Changes in Children’s Literature

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In this column, we review titles that represent the ways children’s literature has evolved by genre, format, and modality.

The evolution of children’s literature is astonishing. From traditional oral tales to book apps, the field has transformed in myriad ways. These changes have reflected technological advances in publishing and dissemination (Serafini, Kachorsky, & Aguilera, 2015; Wooten & McCuiston, 2015), shifts in perceptions about children and societal norms (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2015), and evolving artistic movements (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007), as well as the interrogation of dominant narratives and a spotlight on marginalized voices (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). Moreover, these advances require educators to think more deeply and purposefully about the potential children’s literature offers for students’ growth as literate beings. In this column, we share examples of books that represent how the field has changed and what possibilities are emerging. From hybrid genre formats to interactive apps, these titles synthesize the remarkable development of literature for children and reignites rigorous debate about definitions, processes, and roles of reader, author, illustrator, and text.

References


This Is Not a Book

Written and illustrated by Jean Jullien

When is a book not a book? When it is a tent, a toolbox, a tightrope, a butterfly, a pair of clapping hands, a piano, and even an auditorium filled with people. This clever, almost wordless book by Jean Jullien transforms the familiar board book format into something else entirely. The front and back covers depict both sides of a front door, inviting
Inviting readers to play with physical books once again, Hervé Tullet uses the power of primary colors and simple sounds to create a symphonic reading experience in *Say Zoop!* Tullet’s beloved cast of blue dot, red dot, and yellow dot will be recognized by readers of his earlier notable books: *Press Here, Mix It Up, and Let’s Play! Outdoing his previous groundbreaking work, participatory bookmaking is at its best with *Say Zoop!* where children from any native language can interact with increasingly varied dots to say “oh,” “ah,” and “wahoo.” Early readers, liberated from the typical requirement of alphabetic knowledge to read books, will quickly catch on to the symbolic representation of each dot cueing readers to whisper, shout, talk like a robot, or even make animal noises. Tullet knows that when young children interact with books in magical ways, they are empowered to read and keep reading. The unlimited imagination of each child reader is at the heart of *Say Zoop!*, which concludes with a question that propels readers to make up their own completely new sounds. Each reading is its own unique performance that is guaranteed to be memorable, joyful, and truly rewarding. (KEC)

A graphic book to teach grammatical concepts to newly independent readers? Look no further! Brunetti takes full advantage of the potential of panels to play with the concept of compound words. As a multicultural classroom begins a study of compound words, Annemarie, the protagonist (with a compound name), enthusiastically offers
up a range of compound words. Annemarie’s pronouncements of compound words are paralleled by full- or half-page drawings depicting the literal interpretations of these words. Homesick is depicted as a house with a thermometer and box of tissues, a housefly is a fly in the shape of a house, and a mailman possesses an airmail envelope for a body. These humorous snapshots allow young readers to think past the humor and consider the ways in which compound words sometimes reveal their meaning, and sometimes convey something completely different. A basketball goes in a basket, but it isn’t made of a basket. Eggplants aren’t made of eggs, and butterflies are not made of butter. To further support new readers, all compound words have the first word highlighted in red. This funny introduction to an important concept can also serve as a great mentor text in the classroom. (MAC)

**Short Stories for Little Monsters**
*Written and illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay*

How do moms always know what kids are doing? Do rabbits, snails, and worms have secret lives? What do trees talk about with each other all day? What do you see when you close your eyes? In 19 hilarious short stories, each presented as a two-page comic strip vignette, acclaimed children’s author/illustrator Mary-Louise Gay illuminates the wonderings of young minds. Reminiscent of Ruth Krauss’s beloved works, each tale centers on a child’s perspective of the word—the fantasies, fears, and fascination that result from a blend of innocence and imagination. In “Lies My Mother Told Me,” for example, a series of a mother’s

**Are We There Yet?**
*Written and illustrated by Dan Santat*

Playing on the typical car trip refrain asked by weary young travelers, *Are We There Yet?* invites readers to imagine what happens “when your brain . . . becomes . . . . . . . TOO . . . bored?” As with his Caldecott-winning *The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend*, Santat surprises readers, this time with an allegory on the gift of boredom to help us savor the present. By literally
turning a boring situation upside down, readers are invited to turn the book upside down to see where the protagonist’s boredom has taken him. When ominous scenes of the Wild West, a pirate ship, a medieval joust, and the Sphinx of Giza fail to unhang our young traveler from boredom, a resounding “ROOAAR” catches his attention.

Like the boy in the story, readers will be astounded by the adventures that follow. As the boy jettisons from the back of a Tyrannosaurus Rex from the past into the future, readers encounter several QR codes that activate translations from a robot. Dan Santat’s pencil, crayon, watercolor, ink, and Photoshop illustrations have a cinematic quality to them, varying between double-page spreads and round-cornered panel pages. The colors evoke days gone by, making the story mesmerizing. With a variety of full-page and paneled illustrations, readers are sure to linger on the details that saturate each page, helping readers embody the message to be more present. Santat’s inventive picturebook captures the universal experience of boredom and gently reminds us that you “never . . . . . . know . . . where . . . . . . life . . . . . may . . . . . . take . . . . . you.” (KEC)

Radio Jones and His Robot Dad
Created by Nexus Productions, 2016
Available for iOS

A familiar storyline gets a fresh take in this interactive narrative app. Radio’s dad is stereotypically overworked and too busy to spend time with his son. So Radio, a White tween boy, gets inventive and creates a robotic father stand-in. Piano music provides a soft accompaniment as readers interact with comic-style frames that provide the storyline for this wordless text. Right-hand page swipes reinforce the feel of an e-book while animation and interactive elements take full advantage of the tablet platform. As Radio and Robot Dad play soccer, go for a drive, explore a canyon together, and take a wild ride in a shopping cart, readers can peek in on real Dad’s day by touching a clock icon. Toward evening, things take a turn to the wild side, and Radio’s real dad arrives home to find a host of electronics partying in the living room while Radio shelters behind the coach. As you might expect, Dad puts things right. With a plot twist in the concluding sequence that reminds adult readers to focus on what’s truly important, this gentle, engaging e-book app has appeal across ages. (ETD)

Noah Webster’s Fighting Words
Written by Tracy Nelson Maurer
Illustrated by Mircea Catusanu

Noah Webster may have lived in the 18th century, but readers know immediately that he edited this picturebook biography when they see him listed on the cover as “editor.” The initial leaf spread
contains a note from Noah, informing the reader that he “couldn’t resist” adding a few notes to the biography. This meta-conversation with the reader continues with comments inserted throughout this otherwise “straight” and well-researched picturebook biography of early America’s wordmaster. Sometimes, the comments provide additional information and insight into his life; for example, Webster reveals, “I pushed for America’s first national copyright laws. Nice to see them still at work!” Other times, the comments provide humor, as Webster defends his actions and attempts to make himself look better; when portrayed as argumentative and combative, he insists, “I was simply helping people to see the right point of view.” Catusanu’s playful mixed-media collage illustrations convey Webster’s important life events, reveal his strong personality, and contextualize the dynamics of his life and times with primary source artifacts. Both the author’s and illustrator’s notes help readers make sense of this interesting and engaging text and this fascinating historical figure. (MAC)

Martí’s Song for Freedom/Martí y sus versos por la libertad
Written by Emma Otheguy
Illustrated by Beatriz Vidal
Children’s Book Press, 2017, unpaged,

Blending poetry, biography, primary source, and picturebook—and written in bilingual text—Martí’s Song for Freedom is a prime example of the kind of striking storytelling found within hybrid literary genres. Before he became a renowned poet and revolutionary freedom fighter, young José Martí loved the natural landscape of his home in Cuba, “the grand royal palms that shaded the path” (“las palmas reales/que brindaban sombra a su camino”) and “the river/as it swelled with the rains/and rushed on to the saltwater sea” (“al río/cuando crecía por la lluvia/y corría hacia el mar salado”). But his homeland and fellow Cubans at that time were under Spanish rule and enslaved. Inspired by the US Civil War and its fight to end slavery, as well as the freedom and peace of his surroundings, he believed all people should have these same natural rights. Through his writing, José supported the Cuban rebels in their efforts toward emancipation, and was ultimately imprisoned and exiled. Inspired by the US Civil War and its fight to end slavery, as well as the freedom and peace of his surroundings, he believed all people should have these same natural rights. Through his writing, José supported the Cuban rebels in their efforts toward emancipation, and was ultimately imprisoned and exiled. And yet, he never stopped loving nature or fighting for Cuban independence. Otheguy seamlessly merges Martí’s original verse with her own, producing a lush and lyrical text. Vidal’s vibrant gouache illustrations showcase the beauty and suffering described throughout the book. Appendices include an afterword, author’s note, biography, and excerpts from Martí’s Versos Silencios. (GE)
and important topics, such as family, friends, embarrassing moments, and self-acceptance. The well-known and diverse group of female authors (including Mitali Perkins, Rita Garcia-Williams, Shannon Hale, just to name a few others) share autobiographical moments, advice, and insights in a multigenre volume that’s sure to generate giggles, chuckles, and outright belly laughs. (ETD)

**Fish Girl**

Written by David Wiesner and Donna Jo Napoli
Illustrated by David Wiesner

Traditional literature enthusiasts and wordless picturebook fans will be delighted by *Fish Girl*, a graphic novel from the partnership of David Wiesner and Donna Jo Napoli, adapted from the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, “The Little Mermaid.” Mira is a mermaid held captive as the secret attraction in a boardwalk aquarium. Her captor impersonates Neptune, the King of the Seas, and masquerades as her protector. This former fisherman-turned-charlatan sea god uses a wave-making machine and the mystery of Mira to bring in customers and turn a profit. The etymology

Promising to be the “most hilarious anthology you’ll read today (or maybe EVER)” (book jacket front flap), this collection edited by librarian/blogger/author Betsy Bird makes good on this claim with a stellar cast of authors and a range of genres. Twenty-eight short entries—including comics, letters, advice columns, public service announcements, how-tos, and even Mad Libs—celebrate the humor of girls and offer a model for navigating the tricky middle grades with a sense of perspective and positivity. Graphic offerings from Cece Bell (*El Deafo*), Raina Telgemeier (*Smile*), and Meghan McCarthy are complemented by spot illustrations in other stories, including those by Sophie Blackall (*Finding Winnie*), Jennifer L. Holm (*Babymouse*), and Ursula Vernon (*Dragonbreath*). While the first entry in the collection affords an opportunity to discuss the difference between *making fun of* and *having fun with*, there is much to enjoy here with relatable
of “mira” is from the Latin word meaning “astonishing.” Mira is just that, as she finds the strength to question the world as she has known it in order to escape her glass prison.

While Mira cannot speak, she is observant. With the help of her friends, a gorgeously illustrated octopus and a local girl named Livia, Mira begins to wonder about life outside the aquarium, setting off a chain of events that lead to her freedom and the destruction of the aquarium. This fantastical story is about the serious topics of manipulation and abduction, but it is also about friendship and a desire to live one’s best life despite great risks. The watercolor illustrations in Fish Girl mirror the mysterious nature of the ocean itself. The full range of emotions experienced by the mermaid are particularly well illustrated, giving emotional weight to her plight and her eventual freedom from captivity. The graphic novel form with its sparse dialogue is well chosen for Mira’s story as a girl searching for her voice, her identity, and her freedom. (KEC)

Old Man’s Journey
Created by Felix Bohatsch
Distributed by Broken Rules, 2017
Available for iOS, Android, PC, and Mac

An enigmatic letter, a backpack, and a walking stick: these are the only clues we have to begin the app and the adventure embarked upon by the titular old man. As a wordless narrative puzzle, users must decide which direction to pursue and what happens next in the old man’s story. To move him along his journey and solve the mystery, users must manipulate the landscape, lowering hills, raising valleys, and stretching roads across a coastal terrain. Along the way, there are people, animals, objects, and scenes that spark flashbacks to provide clues about the man’s past, why he undertakes this excursion, and what may be waiting for him at the end of his voyage, thus layering another narrative for users. Each move is a riddle to solve, and without text, it’s up to users to think narratively and rationally about what makes sense. Fortunately, there are many paths the main character can take and no penalty for trial-and-error. Evoking both a wistfulness and a wanderlust, each scene is a breathtaking work of digital art, with bright, vivid details and enjoyable sound effects. A contemporary take on the choose-your-own adventure novel for today’s tech-savvy learners, Old Man’s Journey will appeal to users of all ages for its gorgeous illustrations, compelling storyline, and addictive game-playing qualities. (GE)

Buried Alive: The Secret Michelangelo Took to His Grave
Created by Mary Hoffman
Produced by Sarah Towle
Time Traveler Tours, 2017
Available for iOS and Android

Want a multigenre app that allows students to interact with history, art, and artifacts while letting them in on a centuries-old secret? Time Traveler Tours’ fascinating app allows young people to interact with Michelangelo’s life and works through a combination of historical fiction and
nonfiction text, architecture, paintings, sculpture, maps, and museums. Users can choose how they experience Michelangelo’s life: via the story of his life or via a treasure tour through Florence. For those lucky enough to be in Florence, the app takes the user on an interactive journey exploring the art and architecture of the city while making important connections to Michelangelo’s life, but users everywhere can learn about his biography as well as the Italian Renaissance and the emergence of Italian city-states.

The story is a mostly fictionalized first-person account, starting with Michelangelo’s secret location. Readers are supported throughout by clear icons (hands from the Sistine Chapel point you forward or back), “Fun Facts and Tricky Terms” that provide important definitions and background information, audio recordings of the text, and close-up high-resolution images of his work. Through these interactive explorations, readers can learn about the artistic process—from copying the old masters to brainstorming new ways to represent a familiar topic—and connect with timeless themes of political and artistic rivalries. This app is ideal for tweens passionate about the time period or learning about it in school. (MAC)