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Inside the Picture, Outside the Frame: Semiotics and the Reading of Wordless Picture Books

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Abstract. The publishing world has witnessed a proliferation of wordless children's books during the past 40 years. Books in this genre offer young readers invitations to transact with a whole system of images as they navigate these texts. Using a semiotic framework, this study focuses on three children's readings of wordless picture books and explores the ways in which they assign meaning to a variety of visual signs and cues. The data indicate that the children make sense of wordless picture books by using sense-making processes similar to those used in the reading of print-based texts. Specifically, they construct meaning through the use of prior knowledge and experiences, attention to intertextual cues, multiple perspective-taking, reliance upon story language and rituals, and the implementation of active, playful behaviors as part of the reading process.

Over the past four decades, wordless picture books have become a distinct genre within the world of children's literature (Degler, 1979; Dowhower, 1997; Grasty, 1978; Lindauer, 1988; Stewig, 1988). Although only recently popularized, these wordless books have roots that extend deep into the past. For centuries, people have conveyed meaning through the use of visual images, without the aid of written texts (Brilliant, 1984; Considine, 1987; Heins, 1987; Whalen, 1994). As Stewig (1988) notes, pre-literate people chronicled history, preserved their culture, and shared their stories through cave drawings. Masses of people learned about their religious heritage through the presentation of spiritual stories depicted on stained glass windows. Before "talkies" came to the foreground, movie-goers flocked to silent films, in which visual stories unfolded, without the benefit of the spoken word or, in many cases, subtitles or other print cues. In each of these cases, a series of pictorial images reveals a visual text that invites transaction; one that begs viewers to bring their individual and collective understandings to bear on the illustrated story before them. The wordless picture book follows in these same traditions, with the entire message of the text communicated solely through visual images. These texts serve as invitations to which readers can respond by bringing their own background knowledge, personal experiences, and social histories to bear on their readings of the visual signs presented in the illustrations. Wordless picture books provide a basis on which storytakers and storymakers can construct meaning and build their own narratives.

Review of the Literature

The growing popularity of wordless picture books can be seen clearly in the sheer volume of such titles published. Records indicate that nearly 1,000 wordless texts had been produced by the mid-1990s (Dowhower, 1997), with more than 99 percent of these titles bearing a copyright date of 1960 or later; more than 60 percent of them were published between 1980 and the mid-1990s (Dowhower, 1997).

The expanded impact of wordless picture books during this same time period is also evident in the growing body of professional literature that advocates the use of

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these texts in the classroom. Practitioners and other interested educators have advocated the use of wordless picture books as a means of promoting the concept of story structure (Reese, 1996), developing comprehension (Arthur, 1982), supporting children's attempts at storytelling (Avery, 1996), and teaching visual literacy (Cianciolo, 1984; Evans, 1992; Lindauer, 1988; Read & Smith, 1982; Stewig, 1988). Over the years, these books have been used to elicit talk (Larrick, 1976), support budding writers (D'Angelo, 1979), and nurture the skills and attitudes that surround the handling of books and development of concepts about print (Degler, 1979). Wordless books have made their way into all curricular areas and have been used with children from a wide variety of backgrounds, abilities, and experiences (D'Angelo, 1981; Flatley & Rutland, 1986; Gitelman, 1990; Perry, 1997).

Additional attention has been given to the genre through the use of wordless books in educational studies. Researchers have examined many aspects related to the readings of these texts. For example, Jett-Simpson (1976) conducted a study of comprehension by analyzing the readings of Mercer Mayer's (1975) *Frog Goes to Dinner* by children of three different age levels. Her findings indicated that the children's inferential comprehension of the text was revealed in their picture-stimulated storytelling.

In a study of children's elaborated language, Hough, Nurss, and Wood (1987) asked participants to tell three stories: an original story, a story based on a single picture, and a story based on a wordless picture book. Their findings indicated that while both the picture and the wordless books served as supportive props for storytelling, the original stories contained more elaborate types of language patterns than stories based on the picture or wordless book.

Purcell-Gates (1988) also has reported on many aspects of children's readings of wordless picture books. In a study of children's knowledge of written narratives, she invited well-read-to kindergartners and 2nd-graders to tell two stories. In the first, the children were asked to tell about their birthday parties. In the second, they were asked to pretend to read a wordless book to a doll. The findings confirmed a marked difference between the children's oral and written language registers. In a re-examination of this data, Purcell-Gates (1991) went on to explore the ability of well-read-to kindergartners to decontextualize and recontextualize experience into a written-narrative register. The children's readings of wordless books revealed that they were aware of the need for writers of narrative to create a "within-text world" for readers by providing additional information and using linguistic means to communicate vivid images.

In an extension of this study, Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, and Freppon (1995) sought to determine whether children who begin school with significantly less knowledge about books than well-read-to children will gain this knowledge during the first years of schooling. In this study, which again compared children's tellings of original stories and narratives based on a wordless picture book, the researchers found that schooling does have a significant impact on children's development of their implicit linguistic knowledge of books, and that children who are in holistic, literature-rich classrooms make more significant gains than those who are not.

Van Kraayenoord and Paris (1996) conducted a longitudinal study of children's reading that examined the relationship between children's story constructions based on a wordless text and other types of literacy achievement at the time of the retelling, as well as two years later. They found a strong correlation among children's comprehension of the wordless books and other measures of literacy knowledge. Ultimately, the researchers suggested that teachers use their "Story Construction From a Picture Book Activity" as a means of assessing literacy learning.

Theoretical Framework

Wordless picture books have been embraced by children, well-received by classroom

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teachers, and utilized in the work of educational researchers. Furthermore, many of the texts have been celebrated, with a number of illustrators receiving formal recognition for their work via the awarding of the Caldecott Medal (Bang, 1980; Rohmann, 1994; Spier, 1977; Wiesner, 1988; 1991). Wordless picture books, with their finely detailed and aesthetically pleasing illustrations, certainly provide fine examples of artistry (Groff, 1984; Jacobs & Tunnell, 1996; Lacy, 1986; Lukens, 1995; Marantz, 1977; Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991). They are much more than bound collections of artwork, however (Nodelman, 1988; Wiesner, 1992). Like other types of picture books, the wordless book "... is a unique art object, a combination of image and idea that allows the readers to come away with more than the sum of the parts" (Kiefer, 1995a, p. 6). The wordless book is unique in that its content must be communicated solely through the use of illustrations. These images must be able to stand alone, without the support of a printed text, and must carry the full weight of the illustrator's intentions.

Because of the nature of these texts, the reading of wordless picture books is an open-ended process in which viewers read stories by bringing their background experiences and personal histories to bear on the visual images they encounter within the text. As Dowhower (1997) asserts, "Unlike words, even those fixed in a written text, visual images have an almost infinite capacity for verbal extension, because viewers must become their own narrators, changing the images into some form of internalized verbal expression" (p. 57). Readers construct meaning from wordless texts by transacting with a series of visual codes and interpreting them in light of a particular context (Bang, 1991; Kiefer, 1995a, 1995b; Rosenblatt, 1978). In his Caldecott acceptance speech for *Tuesday,* David Wiesner (1992) noted:

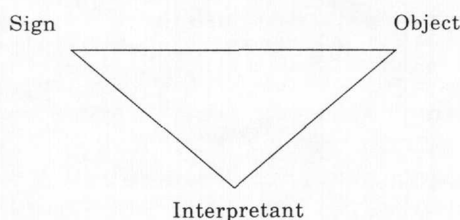
> A wordless book offers a different kind of experience from one with text, for both the author and the reader. There is no author's voice telling the story. Each viewer reads the book in his or her own way. The reader is an integral part of the storytelling process. As the author of a wordless book, I don't have to concern myself about whether the reader's interpretation of each and every detail is the same as mine. My own view has no more, and no less, validity than that of any other viewer. (p. 421)

Wiesner describes the essence of a semiotic perspective of children's literature. From such a perspective, the visual elements are approached as signs, which readers interpret by navigating the "grammar" of the visual text.

Semiotics, in its most basic form, is the study of signs (Eco, 1979; Hawkes, 1977; Solomon, 1988; Suhor, 1992). According to Peirce a sign is something that stands for something else (its object), to someone (its interpretant) (Hawkes, 1977). This triadic relationship among sign, object, and interpretant is basic to the semiotic perspective (see Figure 1).

A sign is symbolic when it has an arbitrary relationship with its object, iconic when it resembles its object, or indexical when it is indicative of an object that is a particular idea, state, or condition (see

Figure 1



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Suhor, 1992). Readers of wordless picture books encounter a variety of visual signs, and then assign meaning to them based on their own experiences, perspectives, and the particular context of the reading event. These sign systems help readers form a type of framework that informs their interpretation of the text and helps them shape their construction of the story (Nodelman, 1988).

Golden and Gerber (1990) have used a semiotic perspective to investigate children's readings of picture books that include a print-based text. Their work indicates that children's readings of picture books include elements of intratextuality, in which individual illustrations are explored as signs, and intertextuality, in which the picture book itself is viewed as a sign. Their work shows how visual cues powerfully affect the ways in which readers construct meaning, regarding the story narrative (Golden & Gerber, 1990). Likewise, Elster's (1998) study of influences on children's emergent readings of picture books indicated that visual cues had a significant impact on their readings and that readers' understanding of text was greatly supported by illustrations. Studies such as these affirm the belief that reading is a meaning-making experience and that this meaning-making process is supported and facilitated by children's ability to respond to visual cues within the text.

Since these studies investigated readings of books that contained a conventional printed text, as well as illustrations, it seems that the effects of visual cues would be even more profound in the construction of meaning based on a wordless text. As Nodelman (1988) notes, "The words and the pictures in picture books both define and amplify each other, neither is as open ended as either would be on its own" (p. viii). Thus, wordless books, which do not have this type of print story line to amplify or clarify the message of the illustrations, are by nature less corrective. They invite more divergent types of readings and may be more open to a range of semiotic interpretations than books that are accompanied by text.

Children's Readings of Wordless Picture Books

In order to better understand the semiotic, sense-making process that takes place when readers transact with wordless picture books, the researchers asked three children to share their readings of these books. The researchers wanted to better understand the strategies that children use to make sense of wordless texts; specifically, how would the children respond to the visual cues and the absence of a print-based story? Would the processes and strategies they use to navigate visual texts be similar to those used by children to read print-based storylines? Finally, how would differences in age and experience level affect the children's reading of wordless texts?

Participants

In selecting participants, the researchers looked for children of various ages (preschool, kindergarten, and elementary), who had many experiences with books in their daily lives, and who met Purcell-Gates's (1988) criteria for being "well-read-to." Outside of these basic criteria, a convenience sample was utilized and no effort was made to randomize selection. The participants included Laura (age 8), Tim (age 5), and Arlee (age 4), all children of the authors' colleagues. Tim and Laura, who are in kindergarten and 3rd grade, respectively, are siblings who attend a private school with a holistic curriculum, in which reading and writing are learned through authentic literacy experiences. The guiding philosophy of instruction at their school emphasizes a whole-part-whole philosophy, while de-emphasizing skill-based instruction. Arlee does not yet attend school. The parents of the children, all of whom work in fields related to education, were informed of the nature, purposes, and procedures of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was done in individual sessions conducted in the children's homes, with each complete session lasting approximately 90 minutes. Each participant was

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presented with a selection of 12 different wordless picture books taken from a local collection (see Figure 2).

The children were invited to explore the books and choose one that they would like to read aloud. Each child was asked to look through the book, read the story aloud, and share his or her impressions of the text. This process was repeated twice, with each child reading a total of three books (see Figure 3).

The children talked about these stories and also commented on some of the other books that they reviewed when making their reading choices. At the conclusion of their individual readings, Tim and Laura also asked for the opportunity to read two books collaboratively (see Figure 4). The data from these collaborative readings, although not originally anticipated, was included in the analysis.

Two adults, one researcher and one parent, were present for each of these sessions. During the session, the researcher offered invitations (e.g., "Would you like to read one of these books?" and "You've picked a good book. Would you read it to me?"), and responded to the children's questions and comments during the readings. The youngest participant received additional support in order to help focus his attention on the wordless book. This was provided by the attending parent, who made several focus-oriented comments such as, "Hmmm . . . what's happening here?" and "Can you read the next page?"

The children's readings and corresponding discussions of the texts were videotaped. Verbatim transcripts, supplemented with researcher observations related to the children's vocal intonations, facial expressions, and physical responses, were developed. Additional data were derived through document analyses of the wordless picture books used within the study.

The data were then analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis, which involves a systematic review of the data, coding, category construction, and analysis (Altheide, 1987; Hubbard & Power, 1999; Merriam, 1991). Initially, the transcripts and notes for each of the children's readings were reviewed alongside the accompanying pages of the wordless book, in an effort to see which visual cues had captured the children's attention and elicited a

Figure 2
Wordless Picture Book Choices

A Boy, a Dog, and a Frog by Mercer Mayer
Do You Want To Be My Friend? by Eric Carle
Free Fall by David Wiesner
Good Dog, Carl by Alexandra Day
Moonlight by Jan Ormerod
Noah's Ark by Peter Spier
Pancakes for Breakfast by Tomie de Paolo
School by Emily McCulley
Sunshine by Jan Ormerod
The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher by Molly Bang
The Silver Pony by Lynd Ward
Up and Up by Shirley Hughes

Figure 3
Children's Individual Book Choices

	Arlee	Tim	Laura
Choice 1	*Pancakes for Breakfast*	*Noah's Ark*	*The Silver Pony*
Choice 2	*Good Dog, Carl*	*Free Fall*	*Good Dog, Carl*
Choice 3	*The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher*	*Moonlight*	*Free Fall*

Figure 4
Tim and Laura's Collaborative Choices

Choice 1	*The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher*
Choice 2	*Up and Up*

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response. Then, each transcript was coded by a general system, in which categories of response to these visual signs were recorded alongside the children's script. Sample categories included descriptors related to the children's references to images contained within the book, such as labeling of items, cross-checking images within the page, comparing illustrations within a text, etc. Other categories addressed references to sources beyond the book, such as reference to daily activities, reference to storybooks, reference to television, reference to radio, etc. Other categories included information related to the children's behaviors during the reading, such as playful behavior, seeking adult interaction, engaging in reading rituals, use of book language, etc. The categories then were collapsed into the five broad categories of sense-making described below (see Figure 5). Finally, as a means of interpretation, the researchers sought to recontextualize the children's responses by identifying the semiotic associations they made in terms of sign, object, and interpretant. They looked for recorded instances in which visual images seemed to stand for explicit meanings within the reader's particular context.

Findings

All three of the children indicated that they based their reading choices upon their response to some type of visual element. For example, Arlee chose to read Tomie de Paolo's *Pancakes for Breakfast* (1978), a text that depicts a woman's attempts to make pancakes. When asked which book he would like to read, Arlee looked at several books and then responded:

> I would read this one [points to the image of pancakes on the cover and smiles]. My Dad would buy those pancakes. He would say, "Look how many pancakes are there." And I would say, ". . . . . O-K!"

For Arlee, a certain illustration (the pancakes) acted as an iconic sign, representing something that he likes and that he associates with his father.

As his first choice, Tim opted to read *Moonlight*, Jan Ormerod's (1981) realistic portrayal of a child's nightly bedtime ritual. However, he rejected Ormerod's (1982) companion text, *Sunshine,* on the basis that it was a "girl's book," making explicit reference to the back cover illustration, which depicts a young girl in her nightgown. After choosing *Moonlight*, he explained:

> I like this one better than *Sunshine*—'cause *Sunshine* is really girlie, you can tell. . . Want to see? I bet you that it's really girlie. [Holds up book and points to the image of a girl in her nightgown.] See . . . nightgown!

In Tim's reading, the image of the nightgown acted as a gender-related indexical sign. To him, it signified that the accompanying text must be a "girl's book." Based on his understanding of cultural expectations of appropriateness for young boys' reading material, he concluded that this text would not be a good choice for him.

Laura, the oldest participant, immediately gravitated to *The Silver Pony* (Ward, 1973), an 86-page "wordless novelette" in which a boy's fantastic adventures with a flying pony unfold chapter by chapter. She explained that she chose this text because she ". . . usually like[s] books that are long—chapter kind of books." For Laura, the thickness of a longer text acted as a symbolic sign, signifying that a particular book might be more appropriate for older readers, such as herself, who are capable of navigating longer, more involved texts. Like

Figure 5
Sense-Making Processes Used by Readers of Wordless Picture Books

- Applying prior knowledge and experiences to the reading
- Bringing many different texts to bear on the reading transaction
- Assuming multiple perspectives in the telling of the stories
- Incorporating story language and story rituals in each reading
- Including active, play-like responses as part of the reading event.

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Arlee and Tim, Laura made decisions about the appropriateness and appeal of a book based on her interpretation of a visual cue—in this case, its size. In each of these examples, the children based their choices on their understanding of specific signs and the significance that they attributed to them. Based on Peirce's triadic notion of subject, object, and interpretant (Hawkes, 1977), the children's choices might be represented as shown in Figure 6.

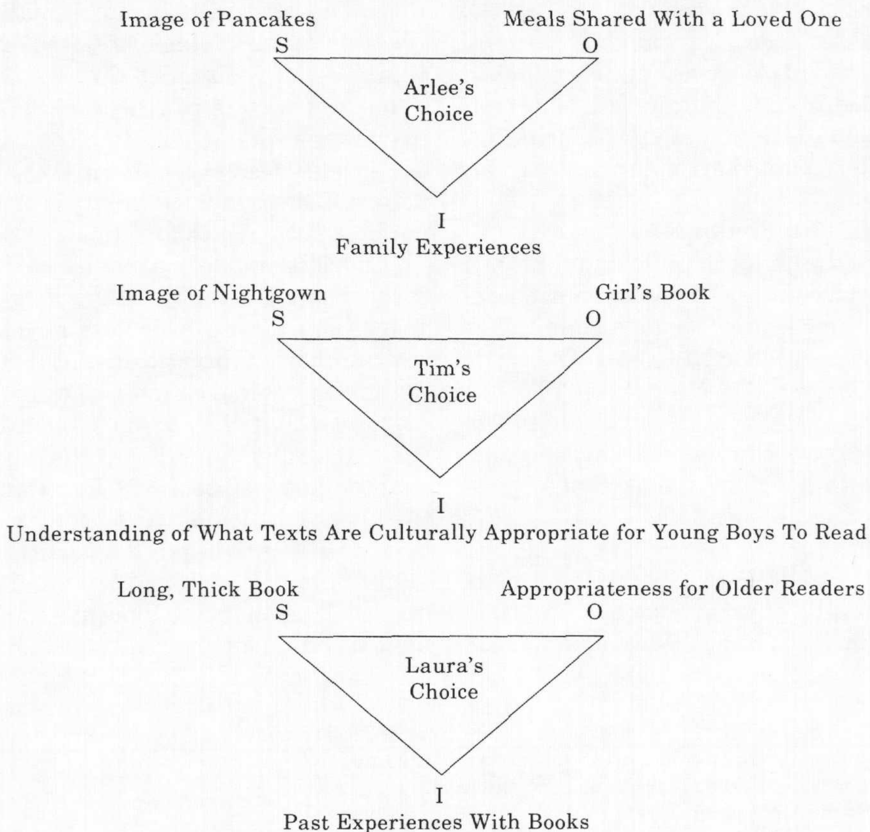
Reading Stories, Making Sense

In this study, the researchers wanted to learn how children of a variety of ages would respond to visual cues and navigate wordless texts. The children explored wordless books and made sense of the visual texts in many of the same ways that readers make sense out of printed texts. The children responded to the books in a developmentally appropriate manner. They made sense of the stories by transacting with the visual texts in their books and assigning potential meanings to different signs encountered within the texts' frameworks. This sense-making process was facilitated by the readers' inclination and ability to construct meaning by applying their prior knowledge and experiences to the reading; bringing many different texts to bear on the reading transaction; assuming multiple perspectives in the telling of the stories; incorporating story language and story rituals in each reading; and including active, play-like responses as part of the reading event.

Sense-Making Through Prior Knowledge and Experiences

Good readers do not read in a vacuum, but

Figure 6
Book Levels Chosen By the Below-average Readers



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rather bring their prior knowledge and experiences to bear on their reading (Rosenblatt, 1978; Smith, 1998). It became evident that Arlee, Tim, and Laura had brought their past experiences with both the general process of reading and with the specific content of individual stories to the reading of these books.

Of the three participants, only Arlee, the youngest, expressed any surprise regarding the wordless nature of the texts. After choosing *Pancakes for Breakfast* by Tomie de Paolo (1978), Arlee asked to read the title page. After scanning the opening illustration, he then inquired about the dedication and copyright information. After scanning the first page again, Arlee threw his hands in the air and asked, "Where are the words? . . . I got words in my books." He repeated this ritual when he read *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher* by Molly Bang (1980). Upon opening the book, he immediately attended to the copyright information and noted, "This one has a lot." Then, as he pointed to the printed text, he exclaimed, "Wo-o-o-o-ords!," adding an additional syllable to "words," each time that his finger touched a different part of the printed text. When reading *Good Dog, Carl* by Alexandra Day (1985), he attended fully to the introductory print text ("Look after the baby, Carl. I'll be back shortly.") and closing text ("Good dog, Carl."). However, he made no attempt to read this text on his own.

Arlee's response is significant in that he brought his previous experiences with literature and knowledge of books to bear on his reading of these particular texts. Although Arlee was not yet reading conventionally, a story line was signified for him through the presence of printed text. On the other hand, Tim and Laura, who had had more experiences with wordless books, expressed no surprise at the lack of print within the texts. For them, the conveyance of a story line was signified in ways that did not require the presence of print. Arlee's response challenges the assumption that young children necessarily find wordless books to be less intimidating than books with printed text. Although Arlee did not rely on a literal reading of print, he did rely on its presence as a support system and as an assurance that there was a story to be read. His knowledge of the importance of the printed word to the reading process had an effect on his impressions of the book and his reading of it.

In addition to their knowledge about books and the functions of print, the children also brought their prior knowledge about a wide range of other subject matter to bear on the reading of each story. In reading these books, the children drew upon their prior knowledge in order to contextualize the signs that they encountered within the illustrations. For example, Laura's version of *Free Fall* (Wiesner, 1988) included tentative references to Greece. When she came upon Wiesner's depiction of books near a large building with prominent columns, she stated, "There were books upon books upon books . . . by a Greek temple, I think." After looking at another illustration depicting a gorge, she made the hypothesis that some of the story action occurs ". . . over the Grand Canyon." However, when asked how she was able to identify these settings, she shrugged and replied, "I don't know." Although Laura did not articulate her sense-making process, she clearly assigned meaning to visual signs (the building and the gorge) by bringing her prior knowledge and experiences to bear upon them. Thus, in her story, a generic large ravine becomes the Grand Canyon and an antiquated building featuring columns becomes a Greek temple. This illustrates the power of semiotics and symbolic interpretation. Whether the illustrator intended to communicate these particular locations or not, the signs evoke specific, contextualized responses in the minds of readers.

Just as readers' experiences can enhance a narrative by helping them construct meaning based on a particular sign, a lack of prior experience also can influence the telling. Readers may encounter signs that seem unusual to them and consequently respond by constructing an unconventional inter-

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pretation. For example, both Tim and Arlee had had only limited experiences with farm life. In Arlee's version of *Pancakes for Breakfast*, he described an image of a woman gathering eggs by saying, "I'll put an egg in the chicken spot." Likewise, Tim described a similar egg gathering scene in *Noah's Ark* with the statement, "They gave the hens eggs." For both readers, the image of a human being, a hen, and a basket of eggs signified distribution, rather than collection.

Although the illustrators clearly intended to impart different messages, Arlee's and Tim's responses exemplify the way in which readers of wordless books construct meaning by contextualizing images based on their personal knowledge and experiences. Their responses affirm Hawkes's (1977) assertion that, from a semiotic perspective, there is never a certain, final unambiguous reading of an aesthetic message.

Sense-Making Through Intertextuality

Semioticians recognize the many complex connections and relationships that exist among texts (Hawkes, 1977; Nodelman, 1988). Most texts make references, either explicitly or implicitly, to other texts in our lives. Consequently, reading becomes a sense-making process that involves a layering of texts and meanings. Good readers are able to read new texts by applying their memories of other texts, and by determining the interrelationships among these texts (Leland & Harste, 1995; Meek, 1988; Stephens, 1990).

In their storytelling, each of the children demonstrated their competence in making sense of intertextual messages by referring to a number of different texts. Arlee, Tim, and Laura all referred to other books when making their reading choices. Arlee made general comparisons between wordless books and traditional picture storybooks; Laura related her criteria for making choices with the characteristics of other books she had read and enjoyed; and Tim compared different titles according to his perception of appropriateness. Within the framework of the stories, the children also made references to specific books. For example, in Tim's reading of Peter Spier's (1977) *Noah's Ark,* his attention was immediately drawn to a small opening illustration of a battle scene. As he returned again and again to this image, Tim compared Spier's work with a different version of the same story, noting: "I've never seen this. But, I have learned about a Noah's ark that doesn't have soldiers marching."

In addition to relating the wordless books to other pieces of literature, references to television and the media also figured prominently in the children's stories. Laura compared characters in *Free Fall* to the Three Stooges. When looking through *Up and Up*, by Shirley Hughes (1979), Tim noted that a character "had stars around her head, like in the cartoons." Tim related the battle scenes in *Noah's Ark* to both his experiences of watching "fighting stuff" on reruns of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle cartoons and to hearing "real army stuff on the radio" when listening to the news. By making connections among books, television, and other media, the children transformed what could have been a simple, linear storybook reading into a more complex, richly layered intertextual experience. Such reading depends on multiple mediation, a process in which readers draw upon a myriad of visual verbal resources that are at their disposal (Elster, 1998).

Sense-Making Through Multiple Perspective-Taking

When children tell stories, they tell them from a particular perspective. When children read books, their understanding can be enhanced by being able to look at the plot from the perspective of different characters within the same story. Arlee, Tim, and Laura were able to do just this in reading the wordless texts. Arlee's version of *Pancakes for Breakfast* provides evidence for this:

Pancakes for Breakfast

She decided to make pancakes . . . Then, *I'll* go out and *I'll* make it. *I'll* go out in the snow, and *I'll* put an egg in the chicken spot . . . So, *they* got the eggs . . . So, went out again . . . to get milk! [laughs] Then *I'll* go out again! [laughs, moves

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to floor and plays with a string of beads before returning to the text and scanning the page] . . .

And *I'll* make pancakes . . . And *I* went out again! . . . And *they* make the pancakes when *I* was walking home. And then, *her* says, "The dog's doing something." Very mad at the cat . . . [scans page, looking puzzled] *She* was starting to get the pancakes now . . . And *they* sleeped at the house with the dog and the cat.
(Emphasis ours)

Arlee's storybook reading shows both an understanding of the story line and evidence of identification with the main character. Throughout his reading, Arlee wavers between using "she" and "I." Likewise, when asked to predict whether the woman would go outside again, Arlee responded, "Yeah, *I* just did it." Arlee takes multiple perspectives in order to make sense of the story by moving back and forth between a first-person perspective located within the picture and a more distant third-person perspective located outside the frame of the book. Tim and Laura, on the other hand, consistently reported their stories from a third-person point of view. However, they did show their ability to take different perspectives by supplying dialogue for the characters.

Sense-Making Through Story Language and Story Rituals

When children hear stories and are exposed to read-alouds on a regular basis, they tend to internalize both the rituals and language of story time (Butler, 1998; Holdaway, 1979; Morrow, 1989; Snow, 1983). The familiarity of these rituals and language registers can provide a scaffolding effect as children make sense of texts. The children in this study each brought story experiences to the reading of wordless texts. Their previous experiences with books had an effect on both the language and the rituals embedded in their storytelling.

Each of the three children responded to the invitation to read these texts from a unique perspective. Most of Arlee's experiences with books had been home-based ones. Rituals common to family storybook reading were evident in his reading of the wordless texts. He chose to sit close to the adult with whom he was sharing each story, sometimes snuggling close and sometimes moving away. He seemed to view the story reading as one part of a larger event in his day, rather than as an isolated event in itself. One time, for example, Arlee left the story reading setting in the middle of telling a story. Without warning, he slipped off the couch in order to play on the floor. A few moments later, he returned to the reading of the book. Arlee appeared to see this reading time as an integral part of his play and daily activities. In this way and others, Arlee incorporated the rituals of a casual bedtime story to his reading of the texts.

Unlike Arlee, Laura had had considerable experience in a school setting, which was reflected in her reading of the texts. With the exception of the collaborative stories that she told with Tim, Laura chose to sit alone when reading each book. She introduced each of her selections formally, in a manner similar to that of a teacher reading to a group of students. For example, she started off one book by saying, "This book's called *Good Dog, Carl*, and this is the way it goes . . . ." Laura read each of her books straight through without stopping for any breaks. She imposed a much more formal structure on her story reading than Arlee did on his.

At the time of these observations, Tim had been in kindergarten for less than six weeks. His readings reflected some of the more structured conventions of school-based read-alouds and other conventions of informal home reading. Like Laura, he chose to sit by himself when reading. At certain points, however, he invited the researchers to come and sit closer to him: "I think you better come see this." Unlike Laura, he did not formally introduce any of the stories that he read. His narratives also seemed to be less formal than hers, in the sense that he often broke the story frame in order to insert his opinion of the story. This is evident in his reading of *Free Fall*. After choosing this text, Tim silently paged

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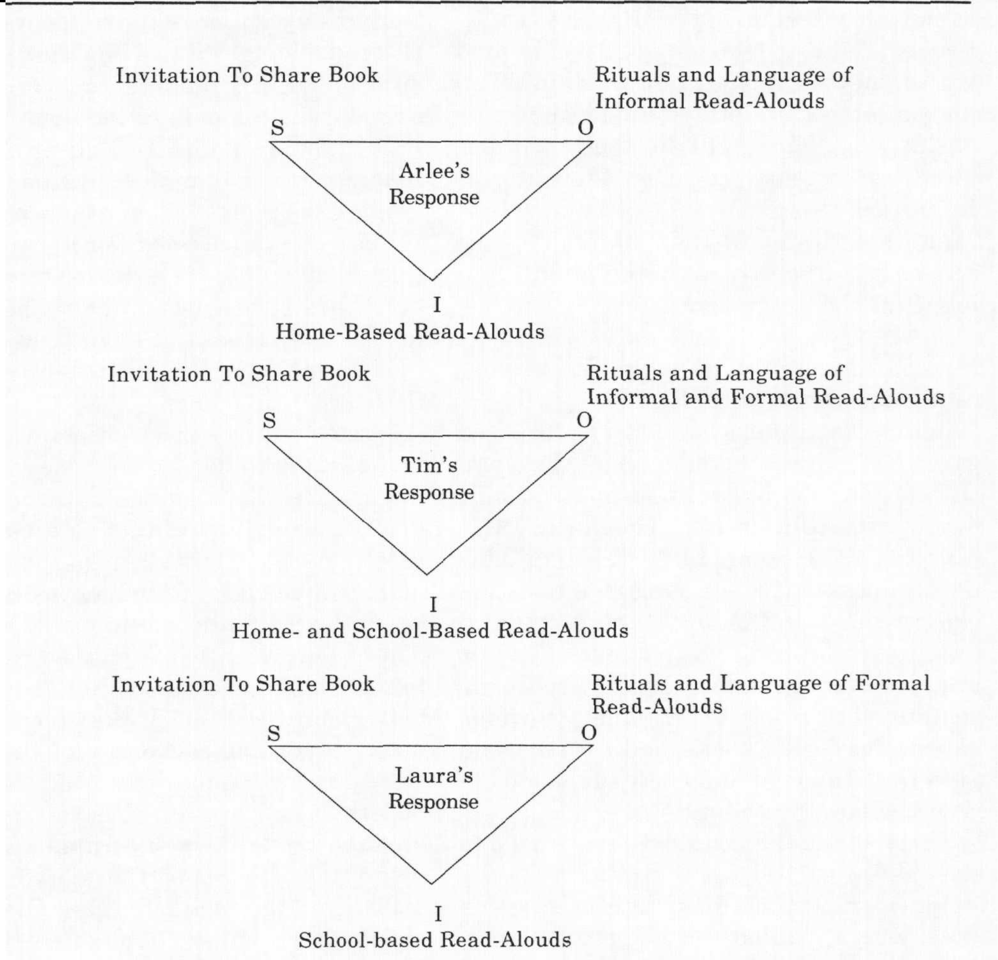
through the book and then told a very brief version of the story, turning the pages of the book throughout:

Free Fall (1)
He falls asleep and has a dream. And this is still him dreaming. He flies across the chessboard. *Actually, this is sort of awesome!* He goes back into his town, only it's smaller. And then he falls asleep. He's just dreaming all this time. And then he wakes up. Yeah, this is all just dreaming.
(emphasis ours)

In this overview, Tim gave the highlights of the story, ignored many of the details, and interjected his opinion of the piece. Later, Tim returned to this book and shared an expanded version:

Free Fall (2)
This is it. He goes across the wasteland. He gets on a chessboard—*which I don't understand why they put it in; why they made it a chessboard.... Really weird....* He goes into the home of chessboard pieces. *This is sort of weirdo.* But, you know what? The birds are the army. So, he just knocks over one army person and it falls out as birds. He has a dragon and then he's watching those two guys getting to hide behind a book. While the dragon is sneaking up behind them, he keeps his eye on them. As he comes back out with another one of his friends, the people he meets in this life. He plays with his people. He's going on a cliff ride. He's on a small city, where things are blowing away. And then it's a total hurricane! All the

Figure 7



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things are blowing all over the place! [makes hurricane sound effects] . . . and then the chessboard things fall over. *Hey! This is sort of yucky.* The juice spills. He flies away. He tries to grab on to something. He flies across the way on a goose . . . And then he sees fish. He's dreaming. And then, he wakes up.
(emphasis ours)

Again, Tim moved in and out of the frame of the story by including his opinion in the midst of relaying the story line. He used both formal and informal rituals in order to make sense of the text and to share his story. Also, Tim's language reflected storybook reading. Framing the action of the story with introductions such as, "As he comes back out with his friends . . . " is reminiscent of the type of language register used in many children's books. He also incorporated other elements of story language into the telling of his stories, as exemplified by his description of the animals in *Noah's Ark* as "marching in two-by-two."

Laura's readings also showed evidence of this register in many of her stories, including her version of *Free Fall*:

I'm gonna read a book called *Free Fall*. Tim was asleep. He had been reading. A page flew out of his book. He was dreaming. He was with checkers. He saw a king. The map was still there. These chess things were real. "Bigger than life!" Tim thought. Then he saw a checkers castle. "I like this game . . . I think I'll stay at the castle," thought Tim. But he went through anyway. He saw knights, and he saw all kinds of weird doves. He knocked over a knight and he saw all kinds of weird doves. "Oh well," thought Tim . . . .

Laura's use of language was reflective of past experiences with storybook reading. For example, she began one story with "Once upon a time . . . " and concluded it with "and they lived happily ever after." Like Arlee and Tim, Laura also used the conventions of story language. Her sense-making of the text was facilitated, in part, through the imposition of a traditional story structure.

For each of the children, the invitation to read these books acted as a sign. Their use of story language and rituals reveals both the denotations and the connotations that this signification carried for each of them (see Figure 7).

Sense-Making Through Active, Playful Behaviors

In recent years, many researchers have articulated the connection between literacy and play (e.g., Campbell, 1998; Christie, 1991; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). Many children approach literate activities in unconventional ways, developing literacy processes and sense-making strategies that are more playful and less verbocentric (Fueyo, 1991). Children spontaneously respond to certain texts in playful manners (Hade, 1991). Arlee, Tim, and Laura each engaged in different forms of play-like behavior. For Arlee, the storybook reading experience was entwined with his play. On two occasions, he left the text in order to move about the room and play with different objects. Upon returning to the text, Arlee continued to play with a small string of beads, wrapping them around his hand and frequently putting them on and taking them off again, as he read his story. When asked to set the beads aside, he did so willingly, but then sat silently, staring at the page. When the beads were returned to him, he smiled and began reading the text again. In Arlee's mind, reading and play went together naturally. Although the researchers initially believed the beads distracted Arlee from his reading, the opposite seemed to be true. Removing the beads from the situation distracted Arlee more and seemed to hamper his ability (or at least his willingness) to make sense of the text.

Tim playfully responded when sharing his stories. He used many playful body movements and hand gestures in order to describe different scenes. Verbally, he used voice intonation, repetition, and sound effects in playful ways. Laura also incorporated these same types of playful behaviors into her storytelling, but not to the same

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extent that Tim did. Interestingly, Tim and Laura's collaborative reading contained more examples of elaborate gesturing, active movement, sound effects, and different uses of voice intonation than either used in their individual stories.

Furthermore, play seemed to beget play. For example, when Tim included a sound effect in the reading of one page, Laura would include a louder sound effect when reading the next. Likewise, when Laura made an elaborate hand gesture when reading one page, Tim made a more elaborate one when reading the next. Laura, included another characteristic of verbal play, the use of diminutives, in the collaborative stories. For example, she described Bang's Strawberry Snatcher as "little elfie" and described the action in Shirley Hughes's *Up and Up* in terms of "loopedy-loops and curly-q's." She did not include these types of linguistic diminutives in her individual readings. Play may not be the central feature of these readings, but it is an important element. It seems that playful behaviors during the reading of these stories add a different layer to the text.

Conclusions

Clearly, authentic transactions with wordless books are possible. The storytellers in this study applied their experiences—with both the word and the world—to the wordless texts that they explored. Their narratives were rich with references to the written word, visual images, and other experience-based texts that made up their everyday lives.

The findings of this study are in keeping with other research that has investigated children's readings of picture books. Such work has pointed to the impact of intertextuality (Golden & Gerber, 1990; Meek, 1988; Stephens, 1990), linked literacy with play (Fueyo, 1991; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993), and shown that "children's emergent readings of familiar picture books reveal their knowledge of the functions of books, of book-handling procedures, and of the distinctive language of books" (Elster, 1998, p. 43). This study differs, however, because the texts read by the participants were limited to the genre of wordless picture books. The findings indicate children rely on many of the same strategies for reading wordless, visual texts, as they do when reading texts that offer a combination of print and visual texts: They rely on cues, engage in self-talk, and make informed hypotheses when "reading" the story line that is set before them. Furthermore, the impact, effects, and responses associated with children's transactions with books are not necessarily dominated by the printed text. Young readers become actively involved in their readings of wordless texts; they interpret signs, construct meaning, and offer responses in ways similar to those that might accompany the reading of traditional storybooks.

These findings challenge the popular notion that wordless picture books are necessarily "simple" texts, appropriate only for a narrow audience of very young children. Rather, it appears that wordless books have the potential to invite readers of a variety of levels to transact with these visual texts and engage in active story construction by mediating the complex layers of intertextual material that lie both within and beyond the pages of the book. In practical terms, this means that readers of a wide range of ages and levels may benefit from transacting with wordless texts. Furthermore, children's readings of these texts may provide a glimpse into their understanding of literacy-related activities, as well as insights into the sense-making processes they use when navigating texts. Therefore, teachers and parents may wish to consider making room for reading and discussing wordless picture books within the curriculum.

In this study, Laura, Tim, and Arlee made sense of wordless books by bringing their lives together with the text, and then reading to understand as a cohesive whole (Meek, 1988; Pinsent, 1997; Schwarcz, 1982). These children adeptly made sense out of the signs encoded in the illustrations and made connections with other texts, both inside and outside of the books. Essentially, they read both inside the picture and

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outside the frame. By viewing their readings through the lens of semiotic theory, it is possible to gain a fresh glimpse of the active role that young readers play in the literacy transaction process, and to develop a vision for incorporating the reading and discussion of wordless texts in meaningful ways within the early literacy curriculum.

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