses many full-page or even two-page spreads (splash pages). On pages that she breaks into smaller panels, she applies a grid format without any white space for gutters between the panels. This contrasts with her silent comic *Robot Dreams*, produced by comics publisher First Second, which employs traditional panels and gutters. One could create a sliding scale from comics to picturebooks and these silent comics fall in different places on that scale, with Wiesner's (2006) *Flotsam* and Dieter Schubert's *Monkie* (a Dutch silent picture narrative; 1989) most on the picturebook side, and something like *Owly* furthest across on the comics side. At the same time, these wordless texts all share a reliance on the expressiveness of their images and on sequence to tell their stories. 140 145 150

### Fixing narrative

In *Words about Pictures*, Perry Nodelman pointed out the simplicity of verbal text in picturebooks, and the sophistication of the images that offer 'complex visual information'. The visual information becomes the key communicator in wordless picturebooks, apart from the important verbal element of the title, of course. Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006), in *How Picturebooks Work*, also discuss the difference between words and pictures: 155 160

[C]onventional (verbal) signs are suitable for narration, for creation of narrative texts, while iconic (visual) signs are limited to description. Pictures, iconic signs, cannot directly convey causality and temporality, two most essential aspects of narrativity. While pictures, and especially a sequence of pictures in a picturebook, successfully confront this problem in a number of ways, it is in the interaction of words and images that new and exciting solutions can be found. Likewise, while words can only describe spatial relations, pictures can explore and play with them in limitless ways. (26) 165

Nikolajeva and Scott are quite prescriptive here, about what text and images can do. In the essay 'Interpretive codes and Implied Readers of Children's Picturebooks', Nikolajeva expands on the limitations of visual messages: 170

In wordless picturebooks, plots are vague and allow multiple interpretations, even if images are relatively simple. When the narrative is made up of a sequence of panels, it may seem easy to read the images in the correct temporal order and to understand the causal links between them (proairetic code); yet there can never be a single unequivocal interpretation.... More complex wordless narratives present further challenges. Abundance of detail provides infinite interpretative options, and no single hermeneutic code can be applied. Here, the 175



degree of narrativity becomes low, and the only compelling narrative element is the eventual turning of pages. (2010, 32)

The main problem for Nikolajeva seems to come from verbalising the narrative. In looking at the images, readers will notice different details. Consequently, different people retelling the story, or summarising it, will use different words and focus on different things. This makes the narrative ‘vague’. However, reading is always a process of interpretation, whether it concerns textual or pictorial reading, and it follows that the summaries different readers make will in most cases differ from one another. Certainly, verbal and visual texts will have different strengths: textual narratives are likely to be better at interiority, while pictorial narratives can be more spatial and show a chain of events well. The two forms will create different kinds of narrative, hopefully playing to their strengths and weaknesses. It does not automatically follow that narratives in one form will always be ‘clear’ and ‘definite’, and in the other form they are doomed to be ‘vague’ and confusing.

In their discussions of picturebooks, Nikolajeva and Scott pointed out the difficulties of producing a story using only images, and it seems this statement has been accepted as a challenge by the recent host of cartoonists and illustrators who have created silent narratives. The creators have come up with a number of different strategies to overcome the lack of words. Silent comics rely on their readers’ ability to read faces and body language, an intricate process, since, as Will Eisner illustrates in *Comics and Sequential Art*, the same posture can mean different things in different contexts, or combined with different facial expressions. Many narratives use the images to foreground characters’ emotional states and draw readers into the narrative through empathy and action.

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### Telling expressions

In Sara Varon’s (2007) wordless comic *Robot Dreams*, Dog is lonely and builds a robot companion.<sup>1</sup> When Robot rusts solid after a swim in the sea, Dog has to leave him behind on the beach, wracked by guilt. Unable to retrieve Robot before the beach closes for the season, Dog spends the winter finding new friendships, though none completely fulfilling or lasting (the snowman friend melts, for example). Robot is scavenged during his winter on the beach, but is eventually salvaged and restored by Raccoon, improved with a radio body. In the spring, Dog returns to the beach but finds Robot gone, so she gives up and builds a new robot friend. When the original Robot sees Dog and her new pal pass his window, he is sad and happy at the same time, and he tunes his radio to a song to accompany them on their way.

This story is filled with many, sometimes conflicting, emotions, and Varon’s art captures these in a minimum of lines. The child-friendly, clear-line cartooning is able to express Dog’s shame at having to abandon her friend, as well as her discomfort and embarrassment in some situations. Dog goes through an emotional rollercoaster as she tries to make new friends. On pages 79–81, Dog is visiting a group of anteaters she recently befriended, and she is trying to be a polite guest when faced with ants, a food she really does not like and which ultimately disagrees with her. This scene, in which Dog’s emotional and physical reactions are captured in clear, simple lines, can be seen as an illustration of Ernst Gombrich’s theory that viewers are able and willing to fill in all kinds of detail after being given only a tiny bit of information. Gombrich (1961) notes ‘[t]he willingness of the public to accept the grotesque and simplified partly because the lack of elaboration guarantees the absence of contradictory clues’ (336), a central principle of


what he calls the ‘invention of pictorial effects’ (330) in which it comes to capturing human (or in this case, anthropomorphised) expression. Robot, too, has an extremely simple physiognomy, and yet the art is able to show his range of emotions after he sees Dog and the new Robot. A little goes a long way in this book, perfectly demonstrating Gombrich’s pictorial effects. The facial expressions and postures we see in this and other silent comics are important parts in communicating the narratives, since, through recognisable emotions, they build connections with readers that address them based on empathy, even when the characters cannot speak for themselves.

Scott McCloud (1994), in *Understanding Comics*, discusses how a simple physiognomy allows for more universal identification with the characters by readers, with the smiley face being his ultimate example. Many of the characters in silent children’s comics are very simply rendered, but they are also recognisable types, and rather than inviting the reader’s McCloudian identification with these characters, their clearly shown emotional states invite an empathetic response from the reader. This can be seen with Varon’s almost generic main characters of shy Dog and loyal Robot (2007), as well as confident Chicken and nervous Cat (2006); but also in Bob Staake’s (2013) lonely boy in *Bluebird*, Faller’s enterprising hero Polo (2004a, b, 2005), and Voguchi, the excitable and adventurous heroine of Forsythe’s *Ojingogo* and *Jinchalo* (2009, 2012). The representations of these comics’ main personae capture the ‘permanent traits’ of these figures’ physiognomies, which indicate their character, giving readers a clear impression of the kind of personalities the heroes or the heroines are. Simultaneously, these representations show the ‘impermanent traits’ on their human (or humanised) faces, which indicate emotion and thus capture the characters’ reactions to their situations. The reference to ‘permanent’ and ‘impermanent traits’ comes from Gombrich’s discussion of Töpffer’s ‘Essay on Physiognomy’ (1961, 340), in which he comes up with what he calls the ‘Töpffer’s Law’:

Discover expression [even] in the staring eye or gaping mouth of a lifeless form, and what might be called ‘Töpffer’s law’ will come into operation—it will not be classed just as a face, but will acquire a definite character and expression, will be endowed with life, with presence. (342)

Our tendency to recognise character and emotion even in the simplest of lines, speaks in many of these silent comics.

### Photographic witness

AC  Shaun Tan’s (2007) *The Arrival* follows a strategy that is very different from the simplicity of Varon’s art, to draw readers into his story and establish the narrative. In *The Arrival*, a narrative of immigration and finding one’s home in a new land, the characters are drawn realistically and in detail. Because characters cannot be identified by name, the process of paying attention to their faces, the representation, becomes all the more important. Readers have to rely on people’s appearances to keep characters apart and follow their experiences. The main character, his family, and the people from different places across the world whom he gets to know in his new country, are all differentiated, drawn in almost photographic detail. In fact, photographs play an important role in this narrative. The main character has a photo of his family with him, which he looks at often. This photo also helps readers recognise his family, when his wife and daughter arrive towards the end of the book.

Photographs are used for identification on the official papers the main character receives upon entry into his new homeland, and which he and some of his fellow immigrants show each other to share their common experience. The end pages of the book feature dozens of these photographs, all passport-style images showing a diverse group of people, young and old, of many different ethnicities, and wearing all kinds of traditional garb. While the world of the narrative is a fantasy/science fiction realm of odd pet-like creatures, strange vegetables and impossible technologies, these photographs do not give evidence of that fantasy realm, and instead bring to mind the real-world experience of diaspora. Throughout the book, no matter how otherworldly their surroundings, the people inhabiting it are realistic and represent the diversity that is so typical of an immigrant nation. The reference is made explicit with the way the book shows the country's port of entry, clearly drawing in historical photographs of Ellis Island, and in the ocean liner that brought the main character to this port, from the same era. While the characters in the book are identified as unique individuals, the way this is done through an association with photographs also shows them as part of a greater pattern, a pattern of flight and homecoming.

In addition to this, *The Arrival's* narrative thematises communication, especially the difficulty of communicating when one is in a new country where one does not know the language. The main character cannot read the script in his adoptive home (nor can we – it is a made-up script), and this sometimes leads to funny situations, as when he finds a job pasting up posters but gets fired for hanging them upside down. This use of a fantasy alphabet is one way in which the book draws attention to its wordless nature. An important feature of communication in silent comics in general, the use of body language and mime, takes on a double role in Tan's narrative. Silent comics often use exaggerated body language to facilitate communication and narration, and this is no different in *The Arrival*, in which, as people share the stories of what drove them from their homelands, we repeatedly see people running or cowering in fear, or faces grimacing in pain. Further, however, the body language is used to thematise wordlessness through the recurring use of impromptu sign language, as the main character tries to communicate with the people around him using pantomime. Exaggerated hand gestures are represented again and again as people give him directions and instructions, as he gesticulates his orders while shopping for groceries, and most poignantly in warm gestures of welcome as he is invited into the homes and lives of new friends. The book ends on this optimistic note, as his daughter, now comfortable and settled into her new life, is represented giving directions in hand signals to another young newcomer.

In these silent children's comics, again and again we see silenced characters continuing to express hope but also loss, and throughout their search for meaning. The emotions expressed by the characters in these wordless comics create empathy for, more than identification with, the characters, whether they are established as unique individuals or as representatives of a larger struggle. Their pictorial representations work to create the reader's investment in what happens to the characters, all based on their facial and physical expressions.

### Critical inclusion

Roughly coinciding with the rise in wordless comics for children, recent scholarly work about picturebooks has also begun to mention comics. Although scholars often make a point of referencing the shared basis in combined text and images for picturebooks and comics, when comics and picturebooks are discussed together, or when their relatedness is

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being pointed out, the examples that are given are often wordless texts, both silent comics and silent picturebooks (e.g. Salisbury and Styles 2012; Gibson 2010; see Hatfield and Svonkin [2012] for an overview).<sup>2</sup> The examples often given include Raymond Briggs's *The Snowman*, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, and Andy Runton's *Owly*. In *Critical Approaches to Young Adult Literature*, Kathy Latrobe and Judy Drury include comics in their lists of suggested readings throughout, though their preferred term is 'graphic novels', and they also devote a good part of their chapter 'Popular Culture and Literacy' to comics. In their list of resources accompanying this chapter they even include the genre 'wordless' specifically (251).<sup>3</sup>

In *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*, David Lewis (2001) discusses the malleability of the picturebook form, pointing out the usefulness of family resemblances for deciding what kinds of texts are comics or picturebooks, rather than being strict about definitions: 'we simply need to be willing to lean towards an inclusive model of the picturebook, rather than an exclusive one' (28). However, in embracing malleability, Lewis perhaps goes too far, with the odd move of putting comics at the origins of wordless picturebooks:

[G]raphic novels are further blurring the lines that divide picturebooks from other kinds of texts. From the 1970s onwards, the speech and thought bubbles characteristic of the comic strip style disappeared altogether in some books, giving rise to the wordless picturebook. In thirty years or so this rather peculiar formal mutation has thrived and propagated itself as illustrators have tested out its possibilities upon an increasingly visually literate population. For example, Istvan Banyai's wordless *Zoom* and *Re-Zoom* in which each successive page turn takes the reader/viewer further away from the image with which the book began is about as far away from the wordless comic strip in both method and intention as it is possible to go. (61–62)

As Lewis acknowledges, Banyai's work does not read like a comic at all. In terms of its design, format and style, *Zoom* reads like a picturebook. So why make the detour through comics and silent comics to trace a line from picturebooks to wordless picturebooks? Lewis's strange circumnavigational origin of the wordless picturebook is reminiscent of Charles Hatfield's description of the similarly roundabout but much more logical route by which comics have once again become acceptable reading material for children. In the section 'Graphic Novel', in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, Hatfield (2011, 103–104) points out that the rise of the graphic novel, a grown-up form of comics, has opened up a space for graphic novels for children, which are now being welcomed by educators, librarians and bookstores alike. The irony, and the roundabout route I referred to, is that the graphic novel developed out of underground comics, the creation of the direct market, and the rise of alternative comics. Comics produced out of this alchemical mixture were more explicitly adult than any previous comics had been, and yet the 'genre' they engendered, the graphic novel, made comics once again safe for children, and in unprecedented ways.

### Eloquent pictures

Lewis is right to point out the malleability of the narrative in pictures. Picturebooks and comics are sometimes barely distinguishable from one another, and with wordless comics and silent picturebooks this is even more emphatically the case. As may be evident from my earlier discussion, sometimes the difference between a comic and a picturebook may be only the company that publishes the work, or the genre that the creator has chosen to

identify with. For picturebooks, the inclusion of comics-derived features can be a way to show they are ‘cool’, to capitalise on the current popularity of comics. By the same token, picturebook aesthetics are a way for comics to show a more serious and respectable side, perhaps in a bid to appeal to the parents, who after all are the ones buying the books. There are also certain stylistic choices that differentiate silent picturebook-type works from silent works that emphasise comics. I discussed line art and gutters as indicators of ‘comic-ness’ earlier. More realistic art and large illustrations are a sign of ‘picturebook-ness’.

Wordless picturebooks are more likely to use panoramic illustrations over full-page or even two-page spreads that show off the artist’s skills. Visually stunning, such overviews often contain a lot of funny or striking details, including references to the visual arts (in *Anno’s Journey*, for example), or *Where’s Waldo*-like hide-and-seek elements, as in *The Yellow Balloon*. In such picturebooks, narrative is secondary and often rudimentary. Banyai’s *Zoom* is another example of this tendency. Such texts are more about flow and visual impressions than about narrative. *Anno’s Journey* shows a character travelling through a landscape as well as through history, without a story that involves the ‘main character’ himself. In *The Yellow Balloon*, we are invited to find the eponymous balloon, as well as other recurring ‘characters’ like the little blue car, the escaped prisoner, and the fakir on a flying carpet. We find them in numerous exotic and interesting locales – the desert, the high north, a tropical island – without a storyline that explains, for example, how the little blue car ended up on an island in the South Pacific. The book does provide a sense of narrative closure, however, to make it slightly more than just a puzzle book: the blue car arrives back at home, where the fakir gives its occupants his carpet in exchange for the balloon; the prisoner is reunited with his family, and all is well.

Indeed, Nikolajeva noted: ‘A wordless doublespread is ... a narrative pause’ (2010, 38), and hide-and-seek pictures enforce that pause by making readers search for specific elements. However, this attitude speaks to a conception of narrative as driven by text, and the image as always distinct from that, a visual pleasure that takes a break from narrative thrust. David Wiesner’s work demonstrates that the same visual style can be employed by for visual pleasure and for narrative. In *Free Fall* (Wiesner 1988) the fantastical and stunning landscapes blend into one another from page to page, tied together loosely by the narrative of a boy having a dream based on the book he was reading and the toys and other elements at his bedside. Wiesner’s (2006) *Flotsam* has the same realistic, beautifully rendered art, but often uses smaller sequential images, panels basically, to tell the story of a boy who finds a camera that washes up from the sea. *Flotsam* can be read as a comic, in a way that *Free Fall* cannot. In *Flotsam*, full-page images show the pictures that children and sea creatures took with this camera, over the course of decades: on each consecutive sea voyage, all kinds of fish take pictures, and the next child takes a picture of him- or herself with the previous child’s picture, creating a *mise en abyme* that goes back all the way to the first owner of the camera in the 1920s. Loaded with new film, the first picture taken by the child itself, the camera is then returned to the sea, ready for long journey and the next child to find it.

In this case, quite a compelling story ties together the beautiful pictures of underwater worlds. I find it significant that this overarching story is mainly driven by the smaller panels. The spectacle created by the larger images is wonderful and creates worlds that as a reader I want to pore over and spend time on to discover, worlds that provide visual pleasure. The smaller, less visually stunning panels take on the more prosaic role of creating narrative. These panels use a key element of the formal vocabulary of comics, sequential images. In each individual panel the overall composition is less significant:

these panels are in service to the narrative. And because they are uninterrupted, or at least unsupported by textual captions and dialogue balloons, in their role as narrative panels, they have to speak for themselves. 410

The narrative panels in *Flotsam* involve the boy showing the new-found underwater camera to his parents and the beach guard. Having determined that it is not a recently lost object and that it thus belongs to the boy, he opens it and gets the film developed. Eight panels are used here to show how he has to wait for an interminable hour until the photographs are ready, and then he runs back to the beach with his prize. His patience is rewarded with the beautiful photographs of strange sea creatures in fantastical situations, and the final *mise en abyme* picture of 11 children who had the camera before him. 415

Wiesner's use of the interplay between narrative and visual pleasure, in smaller and larger images, is more pronounced than it tends to be in wordless children's stories. *Bluebird* (Staake 2013), *Monkie* (Schubert 1989), *Polo: The Runaway Book* (Faller 2005), *Chicken and Cat* (Varon 2006) and *The Arrival* (Tan 2007) all use some combination of smaller and larger, or even full-page, images, but in most cases the separation between the amount of detail and visuality between the larger and smaller panels is not as great. In *Bluebird*, Bob Staake (2013) uses fairly dense multi-panel pages throughout, with a great variety of layouts. The book's size allows even half-page panels to be fairly large, but the book only employs full-page images very sparingly. The end pages of the book are part of the narrative, with the opening double-page spread introducing the bird, and the last double-page spread providing a final goodbye. Within the book itself there is one full-page panel, which is not used to give an overview of a scene, as is a common use of such panels, but instead to give a large close-up of the boy and the bird on his shoulder, showing their close friendship. Full-page spreads in *Polo* are reminiscent of those in early *Tintin* albums, in which an oversize panel would sometimes be inserted, interrupting the text to draw attention to a key scene in the book, almost like an alternative cover, and usually a moment involving an action in a striking setting. Faller similarly provides a full-page panel for many of the key scenes in the book, similar to the way novels used to include illustrations. You can follow the whole narrative by reading the smaller panels, but you get a summary of the highlights in the full page panels. 420 425 430 435

### Visual literacy

Rather than focusing on what silent texts lack, such as specific words to guide readers, one can instead consider what kind of a reading experience they do offer. Many of the books listed above address fairly young readers who will still have developing literacy skills (6–8 years old). The wordless comics ask readers to apply many of these literacy skills, such as determining reading order, scanning the page, and anticipation, in looking backwards and forwards to complete a fuller idea of what is being said. A narrative in pictures offers such readers a text in which they do not get hung up on words and spellings. Consequently, these texts draw attention to the active processes involved in reading and interpretation, which is something that applies to readers at any level. Books using words have a deceptively passive reading process: ostensibly, one reads the words and knows what the story is. This conception of reading negates/overlooks complex processes of interpretation that go on as the reader grasps the full connotations and layers of meaning. Reading wordless comics, or even children and adults reading them together, brings the process into the open, as readers point out characters and details and can discuss them together. These wordless stories may look simple, but if you follow the pictures they make visible the complex moves we all go through to understand stories. 440 445 450 455



## Notes

1. While the book's title implies that the robot character is called Robot, the dog character is never explicitly named in the text, nor is he or she specifically gendered. The dust jacket blurb says 'Dog tries to replace his friend', but I choose to call Dog 'her' in my analysis, to foreground the potential for malleability in wordless comics, and the reader's agency in creating interpretations. 460
2. Some studies do hint at reasons to keep the two forms, comics and picturebooks, apart. For example in *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity*, Nathalie op de Beeck (2010a) is careful to include comics repeatedly in listings of various forms of children's culture available in the period she is discussing, but she does not include any comics in the corpus of texts she discusses in detail. They are apparently too different a form from picturebooks to be considered. 465
3. Unfortunately the text they recommend, *Monkey vs. Robot* by James Kochalka, is not actually wordless. The comic does not include a lot of dialogue, since, true to nature, the monkey does not speak, but the work is filled with sound effects of the monkeys banging logs and sticks in the forest and the clanking of machines in the robot factory, to the degree that often any space in the panels that is not filled with figures is taken up by onomatopoeia. 470

## Notes on contributor

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