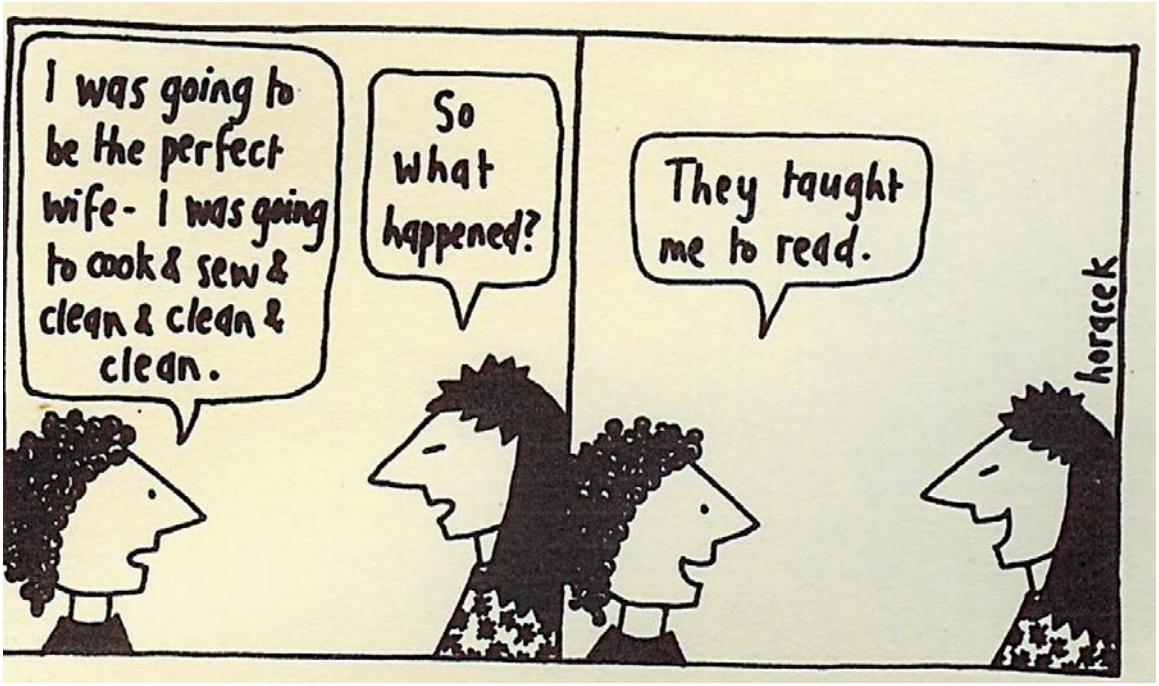

Fig.1 Judy Horacek, cartoon, Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to our Children will Change their Lives Forever, San Diego: Harvert Original-Harcourt Inc., 2001: 161.

As we twist our tongues around syllables
I try to explain to them
that poetry is everywhere
the wash of waves
the crackle of fire
that no it doesn't have to rhyme
but it must always have a beat
a finger-snap
a toe-tap
that to write one must see and taste and smell and hear and feel
and more than that, must feel the taste must smell the hear

they seem to understand…

Fitch, Sheree. "Grand LaPierre, Newfoundland" In This House are Many Women: and other poems. New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2004: 72.

THE VIBRANT TRIANGLE:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PICTURE BOOK, THE ADULT READER AND THE CHILD LISTENER

Luc, my five year old son, nestles into me as we sit on the floor. I have a picture book on my lap. I begin to read. Just as important, Luc begins to listen. As I read aloud, he engages with the story—its words and sounds, pace and rhythms, colors and shapes. He sits up. He laughs, he asks me questions, he repeats phrases from the story.

This thesis examines the dynamic relationship between the picture book, the adult reader and the child listener—a relationship which I have named the Vibrant Triangle. It explores picture books that are exemplary for containing recognizable characteristics that facilitate listener engagement. This thesis aims to define and explore those characteristics. While illustrations find occasional mention here, their vital role in the read-aloud process is worth extended study beyond the scope of this work. Here I am concerned with the commonalities between selected texts, and the ways that adult readers and child listeners collaborate with them.

The story I read to Luc becomes a *speakerly text*. And Luc becomes a *co-creator* of the whole story-reading experience.

What do I mean by this?

I. Theories Linking Texts and Readers

Michelle Pagni Stewart says in her article, "Emerging Literacy of (an)other kind: Speakerly Children's Picture Books":

> Through listening, children become participants in and often co-creators of the story, thus acquiring a skill as significant as that of the reader, a skill many children and adults take for granted by privileging the story and the teller over the listener. (42)

Complacency about listening skills is a modern American phenomenon. In many other cultures, Stewart states, oral traditions are alive and well, even honored. Oral traditions naturally elevate listening skills, and therefore the importance of both storyteller and listener. In particular, the listener's level of comprehension, specific interests, and line of questioning all contribute to the story that gets told. In these ways, Stewart says, the listener becomes an active participant.

Stewart goes on to say that cultures who value oral traditions often incorporate the characteristics of those traditions into their written works. She says, "…in some books the words and pictures replicate oral traditions, bridging the gap between oral and written texts, becoming what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies as speakerly texts" (42). In many picture books the illustrations *fill* gaps created by the text. However, in speakerly picture books, gaps created by the combination of text and illustrations remain *unfilled*. This structure leaves room for the reader—or listener—to be a part of the creative process.

In this thesis I will use Gates's term—*the speakerly text*—to mean the kind of text that can bridge the gap between oral storytelling traditions and the written word, specifically for child listeners.

I will also use the term *utterature,* a word coined by children's book author and poet, Sheree Fitch. Utterature encompasses "all literature that is dependent on the human voice and a community of listeners to have its life" (Lynes 29). Fitch believes that a vital component of children's literature is the notion of a community of listeners. Utterature is an apt description of much literature for young children, as it recognizes "the communal characteristics of orality, of a literature meant to be spoken out loud" (29).

This notion harks back to the tradition of oral storytelling, an art form that is fully realized only in the presence of three requisite components—the story, the storyteller and the listener. The listener is typically a child, and often the act of receiving the story is a sort of rite of passage, or a lesson. Most common are those stories that teach a child a moral lesson: something critical to the child's understanding of what is expected of her in her society.

Sheree Fitch takes this a step *inward.* Her idea is that [the] voiced, poetic language [of children's 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 voices contains a range of ideas and emotions" (Fitch, "The Sweet Chorus" 53). The chorus of five voices—which Fitch defines as *I do, I think, I feel, I belong, I create*—is comprised of the different pieces that make up the whole child. The pieces lead directly to *I am.*

When Fitch speaks about books that nurture a child's rite of discovery of his or her body, she speaks about books that can communicate with each of these voices. These books are organic in nature. Their voices embody the work. They offer "the feel of the feeling, the texture of emotion" (Fitch, "The Sweet Chorus" 51). Speakerly texts allow these voices expression and thus allow for the awakening of the voices in the child listener. A multi-sensory experience, reading a book aloud can awaken a child's body in its totality, thus awakening the child to his own self.

Louise Rosenblatt—educator, reading researcher, author and creator of the Reader Response Theory—offers up a similar idea: "We tend to 'feel ourselves into,' to empathize with, the painting of the tree that is swaying in the wind, until the successful artist will have somehow made us that very tree itself" (37). This echoes Fitch's notion of the rite of self-discovery of a child's body.

A book, with its letters and punctuation symbols running across its pages, is not a complete entity, according to Rosenblatt. Her Reader Response Theory states that it is not until the reader enters the scene and makes sense of those letters and punctuation that the meaning of the book is fully realized. In essence, the book is not a piece of literature until it is read.

Rosenblatt calls the experience of reading a piece of literature a *transaction* between the text itself and the reader. A transaction best describes the experience because it expresses reciprocity between the two entities. One is not more important than the other. One does not carry more weight than the other. They are of equal value and necessity.

The transaction model suggests that the text and the reader engage in a sort of circling spiral dance, as opposed to the notion that the text contains all of the meaning within it, and the reader's job is to extract that meaning. Of course, the text does not literally change from one moment to the next—the words on the page are forever printed there in a particular order and arranged in a particular way—but its meaning is *birthed and rebirthed* as the reader engages with the words on the page. She reads a section, gleans some meaning, applies that meaning to the next section, gleans more meaning, feels something new, re-applies meaning to the previous section, applies this new meaning to the next section that she reads…and so on and so on. It is a breathtaking and immediate *unfolding* of feeling and thought, much like the unfolding of wings. It is the *experience* between the text and the individual reader.

In her work, Rosenblatt does not refer to picture books or to the experience of reading them aloud to children. Yet the application of her Reader Response Theory to the Vibrant Triangle of book, reader, and listener is a natural one. Like the tradition of oral storytelling, Gates' idea of the speakerly text and Fitch's idea of utterature, Rosenblatt believes that the story in itself is not a complete creation. And while Rosenblatt only speaks of the transaction between the text and the reader, it is easy to extrapolate from her work to the three-way transaction among the text, the adult reader and the child listener.

So how exactly does the experience of reading a picture book aloud affect the child?

II. The Biological Foundation for Flexibility in Developmental Growth

In recent years, neuroscientists have proven what psychologists have long intuited—reading aloud to children actually influences the way their brains develop. Children are born with most of the brain cells, or neurons, that they will have for their lifetime. But these neurons are not yet connected with the complex networks—or synapses—that are needed for mature thought processes to happen. In the early years of children's lives, brain cells form these synapses very quickly.

Some of this process of connection is genetic and happens regardless of specific environmental stimulation. However, some of it relies on external experiences. When a parent or caregiver engages in a positive interaction with a child, synapses form. Specifically, reading aloud to a child is a powerful way to foster synapse growth. It helps to create new connections and also strengthens existing ones ("Making Connections"). In their early years of life, children form extra synapses. At around ten years of age, however, children begin to lose some of those connections. This is not a random process. Those connections that have been used repeatedly are strengthened, and are more likely to remain. Therefore, consistent reading aloud profoundly affects the child listener. It leaves the child more equipped to learn when the brain's pruning process begins.

Howard Gardner, author of *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, theorizes that human beings possess eight kinds of intelligences, and that we have the ability to nurture and expand all of them. As opposed to a more traditional view, which primarily takes only linguistic and logical/mathematical skills into account when defining a person's level of intelligence, the theory of multiple intelligences reaches out to many more levels and types of skills that a person may intrinsically

possess. Gardner's theory in effect echoes Sheree Fitch's chorus of voices—*I do, I feel, I belong, I create.*

The intelligences, briefly described in Thomas Armstrong's article "Multiple Intelligences: Seven Ways to Approach Curriculum," are:

TABLE ONE: HOWARD GARDNER'S EIGHT MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Linguistic	the intelligence of words
Logical/Mathematical	the intelligence of numbers and reasoning
Spatial	the intelligence of pictures and images
Musical	the intelligence of tone, rhythm, and timbre
Bodily/Kinesthetic	the intelligence of the whole body and hands
Interpersonal	the intelligence of social understanding
Intrapersonal	the intelligence of self-knowledge
Natural	the intelligence of recognizing/classifying artifacts

Source: Thomas Armstrong, "Multiple Intelligences: Seven Ways to Approach Curriculum," Educational Leadership Nov (1994): 26.

These are nonexclusive categories, as many, if not all, people have strengths in more than one. Even so, e*ach and every one* of these categories contains a valid and critical set of skills. And *each and every one* of these skill-sets can be taught and nurtured. They should be respected equally and recognized as intelligences. Similar to Fitch's beliefs about the child's rite of passage regarding self-discovery of his body, the theory of multiple intelligences taps into the *whole child*. Which picture books are most conducive to this kind of learning?

Stewart focuses on speakerly texts/picture books about cultures that honor oral traditions—Native American, Asian American and African American. But is it possible that many more picture books, across many more cultural lines, fit into the category of speakerly texts? And if so, what do these books have in common?

At first glance it might appear that all picture books have the potential to fit this category. Picture books are generally read aloud to a child. And because oral storytelling is an active bridge between the text and the child, the experience is immediate, dynamic and leaves room for the unexpected. The child may repeat words or ask questions. The child may act out some of the story. The child—the listener—plays an unmistakable role in the experience. Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that some picture books work more effectively than others to foster this kind of interaction around text between adult and child.

III. Four Characteristics of Utterature

I have identified four characteristics that I believe are integral to picture books deserving of the title *utterature*. And although they are separate characteristics, they build upon each other. Taken together they resonate most powerfully.

A. Spare and Purposeful Language Helps to Create Plot

In utterature, form is as vital as content. In the process of reading the picture book aloud, the child listener takes in the sounds of the words, and the immediacy of rhythm and pace, as they are spoken by the adult reader. The content of the picture book is therefore not enough. To simply retell a story, or summarize it, is to miss the point

entirely. The form of the picture book, as well as the content, is vital to the transactional experience. For it is from within the form that the content rises, and it is through the content that the form takes its shape. As Rosenblatt states: "…The formal relations in the literary work—the verse form, rhyme scheme, sentence structure, plot structure—or the other sensuous elements, such as the imagery, do not have a separable or even a clearly distinguishable effect" (45).

When Marcus Moore Moved In by Rebecca Bond is a good example of this kind of book. This story is about a boy who moves onto a new street. As his parents and the moving men unload furniture from the truck into his new apartment, Marcus assesses his new situation. At first he feels lonely. There are no other people on the street. Then he sees a lively girl walk by. She is full of sound and rhythm and life. She stomps her feet on the concrete sidewalk. She bangs a metal bucket like a drum. She rides her bicycle and rings her bell. After Marcus and the girl, Katherine, befriend each other, the street becomes full of people and possibility.

Listen to the opening of Marcus's story:

> At 44 MacDougal Street when Marcus Moore moved in,
>
> "I'm here!" said Marcus Moore,
>
> But there was no one there. (*page turn*)
>
> There was no one coming up the street.
>
> There was no one coming down. (*page turn*)
>
> There were only beds and boxes.
>
> There were only rolls of rugs. (*page turn*)
>
> There was only early morning,

> And there was only him,
>
> At 44 MacDougal Street when Marcus Moore moved in. (3-9)

Rebecca Bond's text is fluid and easy to read. Hearing it is like hearing a song—the ear does not have to do much work and, instead, easily welcomes words that are already organized by sound and rhythm and repetition.

The effect of this is that the child can immediately begin to anticipate what will come next. For example, after hearing *there were only beds and boxes. There were only rolls of…* the child can guess that the next word will be *rugs*, might in fact make that guess out loud. It is easy to remember the word *rugs*—because of the alliteration and rhythm—and because of that, text prediction is high, inviting the listening child's immediate participation.

Uri Shulevitz states:

> All the elements in a picture book—words and pictures, the visible and the invisible, content and form—must work together toward a common goal. How you say something…is as important as what you say. (60)

I would go a bit further and assert that how you say something plays a vital role in creating what is said. It is impossible to understand plot—to turn it over and over in your mind, to feel it, to connect with it—if you cannot get to it. Language allows access. It facilitates a visceral connection to story.

This Place in the Snow by Rebecca Bond is a picture book with a simple plot. A snowstorm brings a tremendous amount of snow one night. After a plow pushes the snow into a giant pile, a community of children wakes up and creates their own kingdom from the mound of snow. This is a story that is certainly accessible to children who live in

rural, snowy environments. They have seen snow; they have played in snow; they can relate to this plot. But how do they—and other children, for that matter, who have to imagine what snow is like—*feel* the experience of building their own kingdom out of a snow pile? How are the senses of these child readers (or listeners) engaged by the story as it is being read?

I believe it is through the role of language in forging story.

Rebecca Bond begins *This Place in the Snow* with one sentence on a double spread. "A silent snow fell all night long" (5). The alliteration of *silent* and *snow* evokes the hushed sound of snow falling. The brevity of the sentence allows for a moment of silence. In this pause the child listening to the story can look at the illustration—swirling snow piling high through the night—which fills the double spread. Right from the start, we feel the quiet power of the event.

The next two pages follow with, "It lay like lace along the trees. It hatted the houses. It capsuled the cars in thick and sticky white" (6-7). The alliteration of *lay like lace*, *hatted* and *houses*, and *capsuled* and *cars* suggests a smooth and rhythmic process, a magical event unfolding. Again, the shortness of the sentences allows for silence, or breaths, to take in the magnitude of the snowstorm. In the last sentence, new sounds are introduced: *thick* and *sticky*. The sounds of these words—the short *i* and the sharp *ck* sounds in the middle of the words—help define their meanings. The words don't linger in the reader's mouth, so the child listening understands, viscerally, that the snow is sticking to the ground and piling high. This kind of language and rhythm continues on the next two pages as the plow appears.

The community of children is awakened by the sound of the plow and we hear the first bit of dialogue: "And quiet turned noisy. And noisy turned loud with strings of cries and shrieks and shouts—'The plow!' 'The plow!' 'The plow!'" (11).

There is only one piece of information in this dialogue—that the children have heard the plow. Because it is repeated three times, the child listening to the story can focus on this plow, and understand that it is vital to these children.

Dialogue, again, conveys content later in the story. After the snowplow driver gives the children a wave, they rush to the top of the snow mound to survey their material and talk about what they will build:

> And then there came much talking and planning about it.
>
> "Like this!" someone said.
>
> "Or maybe like that."
>
> "And could we—"
>
> "And we could—"
>
> "And let's too—"
>
> "Do THAT!"
>
> They brightly, they greatly, agreed (19.)

Through the use of partial sentences and repetition of certain words and rhythm, the frenetic energy of the children is *felt* by the child listening to the story.

Through consistent and deliberate use of alliteration, sentence length, assonance, and rhythm, Bond creates a door to the plot, as well as a door to the sensory details of the plot, through her use of language.

Finally, on the last page of the story, the children go back out into the night, to stand atop their kingdom one more time. From their point of view—way up high on their amazing creation—they look up at the sky and down at the ground and all around their community. They look at "this place, full of grace, in the snow" (40).

They reflect on all of this from their place in the snow, and the child listening to the story has time to reflect on it too.

One last story that uses spare and purposeful language to help create plot is *Show Way* by Jacqueline Woodson. A Show Way is a quilt made of sewn squares that carry hidden meanings within their images. Created by mothers and daughters who were slaves in the South, hung up and studied in the dark cover of night, they were guides for slaves who escaped from plantations to search for freedom in the North.

Woodson's book is autobiographical in the sense of weaving within itself the narrative of her own family history. It is about a girl named Soonie, and the line of women in her family who came before her and after her. It is a quilt of a story—itself a show way. The women within it are each a square—separate and unique and full of meaning—and sewn together they create a rich and complex image of the brave and creative women in this one family. The book weaves its way from one woman's story to the next, growing and changing with each, much like a journey on an open and promising road. Right from the start, *Show Way* uses form to mirror content.

The story opens with Soonie's great-grandma being sold to a plantation at seven-years old. She is taken from her mother and father in Virginia to her new home in South Carolina. She takes only some muslin, two needles and bright red thread. There she is raised by a woman called Big Mama who teaches her to sew:

> At night, Big Mama told the children stories.
> Stories she'd tell in a whisper about
> children growing up and getting themselves free.
> And the children leaned in.
> And listened real hard.
> And in the daytime when there was some
> few minutes for a slave to rest a bit,
> Big Mama taught Soonie's great grandma to sew
> colored thread into stars and moons and roads
> that slave children grew up and followed
> late in the night, a piece of quilt and
> the true moon leading them. (4-7)

The language here is rhythmic. The words are short—two syllables at the most—and flow easily. The first sentence ends with the word *stories.* The second sentence begins with the same word: *Stories*. The repetition of this word, separated by the pause induced by the period, creates a lingering moment. It creates a short overlap—a suspension in time—before moving ahead. All of this creates a magical effect, the language echoing the rhythm of a needle pushing in and pulling out of a piece of fabric.

The next three sentences begin with the same word—*And*. With similar effect, they loop back to one another, while at the same time moving the story forward. Phrase choices are also poignant here. Woodson writes: "And in the daytime when there was some few minutes for a slave to rest a bit..." She also writes: "Big Mama taught Soonie's great grandma to sew colored thread into stars and moons and roads that slave children

grew up and followed…" Both "some few minutes" and "that slave children grew up and followed" stand out. They are unusual, or non-standard, phrase structures. They are also incredibly comfortable on the tongue, perhaps originating in the rhythms of spoken language.

The story journeys forward with the birth of Soonie's grandmother. "Had herself a baby girl and named that child Mathis May. Loved that baby up so. Yes, she loved that baby up" (9). The rhythm conveys the love passed down from mother to daughter. Love is lyrical. And love, most definitely, delights in repetition. Mathis May, like her mother, learns to sew and learns to create show ways. In 1863—the year of the emancipation of the slaves—she has a baby and Soonie's mother is born. Then Soonie is born. In each scene where a new baby girl is born, Woodson repeats her love refrain: "Loved that baby up so. Loved that baby up." It becomes a thread that weaves its way from beginning to end within this story.

Then Soonie has a baby named Georgiana. And Georgiana loves to read. *She loves to read*. While the love refrain remains constant, the sewing of quilts begins to transform into the reading of books. Magical. And then something else magical happens. The child listening to *Show Way* being read aloud immediately connects to Georgiana. She is "reading" just like Georgiana is reading. Just as Rosenblatt says, a transaction is truly occurring. For the child listener unconsciously and intuitively goes back through the text and connects with the other girls—Soonie and Soonie's mother and grandma and great-grandma. She connects with them because they are all written with the same rhythms, the same word and phrase choices as Georgiana's section of the story. She makes the connection that the sewing of quilts is the same as the reading of books.

They are both creative and journeying acts. The child listener can make the connection in reverse: that the reading of books is the same as building a house, or baking a cake or planting a tree. They are all active and creative and take us into the future.

This notion is echoed in Sheree Fitch's work and experience and beliefs.

Fitch has participated in *Somebody's Daughter*, a literacy program based in Iglurjuakuluit, Nunavut, in the Canadian Arctic. During the day, the group of Inuit women participants sew, reclaiming, as Fitch says, "the traditional Inuit sewing skills of their foremothers" ("Up in the Tree"). At night, they put down their sewing and work on their literacy skills. They tell their stories. They write their stories. They share their stories. Sewing and storytelling. Indeed, the two are one and the same. Fitch writes:

> If or when the world crashes, satellites go out, we might all remember such basics and rely on the storyteller's very human voice. We might once again take sinew from whale, rinse it in salt, stretch it across a board and then wait until it dries in the sun, spun gold, transformed into thread. Thread with which we sew things together, or back together, stitch by stitch. ("Up in the Tree")

The storyteller's very human voice is the mother of speakerly picture book texts. The mother of utterature. And so the act of creation—be it sewing or whatever else it might be—is the mother of these texts too.

In *Show Way*, Georgiana has twin daughters. One of them has a baby girl. This is none other than Jacqueline Woodson herself. And Woodson, finally, has her own baby girl named Toshi. And she writes in the final words of this story:

> And I grew up,

tall and straight-boned,

writing every day.

And the words became books

that told the stories of

many people's Show Ways…

So some mornings, I start all over.

Holding tight to little Toshi,

I whisper a story that came before her…

Now, Soonie was your great-great-grandma.

And when Soonie's great-grandma was seven…" (36-40)

From Soonie—backwards through her mother and various grandmothers, and forwards through her daughter and her daughter's daughter and so on—the thread of creating weaves its way through *Show Way* and also through the child listening to the story. Beginning with Soonie's great-grandma who learns to quilt, the child listening to *Show Way* feels the rhythm of this craft—fingers gripping a metal needle, the tiny in and out movements of the needle piercing the rough, muslin fabric. Of course she isn't literally feeling what it is like to sew. But she is internalizing the *rhythm* of sewing, which is, perhaps, to say that she is internalizing the rhythm of *creating*—encompassing sewing, story telling, story writing, and journeying down a road toward freedom.

Sensory engagement with a story—based on spare and purposeful prose—*as it is being read* allows for a deep connection with the plot and meaning of that story. This is how the Vibrant Triangle can change a child.

B. Limited Text On a Page Helps to Create Emotional Experience

The number of words on a page can enhance the emotional resonance of a story. This is a natural extension of language helping to create plot. Rebecca Bond's *When Marcus Moore Moved In* uses this technique quite effectively. At the beginning of the story, Marcus is lonely. The few words on each page create a natural pause with each page turn. The slower pace—the pauses—reflect his loneliness in the sound of story being told.

And then Marcus meets Katherine and they begin to play together. We find a whopping nineteen words on this spread:

> They went *ringle! Jingle! Jangle!*
>
> And *ker-UNCH! Ker-UNCH! Ker-UNCH!*
>
> They went *klomp! Ka-LOMP! Ka-LOMPING!*
>
> They went *BOOM-BA-DEE! BOOM-DA-DEE! BOOM!* (*page turn*)
>
> (21-22)

This page is filled with words—joyful, crunchy words—that do not *describe* the play between Marcus and Katherine. Instead, they are the play itself. This choice to use many lively words allows the change in emotion to come clearly through. Marcus no longer feels lonely. He feels connected to this street. He feels, finally, at home. This is created, in part, by Rebecca Bond's choice to have many more words on the page, which quickens and heightens the pace of the story.

Mem Fox uses the same technique in her picture book *Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild!* This is a story about Harriet, a mischievous girl, who repeatedly gets herself into messes. It is also about her mother, who copes with having such a challenging daughter.

The story is built on a structure of repetition. Over the course of one day, Harriet has mishap after mishap. At first her mother remains calm. For example, after Harriet knocks over her glass of juice in the morning, the text reads: "Her mother didn't like to yell, so instead she said, 'Harriet, my *darling* child.' 'I'm sorry,' said Harriet, and she was" (5).

The text is spare. Harriet and her mother only speak a few words to one another. This creates a familiarity between the two, which the child listening to the story clearly feels. He knows—through this minimal exchange—that this kind of interaction happens between Harriet and her mother all the time. This sparseness also creates a sense of suspense, especially because the very last line on the page is the apology from Harriet. What will happen next?

Harriet gets herself into another mess, of course. She spills jam all over herself during snack time. After this occurs, the text reads: "Her mother didn't like to yell, so instead she said, 'Harriet, my *darling* child. Harriet, you'll drive me wild.' 'I'm sorry,' said Harriet, and she was" (9). Fox makes a strong choice here. She has increased the text—specifically what the mother says to Harriet—ever so slightly. The additional words, and the additional time it takes for the adult reader to speak those words, add tension to the story. And when Harriet says the exact same thing in response to this new and slightly longer text, the suspense is amplified. Might she really dare to do something else?

This structure is maintained until the climax of the story. Harriet continues to get herself into messes and her mother continues to talk to her without yelling, always adding

one more rhyming phrase to her line of dialogue. And Harriet continues to offer her one, steady response—*I'm sorry*. The suspense builds and builds and builds.

Finally: "…when Harriet was meant to be napping, she ripped open a pillow, just like that. A thousand feathers flew in every direction" (18-19). The page turns. Then the text reads simply: "There was a terrible silence" (20). With this page turn and then the one sentence that follows, Fox brings that waiting and wondering to its ultimate height. *Uh oh* thinks Harriet, *What is going to happen now? Uh oh*, thinks the child listening to the story, *What is going to happen now?* We access and feel Harriet's emotional experience through Fox's use of the page turn, pace, and sparseness of language.

The page turns again. "Then Harriet's mother began to yell. She yelled and yelled and yelled" (22). This is the pay-off. The suspense, like a balloon that has been filling slowly, slowly, now bursts. Harriet's mother bursts too. Using only two sentences, Fox achieves both a sense of noise and a sense of quiet. It is an amazing read-aloud moment. The sound of Harriet's mother yelling is tangible. Afterwards, there is a silence, and a pause, naturally built in before turning the page. Then the page turns. Harriet apologizes and her mother apologizes and they find a way to connect and laugh and clean up the mess together.

None of this is by accident. Mem Fox is a highly respected literacy expert as well as children's book author. She has done much work to understand and teach literacy, and specifically to promote the awareness of the important intersection of literacy and reading aloud. As we shall see, she believes that literacy is created, in large part, by the rhythms, rhymes and number of words on a page, as well as the emotional experience of the story.

Martin Waddell also uses this technique effectively in his picture book *Owl Babies*. In this story, three baby owls wait for their mother to come back to them. It is night and they are scared. The story's rhythm is built on the dialogue that they exchange with one another. They explore their fears, their ideas, their desires, and they work together to find a way to feel safe while they wait. The story is a powerful externalization of the deep emotions all children have about being left alone.

Many pages of Waddell's book consist of dialogue triplets. For example: "One night [the owl babies] woke up and their Owl Mother was GONE. 'Where's Mommy?' asked Sarah. 'Oh my goodness!' said Percy. 'I want my mommy!' said Bill" (4). Read aloud, the cacophony of the trio of voices, along with the number of words on the page, create a sense of urgency. Sarah and Percy and Bill miss their mother, this is clear. They do not know what to do without her. This is clear too. The child listening to the story experiences the baby owls' emotions. This is achieved, at least in part, because the dialogue is grouped together in triplets just as the owls are grouped in the story.
On page sixteen we find more of the same: "'Suppose she got lost,' said Sarah. 'Or a fox got her!' said Percy. 'I want my mommy!' said Bill. And the baby owls closed their eyes and wished their Owl Mother would come."

From this point on, the story's structure changes. After the page turn, there is one short line of text: "AND SHE CAME" (18). By altering the familiar and expected pace and rhythm, Waddell creates—all at once—a new emotional state. Owl Mother is home! The child listener feels the near-ecstasy of relief flood his own body. Using only three words on this page allows Owl Mother's soaring return to both come as a wonderful surprise and have time to sink in. The child listener experiences all of this just a few

moments before we see Sarah, Percy and Bill feeling the exact same thing. On page twenty-two we see: "'Mommy!' they cried, and they flapped and they danced, and they bounced up and down on their branch." Again, the structure changes as the owl babies speak together for the first and only time in the text. The dialogue is shorter than it has been previously, creating a new effect; it shows—and shares—the unified joy that Sarah and Percy and Bill feel upon their mother's return.

All three of these picture books *When Marcus Moore Moved In, Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild!* and *Owl Babies* use carefully limited text on the page to help create the emotional experience of the story.

C. Using Narrative Structure to Extend the Story Beyond Itself

Another characteristic of speakerly texts is that they easily extend off the page. They invite the child listening to the story to bring that story into her own life. Once the child has internalized the rhythms and sounds of the words; once she has the experience of the story—its plot, its characters and its environment—buzzing within her, it is an effortless next step to take that story into her life. To allow this, the story must end, not with a tidy and full wrap up, but instead by leaving open the possibility for more. And this possibility can take a few different forms. The story can end with a question, or it can end with a new mystery unfolding. It can end with an obvious next chapter, or it can set up a pattern that is easily continued once the book is closed.

More More More by Vera B. Williams is a good example of the narrative structure of the picture book extending the story beyond itself. The book is like a song.

It is full of rhythm and repetition and lyric-like word choices. Indeed, it has three movements of a song built right into it. This is the first movement, titled *Little Guy*:

> This is Little Guy.
>
> Little Guy runs away so fast
>
> Little Guy's daddy has to run like anything
>
> Just to catch that baby up.
>
> But Little Guy's daddy catches that baby up all right.
>
> He throws that baby high
>
> and swings that baby all around.
>
> "Oh, you're a great little guy," Little Guy's daddy sings to Little Guy.
>
> "Just look at you
>
> with your perfect belly button
>
> right in the middle
>
> right in the middle
>
> right in the middle
>
> of your fat little belly.
>
> Then Little Guy's daddy brings that baby right up close
>
> and gives that little guy's belly
>
> a kiss right in the middle of the belly button.
>
> "More," laughs Little Guy.
>
> "More. More. More." (1-10)

The playful actions depicted in the text, as well as the repetition of phrases, make this story much like a sing-along. Joining in is easy and fun. The other two movements of

the song are set up just like the first, but with different casts of characters. In the second movement, the grandmother chases Little Pumpkin, and in the last movement, the mother cradles Little Bird. And they are just as fluid and fun.

More! More! More! For the child listening to this story, this refrain comes to mean both *Let's read more of this story!* and *Let's CREATE more of this story!* It invites, and even encourages, the adult reader and the child listener to create their own personal verse to the song. The established pattern would be easy to continue.

Another example of the picture book that goes beyond the page is Margaret Wise Brown's *Bumble Bugs and Elephants*. This spare and rhythmic picture book sets up a pattern, much like *More More More*. Here, though, the repetition comes from exploring the contrast between large and small. It begins: "Once upon a time there was a great big bumble bug and a tiny little bumble bug, and there was a great big butterfly and a little tiny butterfly…" (1-2). This pattern continues throughout the book, comparing various sized animals.

Finally, at the end of the story, Wise Brown asks the child directly "What do you know that is great big? What do you know that is tiny little?" (17-20). The impact of hearing these two questions after hearing a series of sentences about great big and tiny little animals is immediate and strong. The child, already familiar now with the comparison, is ready to jump in and contribute to the story. He can conjure up some of the large and small things in his life and offer them as vital additions to the story. He lifts the paradigm of the story off the page and places it over the details of his life.

Leonard Marcus says in *Awakening the Moon*: "*Bumble Bugs and Elephants* was not so much a story as a game patterned on an emotional reality of early childhood, a

game that the very young might extend indefinitely by inventing big-little pairs of their own. Here was a book that did not end except in the reader's imagination" (94).

As we shall see, Margaret Wise Brown's writing connected to the real world of real children by more than the intuition of a talented writer. She focused her work on children's feelings and thoughts. She chose words, sentence structures and rhythms based on what she experientially knew resonated for the children for whom she wrote.

Finally, Sheree Fitch's books are good examples of this kind of speakerly text. They are open-ended. They invite the listener to complete them. And so "a community of listeners can be realized not only through rhyme and rhythm, but also through a story's narrative structure…I think especially in children's books, [says Sheree,] what I love is that even though [the day in the story is over,] something exciting might happen tomorrow. It takes a reader to complete my book" (Lynes, 35).

No Two Snowflakes is this kind of a book. It is in the form of a letter from Lou, a little girl who lives in Canada. She writes to her friend, Araba, another little girl who lives somewhere warm and by the sea, perhaps on the continent of Africa. In the letter, Lou describes snow, something that Araba has never seen, smelled, or felt before. "Dear Araba…" begins the story, "You asked me to tell you about snow. Well, there are many kinds of snow…" (2). The letter is an attempt to bring snow to life, in all of its variations and through all of the senses. The story, which Sheree Fitch describes as a "lipslippery" poem, is a series of sensorial descriptions of different kinds of snow. The sounds of its words and phrases are intuitive and infectious. Form, once again, helps to create content.

The story ends with Lou making a promise to, and requesting a favor of, Araba:

> That's all I know, Araba…

I have tried to tell you the taste and smell of snow

its sound and touch

but words are not enough….

But wait…one more thing…

Sometimes snow can be…angel feathers!

Here's what we can do…

This Christmas afternoon

I will take my brother out in our backyard.

We will lie on our backs

swing our arms and legs in wide arcs

make angels in the snow

while you take your sister

to the shore of the sea

and, just for us, make angels in the sand.

Snow is not sand, sand is not snow but…

on this day of miracles

remember that the sun you see

is the sun we see

that no two snowflakes are alike

no two snowflakes are alike

and this, too, is a miracle.

Love, Lou (22-27)

By including this comparison of snow to sand, Fitch opens the possibility of a new chapter to the story. How would Araba describe sand to Lou? Perhaps the child listening to the story lives near the sea and understands firsthand the touch and smell of sand. Or the new chapter might explore something completely different. Perhaps the child listener does not know about snow or sand, but instead she has experience with dirt or rain or wind. When the story ends, a door opens for the child to carry it on in her own life in the form of a discussion or questions or a drawing or simply a thought process, private and wonderful, within her own mind.

And if this weren't enough, Fitch has a letter to the reader on the last spread of the book. In it, she tells the story of when she was in grade two and learned, from her teacher, that no two snowflakes were alike. In that same year at school she also saw a map of the world for the first time and learned that there were peoples and cultures and children—especially children—outside of Canada. In the letter she also explains going to Belize as a storyteller, and the experience of having a child ask her to describe snow. Fitch describes the process of discovering the idea for this book. In this way she opens the door for the child listener to explore her own ideas and where they may take her. After the letter, there is a short section titled *Celebrate your senses* in which Fitch suggests three exercises to explore the senses, based on the story.

No Two Snowflakes also explores the subject of the differences between people and cultures, experiences and imaginings. This introduces the fourth, and last, characteristic of picture books that belong within the Vibrant Triangle.

D. Narrative as an Intuitive Stepping Stone for Learning about the World

Taking the time to sit with a child and read him a picture book aloud removes him momentarily from his own life. It gives the child a break from his immediate problems or obsessions or pleasures. But, of course, they are still with him, and because of that, he incorporates those issues into the read-aloud experience. The result is deeply satisfying on multiple levels; it is both self-contained *and* connected to the child's life.

This multi-layered experience is a profound teaching tool without an outwardly defined teacher. It is a brilliant and intuitive way for a child to learn about himself and the world. A favorite picture book that is read aloud again and again provides an even better opportunity for growth. The book can be the constant as the child's direct life situation changes.

The reading aloud session is an emotional outlet. It is a sensory outlet too. The child listener explores new situations and new places, new experiences and new kinds of people, through their smells and sounds and sights. The intersection of these imaginary elements and the real sensory experiences offers the child a safe and full way to participate in crises and celebrations, dilemmas and resolutions. As Rosenblatt says: "The capacity to sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others is a most precious human attribute" (37).

Rosenblatt holds that "literature provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*" (38). The reading aloud of picture books expands a child's capacity for empathy and understanding. There are countless characters with whom to identify, to connect, and to love.

The picture books that are part of the Vibrant Triangle are especially vital to this kind of personal growth on multiple levels.

Jennifer Armstrong says in an article for The Horn Book:

> I repeat the obvious when I say that books give us access to multiple points of view. Stories…encourage us to imagine one fork in the road after another, paths to an infinite number of choices, outcomes, consequences. Practice in reading stories…may be one of the best ways to learn that there are many possible outcomes to every set of circumstances. (193-194)

Children's book writer Bob Graham is very concerned with the way people are treated. Many, if not all, of his picture books deal with the subject of tolerance. He says in an interview:

> Through our books our children can imagine what it might be like to be in someone else's shoes. This is surely where empathy starts. And with empathy and understanding comes tolerance and who knows? Then they may have a world with some fear taken out of it. (qtd. in Lancashire 2)

Although this sounds like the voice of a man who crafts his books with Issues at the forefront of his mind, Graham is not overtly didactic. "My books are only ever about people being decent to each other," he says, "people just being accepting of each other—and of their dogs" (qtd. in Lancashire 1). Using subtle writing and illustrating techniques (and humor,) Graham draws attention to the issue of tolerance, without ever being heavy-handed. As a result, his books are warm, inviting, and, surprisingly, emotionally charged.

Jethro Byrd: Fairy Child and *"Let's Get a Pup," Said Kate* are two picture books which show how Graham's writing leads to teaching about tolerance.

Graham writes about ordinary people living in ordinary environments. Annabelle, the main character in *Jethro Byrd: Fairy Child* lives in a city apartment, surrounded by concrete, tall buildings and empty lots. When her parents relax they bring beach chairs out to the dirt lot in front of a fence and read. Annabelle has a younger brother named Sam, and it is her responsibility to take care of him. All of these details paint the picture of a very ordinary family. But then Annabelle meets Jethro Byrd and his family and *ordinary* shifts to *"slightly more than ordinary"* (qtd. in Lancashire 2). *They are fairies.* Graham takes a very surprising occurrence and creates a kind of normalcy around it. For example, Jethro describes a Fairy Traveler's Picnic that he and his family attend:

> We go every year, and all my aunts go…They all smell of roses and hug me, and they have damp handkerchiefs, and the flies bite me, and it's hot and itchy…and I have to run in the races, and I always come in last. And the prize for coming in last is…a silly PLASTIC CUP. And I don't want to go. (20-21)

Jethro sounds like any typical child, reluctant to go to a dreary family gathering. This creates a familiarity for the reader. It is easy to connect with Jethro. It is easy to empathize with him. Because he is different, being after all a fairy, Graham quietly and subtly opens the reader's mind and heart to tolerance.

In the penultimate spread, Annabelle watches a long line of fairies flying in the moonlight. Annabelle sits in her apartment window. The surrounding buildings and abandoned lot are visible. The simultaneous existence of these worlds creates, again, a message of tolerance. Simply put, they are allowed to peacefully co-exist.

The text on these pages sums this up beautifully:

> Annabelle saw more fairies. From rich houses, poor houses, playgrounds and parking lots, from under woodpiles and high up in blackbirds' nests, from churches and shop windows, and department stores after dark, from mountains and valleys, back streets and highways, from under hedges and bridges, they rode in the moonlight to the Fairy Travelers' Picnic. (30)

"Let's Get a Pup," Said Kate is about a young girl who wants to get a puppy. Again, Graham portrays a very *ordinary* desire. He creates a relaxed and endearing banter between Kate and her parents:

> Mom looked in the paper.
>
> "It must be small," said Kate.
>
> "And cute," said Dad.
>
> "And get all excited," said Kate.
>
> "And run around in circles," said Dad.
>
> "Hmm," said Mom. "LOOK!"
>
> *THE RESCUE CENTER*
>
> *The center for dogs without a home.*
>
> *The center for dogs all alone.*
>
> With their breakfasts uneaten, they dressed and left immediately. (7)

This heartwarming conversation creates a connection between the reader and the characters. Between the reader and the story. The differences that may exist between the reader and Kate's parents seem insignificant, and perhaps even unnoticed. Again, Graham creates an opportunity for tolerance.

Kate and her parents go to The Rescue Center. They find the perfect puppy. Just as they are ready to leave with him, they meet Rosie. Rosie is not the perfect puppy. In fact, she is not a puppy at all. She is old. She is fat. It is difficult for her to get to her feet. But she radiates "Good Intention" (14) and Kate and her parents are touched by her. In a teary voice Kate's mother asks, "We would take them all if we could, but what can we do?" (14) And so they leave with their new puppy. They leave Rosie behind. Graham creates a powerful moment here, and just as Kate and her family are heart-touched, the reader is as well. The power—the emotion—comes from the quiet, real moment that Graham creates. It resonates on two levels. On the surface it is about a family making a tough choice to leave a dog behind, but underneath it is about a family opening its collective heart to someone different, someone with whom they did not intend to bond.

The dilemma is resolved the next day, when Kate and her parents decide that they can not bear to leave Rosie at The Rescue Center. They allow themselves to change their minds. They go back to get Rosie and happily expand their family from three people, to three people and two dogs.

In Graham's unique, quiet and powerful way, he offers readers the opportunity to explore and understand tolerance. Because his stories are full of ordinary families, familiar situations and lovable animals, children seize those opportunities and empathize with his characters. Graham might not be keen on the heavy-handed approach to teaching, but he is a successful teacher. And a necessary one. For once children have the foundation of a simpler kind of tolerance under their belts, they are more fully equipped to deal out in the world with the tougher kind.

A Place to Grow by Soyung Pak is a final example of the kind of picture book that is an intuitive stepping stone for learning about the world. It is a story about a family migrating across the world to a new home. Pak uses the metaphor of a seed traveling on the wind to describe the sometimes hard journey of a family leaving one home in order to find a better and safer one.

The story begins with a wide angle approach. Pak writes: "The earth is soft. The sun still shimmers wet from its long snowy winter nap. This is the seed time. This is the growing time. When seeds flying in the wind find their gardens to grow in and finally land" (2-3). While the images are specific, the concept is more panoramic. It is about the cycle of the seasons, a phenomenon to which most people can connect.

The entry into the story is inviting. The child listener can relate to winter changing into spring. She can smell the warm wind, perhaps. She can hear the first bird calls after the silence of the cold. This is all made simpler, still, by Pak's word choices. Within the first two sentences there are five words that begin with the sound of the letter *s*. *Soft. Sun still shimmers. Snowy.* The effect is soothing, almost coaxing, ushering the listener into the story. Right away there is a clear and comfortable rhythm at work.

Then the angle tightens. The child listener moves from this universal moment into the specific characters and situation of the story. It becomes clear that it is about a young girl and her father, and that the girl is narrating the story. "My father knows all about this. He knows all about flying. He flew a long way to grow into our family" (4). Now the story reveals what it really is—about a particular family and a particular journey. Perhaps the family is not familiar to the child listener. Perhaps the journey is not familiar either. But the child is already there. She has already connected to the story.

Therefore, she is open to what will unfold. And, again, this is made easier because the language and sentence flow is lyrical and gentle in the ear.

All of this ease is critical, because this story is far from easy in its content. It is, in fact, quite complex. *A Place To Grow* explores the father's decision to leave his home, perhaps in South Korea, from where Pak's father emigrated, and find a new home in which to grow his family. Using the metaphor of the seed blowing in the wind to find the proper place to plant itself, the father describes to his daughter the complicated reasons for leaving his old home. And more than complicated, they are painful, unhappy reasons:

> Good land is warm and safe, like a cozy home, [says the father.] It protects the seed and helps it to grow. But sometimes land in cold and rocky. Instead of offering shelter, it surrounds the seed with the sharp edges of stones. That is what happens when there are too many guns and not enough love. A place like that is no place to grow a flower. (7-9)

The seed metaphor gives the child listener a way to receive the hard details of the emigration story. More than that, Pak constructs the delivery of the metaphor in a way that makes it more conducive to reception. The story is divided into sections. Each section describes a specific environmental element that a seed needs to grow—earth, sun, rain. The element is then expanded with two things: the opposite of that element and how that prohibits healthy growth for the seed *and* the human parallel of that opposite. This construction creates a pathway that naturally follows from the element to its opposite to the human parallel. The child listener can also naturally follow it.

The conversational format of the story also works to engage the listener. The girl and her father carry on a sort of call and response between them. The girl asks the same

question over and over again—"So the seed flew with the wind?"—and because it is the natural question to ask within this story, the child listener might join into the conversation. The girl also articulates her assumptions about the environmental elements in the story—"There is land everywhere" and "the sun shines on everything," etc.—to which her father responds by gently teaching her that her statements are not true for everyone, everywhere. As she re-thinks her assumptions, so does the child listening to the story. As she learns about the realities for some people and about her own family history, so does the child.

Like Graham, Pak weaves a lesson about tolerance into this story. Here, she does so by exploring what intolerance looks like and why someone would travel great distances to find tolerance. The Kirkus Reviews writes: "World migration is becoming more of an issue; family survival has always been; and children's worldliness today requires sophisticated metaphors to assuage anxieties. Perhaps in a small way here is a large contribution" (1477).

A Place To Grow begins with an identifiable image—seeds finding the places where they will grow. But it turns out the whole story is one in which the listening child can find echoes of the known and familiar. This is, in part, because of the widespread realities of emigration. It is also because everyone leaves their home of origin to find new ground, new rain, and new sun. The child listening to this story has perhaps done this already. Or perhaps not, but she will, in small ways like going to school for the first time, and in larger ways down the road. It is important—critical even—for her to embody the words Pak writes: "Even if you fly across the tallest mountains, the longest roads, and the widest seas, there will always be a garden in my heart for you" (29). Pak

evokes a feeling of safety here. This is a cornerstone of the last characteristic of the Vibrant Triangle picture books. If there is a sense of safety for the child listening to the story, then she can do much more than listen. She can imagine and empathize and truly learn.

The picture books that fit most gracefully into the Vibrant Triangle weave together these four characteristics: language driving story, limited text on the page, extending the story beyond the page, and stories leading to learning. Together they can create the most sensorial kind of story, the most organic. The truest.

> *Derek, my husband, reads Mr. Lincoln's Way, by Patricia Polacco, to Luc. In Mr. Lincoln's Way a young boy named Eugene has internalized his father's racism, and spends most of his time at school bullying other children—specifically, the children who are a different race than he is. Mr. Lincoln, the principal of the school, gently opens Eugene up to tolerance. By tapping into Eugene's passion—birds in all of their colors and shapes and sizes—Mr. Lincoln teaches Eugene about the equality of all living things. More importantly, by forging an honest friendship with him, Mr. Lincoln forces Eugene to face his own fear, challenge it, and ultimately replace it with respect and love.*

After Derek reads a scene in which Eugene singles out two Mexican boys in the cafeteria and calls them names, Luc asks, "Why is Eugene calling those boys mean names?" "Because they have different colored skin than Eugene," says Derek. Luc says "What's the matter with that? It's just another color of skin. Sarah's my friend and she has brown skin."

He pauses. "I treat everyone well, don't I?"

Derek continues to read. Mr. Lincoln brings Eugene into his office to talk about the incident and Eugene breaks down and cries. He feels terrible about the way he has treated those two boys in the cafeteria. Luc draws in a breath like he has something to say. Derek waits. Then Luc asks again "I treat everyone well, don't I?" Derek nods his head. Luc continues, "Etta does too. [Etta is Luc's friend.] When she was mean to me on the playground at school I got so sad. And then she felt so bad that she was mean to me that she cried too."

Like Eugene…

When Luc feels anxious about something he says he has the "I don't know feeling." It is his way of translating that confused, visceral feeling. His affect, in those moments, is low-energy, sad and withdrawn. When Derek

finishes reading Mr. Lincoln's Way Luc says "When I have the 'I don't know feeling' I get sad. When Eugene has the 'I don't know feeling' he gets mean." He pauses. "Jordie is the same way. [Jordie is Luc's cousin.] When he has the 'I don't know feeling' he gets mean too."

Perhaps, in hearing the whole story of Eugene, in being privy to the reasons behind his behavior, and in experiencing Eugene's transformation…perhaps Luc can have a better understanding of Jordie. And Etta. And many others. And this, in turn, can influence the way he understands himself in relation to all of these people. And understands himself.

"I treat everyone well, don't I?" Luc asks one last time. Then he answers himself as if he is making a promise. "Yeah, I treat everyone well."

Luc is growing wings.

IV. Writers at the Intersection of Teaching and Writing

A. Why Reading Aloud Changes Children Forever According to Mem Fox

> As we share the words and pictures, the ideas and viewpoints, the rhythms and rhymes, the pain and the comfort, and the hopes and the fears and the big issues of life that we encounter together in the pages of a book, we connect through minds and hearts with our children and bond closely in a secret society associated with the books we have shared. The fire of literacy is created by the emotional sparks between a child, a book, and the person reading. It isn't achieved by the book alone, nor by the child alone, nor by the adult who's reading aloud—it's the relationship winding between all three, bringing them together in easy harmony.
>
> (Fox, "Reading Magic" 10)

What Fox speaks of is the Vibrant Triangle at its best, providing an environment and experience that greatly shape a child's ability to learn to read.

Fox is deeply concerned with the intersection of literacy and reading aloud: this proven place where children can best learn to read. There are three components, Fox says, that work simultaneously to open children up to the process of learning to read. She calls them the three secrets of reading aloud to children. The first is the "magic of print" (75). Page after page, children who are read aloud to experience printed words, syntax and punctuation. This repeated contact familiarizes children with the structures and mechanics of such print. That familiarity leads to an ability to read more easily and more quickly. Of course, page after page, these children also experience the illustrations in these books. And familiarity with illustrations—the colors and patterns, perspectives

and shapes, and so much more—leads to tremendous and varied skill-building as well. This is well worth its own study.

The second secret of reading is the "magic of language" (83). This means children having enough exposure to language to *expect* it to make sense. *Yes, expect*. "Children who have been read aloud to regularly do expect to make sense from print. They know about rhyme and rhythm and repetition. They know how real stories work, which makes it easier for them to read real stories. They can predict that certain words, patterns and plots will occur, and they're proven right" (93-94). This is easy to see in nursery rhymes, such as: *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great* _____. It is clear to a child who has experience with rhyme that the missing word is *fall*. And this applies to less obvious phrases as well.

The third secret of reading is the "magic of general knowledge" (99). The more children are exposed to different experiences, consequences, and cultures, the more they will comprehend what they read. It is as simple as that. This means having conversations about what you are reading aloud to them, perhaps stopping in the middle of a page to answer a question. It also means putting down the book, and just experiencing the world.

When these three secrets of reading—the magics of print, language and general knowledge—are intertwined; when the child listener is repeatedly exposed to all of them; when her synapses have been grown and strengthened, then she is best prepared to learn how to read.

The Vibrant Triangle invites this opportunity. It offers it not only to one child, but to whole communities of children. The harmony between the picture book, the adult

reader and the child listener extends off of the pages of the picture books and into the world of the child. This is clear. But it is also true in broader "families", or within a circle of friends. Reading aloud to groups of children, in formal or informal settings, spins a thread of connection through everyone involved, not only because they have all *heard* the same story, but because they have *experienced* shared interruptions, questions, and the process of finding answers. This is the creation of community.

Human beings are wonderfully complicated creatures. We have within us a kaleidoscope of strengths, skills, and challenges, as well as thoughts, feelings and desires. Children are even more wonderful and complicated. They are engaged in the vital process of *creating* their kaleidoscopes. This is all the more fitting here because books that are part of the Vibrant Triangle are only works in progress until children experience them.

But children, too, are *readers* in progress. Although they are predisposed to some skills and abilities, much of their development is flexible and fluid and can be affected by environmental factors. Their ability to read is one of these developmental processes shaped by the help of external influences. The experience of having a picture book read aloud deeply affects a child. A rich and multi-dimensional experience, it allows all eight multiple intelligences room to develop and deepen. It offers the *whole child* the opportunity to grow.

Louise Rosenblatt is quick to point out that not every experience with literature is as deep or as resonant as every other. Within the reading-aloud context children create themselves as listeners. The Vibrant Triangle picture books are generally read again and again (and again!) often by popular demand. This repetition allows children listeners to

hone their interaction with the text, to draw newer and deeper conclusions and to ask newer and deeper questions every time they hear the story. They learn how to sharpen their literacy skills, as Fox says, as well as their problem-solving skills. They learn how to better understand themselves and the world around them. This is a unique and special relationship with text that the adult reader typically does not engage in.

As a writer, it can be hard to imagine this relationship. It is hard to even remember that at the other end of the experience of writing a text there is an actual book—your book—in the hands of an adult reader, in the ears of a child listener. Writing is so often a solitary endeavor. The writer, most often, doesn't get the opportunity to share her book with children while she is writing it. This wasn't always true.

B. Margaret Wise Brown and the Bank Street Writers Laboratory

Margaret Wise Brown deepened the form of the picture book. In essence, she tried to feel and think like a child. She shared what she was writing with children. She is said to have carried out an experiment with the Bank Street Writers Laboratory during which she went to a city lamp post and stood with her eyes closed in order to better listen to her environment with the ears of a child (Marcus 110). Brown closed the gap, as best she could, between herself as a writer and the child who would eventually read her words.

Lucy Sprague Mitchell, the visionary director of the Bank Street School of Education, where Brown was enrolled as a teacher in training, did a tremendous amount of research on the stages of language development in early childhood. To accomplish this, she spent hours recording word for word what children said, both in casual

comments and in more organized discussions. She collected "thousands upon thousands of…literary fragments" (51). Mitchell found that "communication is not the earliest impulse that leads to the use of language… children begin to play with sounds long before words have any meaning to them" (51-52).

Mitchell's findings were groundbreaking. This was a radical change in thinking from the traditional pedagogy of the time, which focused on the rules of reading and writing—vocabulary, grammar, syntax and spelling. Instead, Mitchell suggested that children naturally focused on "rhythm, sound quality and patterns of sound" (52). These elements, she continued, made language—both the reading and the writing of it—an "art medium" (52).

Children, Mitchell thought, intuitively entwined with this delight which she called the "Here and Now." Unlike adults, who take a step back from a sensory experience to *comment* on it, children stay in the here and now as they describe an experience.

All this laid the foundation on which Margaret Wise Brown would later build her children's books.

In October 1937, the Bank Street Writers Laboratory was created. This was a group within the Bank Street School of Education whose members focused on developing their skills as writers. The Writers Lab had an informal workshop atmosphere and the writers spent much time reading and critiquing each other's work, as well as discussing topics relevant to children's literature. The foundation here was the children—what they thought and how they thought, what they felt and how they felt—and a vital part of the lab was the constant interaction between the writers and the children at the Bank Street School. The writers brought their observations of the children to one another. They also

brought the stories they were working on *to* the children. These connections brought children's literature into a more immediate "here and now" realm, into the real lives of the children who read it (Krishnaswami).

William R. Scott, a parent of a child at the Bank Street School, had a serious interest in books, and wanted to enter the publishing world. Lucy Sprague Mitchell urged him to take on a new and innovative project: to publish "experimentally-tested, 'here-and-now' style children's books" (Marcus 89). These books would be tested on children and revised based on their responses. An extension of the Writers Lab process, children would collaborate on these works. (Art was to be tested in the same way as Clement Hurd discovered when he did illustrations—again and again!—for *Bumble Bugs and Elephants*.) Brown served as both an editor and a writer for Scott's publishing house.

Brown's contribution to the children's writing world was, in addition to the wonderful books she wrote, bringing children and the writing process together. Brown understood the children for whom she wrote. She made it her business to understand by dedicating much time and energy to bridging the gap between the two. With her head and her heart in both worlds, she created stories that echoed back to the children their own feelings and needs, in forms that they intuitively understood. She tapped into their whole bodies. (Krishnaswami).

Margaret Wise Brown broke down the barriers between her work and the children for whom she wrote. Mem Fox does the same thing. Both women's work embodies the underpinnings of the Vibrant Triangle.

V. Why is All of This Important for Childern's Book Writers Anyway?

Because we have a responsibility to the stories we write. Katherine Paterson says: "A book comes from the writer, just as a child is born from its mother, but both book and child have a life of their own. They are not the possession of the writer or the parent, but they are, in the initial stages, the responsibility" (20). She goes on to say that for her there is no division between the mind and the heart, between intellect and emotion, and that *responsibility* means honoring whatever comes from inside both of those spaces. That *responsibility* means writing from a place where the mind and the heart entwine. "We choose to write not what is fashionable or what we think may sell, but what comes out of our deepest selves" (Paterson 20).

Sheree Fitch agrees. "I think a writer, each time, is responsible to articulate the truth—yes? Not necessarily 'the' truth, but your truth, in that story at that particular moment in time…And to do that, yes, you must write from your very core—heart, mind, soul, spirit. And so then, really, it is about being open to those many truths, actually "being" the open heart, becoming big mind and…striving to reach authentic self… From that you serve your work and the readers" (Statement to author).

This is the way to truly connect with the children listening to our stories. What is deeply true has wings. What is deeply true can soar from inside the writer to inside the children listeners. The picture book text is this bird-like gift.

Mem Fox starts with the children and then moves to the story: "I find it far, far better to ache with care for the children for whom I write [rather than cater to the critics, academics, publishers, booksellers and parents]" (Fox, "So Whom" 8). Writing with care, according to Fox, means remembering what interests children, what they need

emotionally, where they live, how they live, what ideas may challenge their thinking. It means paying careful attention to every word in the story you are writing because every word, especially in a picture book, is the result of remembering all of those things. It means loving your characters. And getting them into some sort of trouble. And then getting them back out. But loving them all the while. All of this echoes Katherine Paterson's belief about writing from both mind and heart.

Rosenblatt, too, speaks of the power of the arts to lend meaning: "Much that in life itself might seem disorganized and meaningless takes on order and significance when it comes under the organizing and vitalizing influence of the artist" (42). Children have questions and concerns and emotions that spin and soar inside of their windy little bodies. The books that we choose to write can be homes for those questions and concerns and emotions. We construct our stories word by word—log by log—and we must do so carefully and deliberately so that in the end we have built solid floors and walls and roofs where these children can lay down what swirls inside of them. This is one way to look at our responsibility.

Another way is to see that we have a responsibility to provide a safe place for children. In our words, in our stories, in our texts. "Little kids need reassurance about their safety in a turbulent world and they hope to find that reassurance in the books that they read" (Fox, "For Whom" 9). Within the warm, strong arms of a parent, the child listener can curl up and enter a different world, one in which he finds solace. Or within the soothing, singing voice of a librarian, a group of children can float away and enter a different world, one in which they find challenges. And then resolutions. "In the

moment of the telling of the…story there is the creation of a safe place" (Fitch, "Up in the Tree").

And finally another way is to remember that our words on the page, our manuscripts, even our published picture books are not the finished product. It is the experience of the child listening to our stories that completes the process. It occurs to me that writers have the same relationship to their stories as the children listening to those stories. Just as the story changes the child listener and the child changes the story, the story changes the writer who is in turn changed by it. Words and rhythms, characters and their struggles and successes—these are palpable links between child and writer. They are the gift offered by the writer's hands into the child's eager ones. They are also the gift offered by the child's mind back to the writer. With this intrinsic connection, we can hope to change the world, a child and a word at a time. Children are our collaborators in this process of change. It is crucial to know them.

Of course there is not one prototypical child—one age, one gender, one ethnicity, one culture, one personality—with whom we collaborate. There are hundreds and millions and billions of them. How wonderful! It is not nearly as important to identify that one particular child as it is to recognize and honor the idea that a living, breathing child, representing our potential audience, is integral to our creative processes. A small boy sitting cross-legged under a tree, or a young girl barefoot and crouched in a stream, or or or… This boy and this girl and countless others are our partners.

But first and foremost we have a responsibility to the story. As Katherine Paterson says, "as a writer, I have a responsibility to come humbly and child-like to the empty page, to always be ready to be surprised by the truth, ready to be taught, even

ready to be changed as I write" (21). And really, the process of filling that empty page is the way we create that gift.

VI. Conclusion

A children's book that is part of the Vibrant Triangle has organic rhythm, word choices, and musicality, carefully chosen text on the page, narrative structure allowing it to extend off the page, and narrative working as a stepping stone for learning. Such a picture book has the capacity when read out loud to a child, to slip through the child's skin and into her body. It nestles deep, sprouts its own wings and grows.

We all carry the 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. The *experiences* of having those books read aloud are the flock of winged things. They are the sense of self the child develops, and her sense of the world. They are his sense of his place in that world. They are the child's senses of humanity and tolerance and choice.

The specifics are different for each of us. But at our own pace, in our own time, and with our own purpose the wings are born.

Campfire. Dirt. Wood floor.

Song. Dance. Words.

Voice. Ear. Body.

Oral Storytelling Tradition. Speakerly Text. Utterature.

Picture Book. Adult Reader. Child Listener.

The Vibrant Triangle.

These nights, Luc, my daughter Zory, Derek and I read together before bed. Derek and I sit on the floor with our backs against Luc's bed. Luc sits snuggled into his bean bag chair next to us. Zory sits on Luc's bed, my hair gripped in her hand. We are cozy, we four. Because Derek and I take turns reading, I am lucky enough to get to be the storyteller and the listener. When I am the storyteller, I am acutely aware of the experience that unfolds around me. I read, but I listen too. I take the opportunity to try to learn something about my children. When I am the listener…oh, when I am the listener! I forget about teaching and learning. I lose that conscious awareness. When I am a listener, I am three, seven, twelve again. I am just there, in that moment, feeling the rug under my legs, hearing the words—the glorious words—uttering their secrets for me.

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