

*“Stella East’s thesis represents one of the best pieces  
of scholarship I have seen in a Master’s thesis.”*

External Examiner: Professor Peggy Albers

## A Summary and Presentation of the Thesis:

### PICTURING STORIES:

THE INTEGRITY AND MARGINALIZATION OF VISUAL STORYTELLING  
IN CHILDREN’S PICTUREBOOKS

STELLA EAST

Supervisors:

Professor Sharon Murphy, Professor Peter E. Cumming, and Professor Don Dippo

GRADUATE PROGRAMME IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

YORK UNIVERSITY,  
TORONTO, ONTARIO  
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- *including citations from the examination committee, the thesis abstract, and the first subchapters of four chapters.*

*What has been said about –*

**Stella East's Master's Thesis in Interdisciplinary Studies**

## PICTURING STORIES:

THE INTEGRITY AND MARGINALIZATION OF VISUAL STORYTELLING  
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“The discussion on semiotics, although largely structural, is one of the most thorough and well-explained that I have read. Across the thesis, Ms. East integrates this strong theoretical standpoint to argue her points about the role of visual language in picturebooks and is a passion that merits publication as part of this thesis's future.”

*External Examiner: Professor Peggy Albers*

“This research brings an original and much needed perspective to the role of visual storytelling in children's picturebooks. She challenges orthodoxies that pervade the field and bases her challenge and grounds it confidently and substantively in theory, research, and professional experience. The oral examination provided rich discussion that we all agree changes the way in which we view picturebooks. The committee encourages the candidate to publish from this research.”

*The Examining Committee's statement for Stella East's  
Oral Examination, August 22, 2008<sup>1</sup>*

“This thesis was such a pleasure to read . . .”

*External Examiner: Professor Peggy Albers*

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<sup>1</sup> Chair: Professor Yvonne Singer, York University, Ca.  
Dean's Representative: Professor Esther Fine, York University, Ca.  
Supervisor: Professor Sharon Murphy, York University, Ca.  
External Examiner: Professor Peggy Albers, Georgia State University, USA.

## Abstract

## Picturing Stories:

## The Integrity and Marginalization of Visual Storytelling in Children's Picturebooks

by Stella East

This thesis examines how illustrations in children's picturebooks can be considered a picturing of the story, rather than a picturing of the words. My interest in the integrity of the picturebook has developed within my work as a picturebook illustrator where I consider my role as that of a visual storyteller rather than as a mere decorator of an author's textual narrative. My interdisciplinary approach to this thesis investigates picturebook illustration as visual language, and as an art form, within a visual storytelling tradition. These properties are demonstrated by discussing thirteen narrative works including picturebooks. The integrity of these works is then contrasted with biases practiced in the publishing and cultural community, which lead away from the appreciation and development of the picturebook's visual story. The importance of the picturebook image is manifested in its role as a child reader's introduction to visual literacy, visual art, and the visual narrative.

## Chapter 2

### Visual Language

In this chapter I will argue for a semiotic system, which I choose to call “visual language.” To do this I will deploy common conceptualizations from verbal language such as *vocabulary, syntax, grammar* and the *parts of speech* such as *nouns* and *verbs* and their *modifiers* and discuss how these can be applied to visual language. Furthermore I will draw upon the descriptors that participate in Ferdinand De Saussure’s definition of “the linguistic sign,” such as the *arbitrary and discursive nature of words*, the word as *sound-image and concept*, words as *distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas, langue and parole*, and the position of language in *time among a community of speakers*. I then further demonstrate parallel characteristics and principles within a definition of the pictorial sign. In addition to this I will discuss theories of Charles S. Peirce, W.J.T. Mitchell, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen among others. I thereby demonstrate how visual language may require additional descriptors besides those of verbal language. By using this comparison I will shed light on how the roles of these sign systems of visual and verbal language articulate and modify meaning by being situated within the same picturebook, creating a “third voice.”

## Chapter 3

### Visual Storytelling

In this chapter I will provide theoretical and illustrative argumentation for the visual expression of stories in static pictures, which I choose to call “visual storytelling.” By drawing upon common conceptualizations from narratology, such as “focalization,” and “the passing of time,” I will identify these conceptualizations and demonstrate how they function within a pictorial context. Though my focus within this thesis is the picturebook picture, I will provide argumentation for how narratives are represented within single pictures and across multiple pictures, and the traditional development of such image making. I will thereby situate the picturebook image, its creator, and its audience within this field. By juxtaposing visual storytelling in picturebooks with conventional practices within the visual arts, I will demonstrate the similarities and differences within these fields including their relationships to reproduction and to the written word.

## Chapter 4

### The Integrity of the Visual Narrative

In the previous chapters I have discussed the principles of visual language, the structures of visual storytelling, and the history of the visual story. In this chapter I will use the ideas from these chapters to discuss a group of four narrative works: Fergus Hall's Groundsel (1982), (Fig. 2); Frida Kahlo's "The Little Deer" (1946), (Fig. 17); Jindra Capek's Tales of a Long Afternoon (1988), (Fig. 6); and David Blackwood's "Fire Down on the Labrador" (1980), (Fig. 16).

Conventional opinion might separate these works simply into two categories: *illustrations* and *art*, on the grounds that the pictures in the picturebooks only tell a story already told, whereas those pictures considered *art* have been created with the integrity of the artist. I propose to demonstrate that the images presented in this chapter, picture stories with the integrity of the storyteller, whether considered *illustration* or whether considered *art*, or both. Each of these images has a relationship to words and previously told stories each in its own way. The picturebook Groundsel, for example, is told both in words and images by the same author, and is interwoven with previously told stories such as "Father Time." "Fire Down on the Labrador" is based on oral storytelling about fishing trips to Labrador combined with Blackwood's own experiences. "The Little Deer" is based on stories and motifs from Mexico and Europe, re-worked and woven together

with Kahlo's own life. Capek's Aesop's Fables in Tales of a Long Afternoon is a visual re-telling and re-working of traditional tales that have been re-told numerous of times by others in various mediums. The verbal storyteller and the visual storyteller are therefore, in this case, in the same position, re-telling and re-working visual or verbal motifs and concepts of previously told stories, abiding with particular conventions, grammar, and content of the story's own storytelling traditions. Furthermore, all four of these works circulate within a community of readers, chronologically arranged in picturebooks, on websites, and in art books.

The differences among these images, whether created for presentation in a picturebook, a gallery, a postcard, or a poster, are not those of a relationship to words or reproduction techniques, or whether they are defined as illustrations or fine art. The differences among these images lie rather within the integrity of each image as an independent articulation with aesthetic and narrative signification. By identifying the diverse storytelling properties present in these four static works, I will position the picturebook's visual story within a larger field of visual narrative. With the use of narrative concepts such as the passing of time, focalization and so forth, I will describe how colours and forms, the pictorial syntax, as well as previously told stories and visual motifs articulate these concepts. By comparing the content and narrative structures of these modern images with earlier narrative images, I will place these works within a visual storytelling tradition.

## Chapter 5

### The Visual Story in Children's Picturebooks: Mere Decoration for a Written Text?

The children's picturebook can be a haven for the contemplation and appreciation of the static narrative image, allowing the possibility for a story and an experience to be shared between an adult and a child. The picturebook is also a unique arena for the development of pictorial language and visual storytelling. The visual story in picturebooks, however, is often undermined and marginalized by biased assumptions that influence crucial decision-making. These biases then have profound consequences for the potential of each picturebook and the reader's possibility of a numinous experience.

In this chapter I will draw upon examples from my own experiences as a picturebook illustrator, as well as examples from the publishing industry, the fine art industry, the cultural community, as well as written texts to demonstrate practices detrimental to the picturebook's development and integrity. I will identify claims and practices, no matter how subtle, which I believe, indirectly or directly, undermine the role and importance of visual storytelling in picturebooks and the consequences this undermining has for the illustrator, the picturebook audience, and the picturebook itself. These claims and practices include: misleading reviews in the media, or the lack of reviews altogether; the absence of the illustrator's name in cataloguing and marketing; narrow-minded marketing interests; badly prioritized financing; biased support



programmes for the arts; misunderstood pictorial editing practices; an attitude of indifference during the printing process; flawed literary criticism: misguided assumptions about visual authorship, visual literacy, storytelling and art; as well as everyday terminology that includes vaguely defined words such as “fine art” and “commercial art”

**“Picturing Stories:  
The Integrity and Marginalization of Visual Storytelling in  
Children’s Picturebooks”**

*The thesis “Picturing Stories,” which is 270 pages long, was begun in 2004 at York University, Toronto, Canada, and defended at an oral examination in 2008. The thesis was then nominated for a prize and recommended in part for publication.*



Stella’s oral examination at York University, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008

“Ms. East clearly demonstrates strong scholarship, writes in a strong confident voice and presents a breadth of knowledge about the fields about which she writes. She integrates a range of scholars including semioticians, picturebook illustrators and writers, art critics, historians and scholars. Further, she brings both practical and theoretical knowledge about the construction of picturebooks from her own position as an illustrator.

. . . Good scholarship is good teaching. Throughout the manuscript, I often paused to think about Ms. East’s arguments, her presentation of theory to support her arguments, and her presentation of the significance of visual language. Such reflection encouraged me to consider my own work with visual texts and pictorial semiotics. That I continue to think about my own thinking suggests the power and importance of this manuscript . . .”

*Report by External Examiner:*

*Professor Peggy Albers, Georgia State University, USA.*

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On September 9<sup>th</sup> 2008, just after finishing her thesis, Stella presented the paper, “**Freedom of Speech in Children’s Picturebook Illustration,**” at the 31<sup>st</sup> IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) World Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark. In a letter of recommendation, Professor Peter Cumming states, “Stella argues that (such a) [visual] language has been marginalized by privileging of verbal language and storytelling, and in her paper, Stella argues that such marginalization actually infringes on the “freedom of speech” of illustration. . . . I have had the pleasure of . . . attending Stella’s cogent, persuasive colloquium paper. I have no doubt that Stella’s presentation at IBBY will be carefully prepared and thoughtfully presented: she will represent York Faculty of Graduate Studies well in that international forum . . .”

