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All the World



Just this morning, I sat with my three-year-old daughter, Tavia, and read aloud Liz Garton Scanlon's *All the World*. Tavia stood next to me on the couch, her toes tucked under my leg and her arm around my neck. As I read, Tavia pointed out familiar objects in the illustrations. "There's a shell," she said. "There's a truck. There's corn. I love corn." We went on like this, slow and quiet, Tavia recognizing both beloved words and their corresponding illustrations, until we got to a double spread toward the end of the book. "All the world is you and me," I read (32-33). Tavia stopped pointing at the book. "You?" she asked, pulling her hand out from under my neck and touching my face. "Yes," I said. "Me?" she said, pointing to herself. "Yes," I said again. She paused for a moment, and then, "Us?" she asked finally. "Yes." And then Tavia began to flip back through the pages of the book, her toes wiggling under my leg as she saw herself in the story. "I'm a cousin," she said. "I'm cold. I'm hot." And then she flapped her arms like they were wings. "I'm a bird." A bird.



The Vibrant Triangle: The Relationship between the Picture Book, the Adult Reader, and the Child Listener

by TAMARA SMITH



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Tavia and I and the picture book engaged together in a read-aloud experience, and through that process Tavia began to identify objects in her world, herself in the world, and the way the two are connected. Her imagination was fired up too—she was a bird after all!

I call this the “Vibrant Triangle”: this experience that unfolds between the picture book, the child listener, and the adult reader. I believe picture books are a unique form of literature. They are words on a page, like a novel, or a poem. They are also art, like a painting or a sculpture. However they are also one more thing—they are *utteratures*. Sheree Fitch—Canadian children’s book writer and poet—coined this word, which she defines as “all literature that is dependent on the human voice and a community of listeners to have its life” (qtd. in Lynes 29). These three elements, when woven together with a child and an adult, create the Vibrant Triangle.

Like its sister art form, oral storytelling, picture books are only fully realized in the presence of three requisite components—the story, the storyteller and the listener. In oral storytelling, the act of receiving the story often involves learning a lesson, which teaches a child a moral: something critical to the understanding of what is expected in life. Sheree Fitch takes this process a step inward. Her idea is that the “voiced, poetic language [of picture books] is participatory, communal and expressive of the child’s *rite of discovery of his or her body*” (30). “Within any one child dwells a ‘chorus.’ That chorus of five voices contains a range of ideas and emotions” (“The Sweet Chorus” 53). The chorus—which Fitch defines as *I do, I think, I feel, I belong, I create*—leads directly to *I am*. It represents the different pieces that make up the whole child.

When Fitch speaks about books that nurture a child’s rite of discovery of her body, she refers to those that can communicate with each of these voices. *All the World* is one such book. From its first pages, Tavia began to find her version of Fitch’s voices. She first connected with activities she *does*: “A moat to dig” and “a shell to keep” (Scanlon 2-3.) She then *thought* about times she had been at the beach. She articulated her memories of how she *felt* there. She drew parallels from

these personal beach memories back to the text and illustrations on the page and, in doing so, felt a sense of *belonging* or connecting back to the world of the book. This entire process was one in which Tavia was *creating* her sense of self. And this, in turn, led her to better understand *who she is*.

But not all picture books are equally capable of creating this multi-sensory experience, and so, after careful study, I have identified six characteristics that I believe are integral to the Vibrant Triangle model:

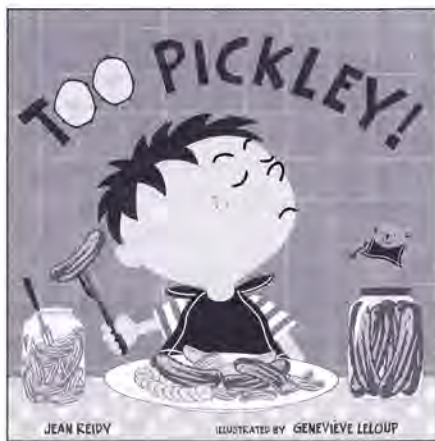
1. Language drives the story (such as repetition, rhythm, rhyme, call and response.)
2. There is limited text on the page (which helps to pace the reading.)
3. The story extends beyond the page (which leaves the child wanting/creating more.)
4. The story inspires thinking about and engaging with the world (because of good and rich storytelling.)
5. During the reading, space and time is left (for the child to insert herself and her imagination into the story)
6. There is a pure collaboration between text and illustration (so that the two create a whole.)



Although they are separate characteristics, picture books that resonate the most powerfully weave them all together.

A language-rich story creates a sensory experience for the listening child. The child listening to the story explores new places, new experiences and new kinds of people, through their smells and sounds and sights. Audrey Vernick's *Is Your Buffalo Ready for Kindergarten?* is a perfect example of this. The story's call and response format clearly and warmly invites children to reflect and interact with it. When Tavia's teacher reads the opening page to her pre-school playgroup, "Some people say kindergarten is no place for a buffalo. How crazy is that?" (2), she can barely finish the question before the group responds with an enthusiastic, "Yeah! That's crazy! That's silly! He belongs!" And subsequent questions in the text, such as "Is he feeling shy?" (3) and "Is he worried about being the only one who's not good with scissors?" (5) provide an opportunity for the children to chat about what they do when they are afraid.

Jean Reidy's *Too Pickley!* is another brilliant example of the Vibrant Triangle characteristics at work. With only two words on a page, Reidy creates simple rhymes and inventive sensory vocabulary such as, "Too crunchy, Too licky, Too stringy, Too sticky," (11-13) which are fun to read aloud and easy for a child to remember, so that by the second or third reading Tavia was chiming in. And, as is true in my house, the book prompts useful discussions about eating choices, and it even introduced Tavia to new foods.



Taking the time to sit with a child and read aloud a Vibrant Triangle picture book removes her and the adult reader momentarily from their everyday lives, and gives them a break from their immediate problems or pleasures. However they are still with the child, and so she will unconsciously incorporate them into the read-aloud experience. The result is deeply satisfying; it is both self-contained *and* connected to the child's life. Tavia, for instance, was completely engaged with the process of reading *All the World* and, at the same time, she made all of the connections to her own life that I have mentioned. The story is divided into locations and activities that are found in a community—playing at the beach, shopping and socializing at a farmer's market, eating dinner at a diner—and Tavia was inspired to imagine other similar community spaces.

The intersection of imaginary elements and real sensory experiences offers the child a safe and full way to participate in crises and celebrations, dilemmas, and resolutions. It expands a child's capacity for empathy and understanding. Tavia heard me read *All the World's* "slip, trip, stumble fall/tip the bucket, spill it all" (18) while she studied the full spread illustration of children caught in the rain—one slipping in her roller skates, one tipping his bucket of stones, one crying in his father's arms—and she felt the experiences of those children and was able to articulate those feelings to me. As Marie Tatar states, "For the child reading, the threshold between reality and fantasy can mysteriously vanish... [reading] flips a switch so that the child returns to the real world with renewed curiosity...not just about the world of fiction but also about the world they inhabit" (137.) As Jean Reidy says, children access a higher intelligence when they make connections between the fiction world and real world.

The last two characteristics are slightly different from the others, in that they are not about text on the page but are about, instead, the intentional spaces that are created and what happens within those spaces. Leaving *space and time* for the child within the text and illustrations is often found in "quiet" picture books. They have, as Jean Reidy says, quiet themes ("Personal Communication") and they are, as Liz Garton

Scanlon explains, not exclusively character/action centered, but are at least as much image/language centered. Their stories are just as much about the rhythms of their particular words and the spaces left between them as it is about their plots (“personal communication”).

If there is space for children inside the books, then there is also a space for the books inside the children. On pages 2-4, *All the World* reads: “A moat to dig/a shell to keep/all the world is wide and deep.” The illustrations first show close-ups of a brother and sister playing at the beach and then a double spread panned-back view of the ocean-side—the wide ocean and its waves, a dramatic cliff coastline, and a road heading into town. The text is quiet and the illustrations are still. But as

the Vibrant Triangle gets activated—when Tavia snuggles into me on the couch and I read—Tavia begins to point and imagine, shout and wiggle, dance and sing and hope and dream. She is anything *but* quiet.

Finally, a Vibrant Triangle picture book must be a collaboration—in the purest form of the word—between the words and the illustrations. As Mo Willems said, “It is only right when both words and image need each other to make any sense” (12). Ultimately, the Vibrant Triangle experience is a collaboration between them all—the book (with its glorious text and illustrations) the child listening, and the adult reading.

When Tavia had her epiphany while we were reading *All the World*, when she immediately flipped the pages backward and asked me to re-read, she was making *new meaning* from the text. The words on the page stayed the same, of course, but their meanings changed. For example, the line, “All the world is cold and hot” (25) became a personal realization that sometimes Tavia was hot and

sometimes she was cold. This falls into Louise Rosenblatt’s reader response theory, which suggests that it is only when the reader enters the scene and makes meaning from the words running across the page that the book is fully realized. In essence, the book is not a finished piece of literature until it is read.

More recent theories about affect and reading as an embodied experience posit the same kind of idea. These theories suggest that reading is a sensual, intimate experience. Just as the child snuggles up tight to the adult—Tavia’s toes under my leg and her arm around my neck—the child also, in essence, snuggles up close to the book. She lets the words touch her, the rhythms of the words flow into her like music. It is an experience that places both the body and the brain on equal ground. It is reading without judgment. Just as I described quiet books, affect does not rely solely on meaning here, but instead on the way a text—in both its form and content—simply and profoundly moves the reader (Littau 143-44). Another way to look at embodied reading is to take its meaning quite literally—examining the way that specific conditions surrounding the reading experience affect the response to it (Waller).



Just like the reader response theory, the theories of affect and reading as an embodied experience fit perfectly within the Vibrant Triangle experience. When I first read, “Nanas, papas, cousins, kin/Piano, harp, and violin” (Scanlon 30–31), Tavia intuitively felt a kinship to the words because of their sounds. She liked hearing them. She liked repeating them. She “[heard] before comprehension” (Littau 143), and because we were snuggled together on the soft couch, perhaps she felt a security that allowed her to be curious. She initiated a conversation about nanas and papas and cousins. And then when she asked me to re-read the book, she gleaned more meaning. She named her grandmothers, her father, and her cousins. She felt something new and made new discoveries.

Tavia’s experience of listening to the story completed a process. Words and rhythms, repetition and page turns, pictures and hues, characters as they struggle and succeed—these are all palpable links between the picture book, the child listener, and the adult reader.

Because picture books are read again and again—often a dozen times during the course of a few minutes—the process of gleaning and applying meaning is easy to see. Repeated exposure to both the sound and sight of words, and connecting the words on the page to tangible objects, ideas, and emotions—to things that matter to the child—make a huge difference in the way a child develops literacy. Before our eyes, the child safely snuggled in our laps is learning, changing, and growing. She is tapping into her chorus of voices. She is discovering herself. So there is real merit in saying *yes, yes, yes* when a child asks for the same picture book again and again and again.

We all carry the picture books from our own childhoods with us. We remember them; we draw on them; we quote them. But there is more to it than that. When a Vibrant Triangle picture book is read aloud, that dynamic experience has the real potential to slip through a child’s skin and into her body. It nestles deep, sprouts wings and begins to grow. It is the sense of self a child develops, and her sense of the world. It is a child’s sense of her place *in* that world.

Just this morning, a wiggling Tavia found herself in *All the World*.

“I’m a bird,” she said.

We are all birds. We are all every story we have heard and read and tucked away inside of us. These picture book read-aloud experiences are—all of them, over time—vital partners in helping us unfold our sense of possibility and our potential. They are our flock of winged things.

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La bambina che ascoltava gli alberi focuses on nature and, in particular, on the importance of being able to listen to its voice. The narrative tells about a child who is able to listen to and feel what trees say. She is well aware that trees have a voice and it is sometimes necessary to be silent in order to listen to them and understand what they want to tell us. Listening to these trees enables this child to receive their special gifts, whether they are fruits, branches or leaves. For instance, the magnolia gives her its beautiful flowers and leaves to be used as an eye mask to see the world through the eyes of a tree, and the beech tree helps the child to become a tree for a while. While she is tree, another child passes by her without noticing at all her presence. This once again underlines the importance of listening to nature and looking at it carefully in order to catch its secrets. The text is accompanied by starkly beautiful illustrations by Cristina Pieropan.

Melissa Garavini



Maria Loretta Giraldo

La bambina che ascoltava gli alberi
[The Girl Who Listened to the Trees]

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