

# Critical Reflection on the Creation of an Interpretive Text in Illustrated Books

By Lachlan Haycock for CMN247: Creative Writing for the Illustrated Book.

The interplay between illustration and prose in illustrated books can provide the opportunity for a third, interpretive text to be created in the resultant narrative gap. Chris van Allsburg's distinction between visual and verbal texts to create an interpretive narrative in *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (1984) compels the reader to further speculate about the relationship between the two texts and how that can influence the creation of their own explanatory narratives to 'fill in the gaps'. The reliance on illustration (i.e. without prose) to create meaning in Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) similarly elicits the production of external, reader-created meaning, whether in written form or otherwise, that expands the narrative. In my illustrated work 'The Man who Ran Away', I intended to combine a contrasting visual-verbal relationship as exemplified by van Allsburg with narrative-driving illustrations in the style of *The Arrival* to allow the reader to extend the narrative of the provided artefact as they desire. Both the creation of an interpretive text that expands upon the printed texts, and the development of narrative exclusively through image, can increase the level of post-narrative interpretation by the reader.

Each illustration in *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* interacts with the accompanying written text in a way that constructs additional, collative meaning – the interpretive text. This means that the reader can be further intrigued by the story and create their own unique explanation for the presented ideas and conflicts, thereby becoming active participants in the construction of the story. Indeed, Anstey and Bull (2000: 4) maintain that both visual and written texts produce meaning individually, but it is the interchange between the two that gives rise to numerous other meanings. In van Allsburg's case, the conflation of illustration, story title and caption in 'Uninvited Guests' (pages 14-15) engenders an immediacy to and clarification of the narrative that could not have been communicated by either of the texts individually. On its own, the caption ('His heart was pounding. He was sure he had seen the doorknob turn.') creates conflict between the man and what lies behind the door, but provides no contextual framework with which to clarify such conflict or the characters. Similarly, the illustration, although presenting a mystery as to the door's origin and purpose, reveals no immediate threat to the person walking down the stairs. Only following a reading of both the written and visual texts is the interpretive narrative clarified, and an immediacy given to the scenario – the eponymous guests are now revealed to be present, in that moment, behind the door. In this case, the mystery of the guests' identity and intentions thereby becomes the most prominent aspect of the interpretive text. According to van Leeuwen's clarification of the visual-verbal dynamic (2004: 230), the function of the written text here is that of complementing the image – that is, of adding information to extend the narrative and increase its overall sophistication. Furthermore, various other images in *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* expand and elaborate upon the prose in a way that constructs additional meaning. The written text of 'Archie Smith, Boy Wonder' (4-5), for example, complements the visual text by introducing elements of mystery ('Is he the one?'). The image identifies the owner of the 'tiny voice' as a small floating ball of white light, a

narrative component only identifiable visually. This accords to the notion of how, ‘through the selection of particular words, and the omission of others, an author can also create gaps in the narrative to invite the reader in’ (Anstey & Bull 2000: 12). The creation of an interpretive text in each of these examples is therefore paramount in provoking the reader to add to the provided narrative either via creation of their own story or simply via a deeper contemplation of the possible explanations for the narrative.

Reader interpretation of an interpretive text existing in furtherance to the printed narrative(s) is also exhibited in Tan’s *The Arrival*. Due to the wordless nature of the work, illustrations communicate details relating to characterisation, theme and plot. Due to the lack of a specific written text, there is an opportunity for the reader to speculate upon events and why they occur using the illustrations as stimuli. The images, therefore, ‘evoke an understanding without having to literally articulate it’ (Devos 2011: 21). Notably, the style and layout of images in the first chapter of *The Arrival* allow the reader to develop an understanding of how the protagonist is leaving on a journey to an as-yet unknown destination and speculate on the significance of such for him and his family. The narrative develops a tone by which the reader is able to understand the immensity of the man’s departure, firstly due to a subdued colour scheme: sepia illustrations convey a solemnness and melancholy with minimal vibrancy evident. Also, the detailed illustration of physicality and facial expressions more accurately conveys emotion than less-detailed images and is more holistically resonant than prose description of such emotion. The order and layout of images further intensify the narrative’s potency: a series of seemingly unconnected images (page 3) followed by a sequence of moment-to-moment images (4) culminate with a full-page illustration (5), which includes each component of the preceding images in a single illustration. This culmination of scene prompts the reader to momentarily pause their reading of the narrative and develop their own proposition for the man’s departure, thereby becoming involved in the meaning-making process. Consequently, the images evoke an understanding that is interpreted by the reader without being defined exactly with prose. Such an understanding is further enhanced by objects included in the illustrations that carry symbolic meaning. The motif of a bird, for example, recurs frequently, including in the very first illustration and at the narrative climax when the man is reunited with his family (117-119). Devos contends that birds symbolise ideas of hope, home and belonging (2011: 21); while this may indeed be the case, due to the open-endedness of the narrative it is possible that the reader will develop their own understanding of the significance of birds in the story. Indeed, visual narratives often exhibit a sense of incompleteness which encourages the reader to draw upon their own values and experiences to create meaning (Anstey & Bull 2000: 14; Tan 2011: 8). As a result, Tan allows for the possibility of unique perspectives on elements of the narrative that expand upon the existing artefact.

My intention with *The Man who Ran Away* was to combine elements of van Allsburg’s and Tan’s works to achieve a greater level of reader interaction with the narrative. Firstly, I attempted to elicit a visual-verbal relationship based on extension and contradiction in a similar manner to van Allsburg. For example, the first line of the work – ‘I wake up floundering on sweaty sheets. It doesn’t take me long to figure out what’s wrong’ (page 5) – presents an open

narrative conflict without any specificity of character or setting. The illustration, however, provides an essential extension for the narrative by showing the recently awoken protagonist staring at the empty other side of the bed; sepia-toned illustrations also help to convey a melancholy tone. The conflict inherent in the visual text, but in no way alluded to in the written text, relates to whom the other side of the bed belongs and why they are no longer present. This forms an element of the interpretive text that I presented to the reader for contemplation with the aim they will be further engaged by the narrative as they progress through it, intrigued by the identity of this unknown person. Moreover, my efforts to enhance the narrative gap using a contradiction between words and image resulted in the illustration on page 22. Here, the conflict between the naivety and ignorance of the protagonist in the prose ('I'm just being paranoid') and the unspoken threat of the visual text that remains unbeknownst to him (another man lies concealed in the bushes, peering out at the protagonist) is an example of dramatic irony, whereby the reader is aware of something the characters are not – this further draws in the reader. Secondly, in response to Tan's work I aimed to emulate the use of narrative-propelling illustrations by leaving open the possibility for multiple interpretations of the plot. I did not indicate in prose or image the exact reason for the protagonist's departure, emulating Tan's withholding of similar information in *The Arrival*. Instead, I included visual clues as to the identity of his pursuers (the aforementioned man in the bushes, for example). Even with these clues, however, there still exists a gap between the two texts for the reader to investigate. Indeed, as any text will present multiple meanings and discourses to the reader (Anstey & Bull 2000: 9), I did not desire to communicate a singular and restricting message. Subsequently, I designed *The Man who Ran Away* with an interplay between the visual and verbal texts to hopefully implicate the reader in the meaning-making process.

A narrative gap between the written and visual texts of illustrated books can promote the reader's interest in and expansion of the existing work. Van Allsburg constructs an interpretive text using discrete elements of image and prose that build upon and provide clarification to the other, potentially eliciting the creation of reader-created narratives. Tan, on the other hand, uses solely illustration to communicate meaning to the reader, who again explores outside the narrative for detail and clarification. My illustrated work uses contradiction and elaboration of the visual-verbal relationship in the attempt to closely engage the reader. Words and images in illustrated books therefore combine in ways that implicate the reader in the individual understanding and dissemination of the work.

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