What’s in “the gap”? A glance down the central concept of picturebook theory

Clementine Beauvais*
Homerton College, Faculty of Education, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK

Abstract
This article proposes a metacritical analysis of the concept of the “readerly gap” in picturebooks, as theorised by scholars of picturebook research—whether theoretical or empirical. In contemporary picturebook research, gaps are both a descriptive and a normative feature of picturebooks: they both define this type of literature and are seen as guarantees of its aesthetic quality and sophistication. They are also a crucial aspect of studies of young reader’s responses to picturebooks, many of which are concerned with how children manage to navigate and “fill” gaps in iconotexts. Readerly gaps are perceived, it seems, as spaces belonging mostly to the reader, somewhat outside of the picturebook; in particular, they are seen as at least mostly protected from adult influence. I argue that the concept of the readerly gap is an interestingly paradoxical creation of adult scholars. Both empirical research on children reading picturebooks and theoretical picturebook studies reinforce the assumption that children are better “gap-fillers” than adults and that they can on occasion become teachers to adults as to how to interpret picturebooks. This optimistically child-centred epistemology stands in stark contrast to contemporary theoretical approaches to children’s literature, which insists on the aetonormative quality of such texts. However, the readerly gap, which I prefer to call a didactic gap, remains a space surrounded with and controlled by an adult injunction. It is beyond the picturebook, beyond even the experience of reading and of exploring children’s experiences of reading, that the fundamental indeterminacy of the picturebook gap can be truly said to dwell.

Keywords: picturebook theory; metacriticism; empirical research; children’s responses; didactic
strategies, intertextuality and intervisuality, and/or playfulness with the medium (Arizpe 2013; Arizpe et al. 2014).

This article offers a partly metacritical reflection on the critical celebration of readerly gaps, as well as a relocation of said gaps within the aesthetic—pedagogical divide central to children’s literature criticism, by looking at both theoretical and empirical research on children’s picturebooks. It is noteworthy, in scholarly literature, that gaps are seen not just as a descriptive but also as a normative feature of children’s picturebooks: “good” picturebooks are understood to be ones with gaps and more gaps make better picturebooks. Sometimes, this is explicit: “Many picture books—indeed, possibly all of the best ones—do not just reveal that pictures show us more than words can say,” says Nodelman (1988, 209). It is also implicit; there is a recurrence in scholarly literature, whether theoretical or empirical, of the same picturebook creators (from Pat Hutchins to David Wiesner through to Anthony Browne), seen as interesting because they offer more gaps, more opportunities for the reader to jump into the holes between misaligned text and pictures.

Why are gaps in picturebooks so theorised and so celebrated? At a basic level, any piece of discourse contains gaps, and literary texts are particularly patchy. Every text, says Umberto Eco (1995), “is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work” (3). Wolfgang Iser’s work, frequently quoted in picturebook criticism and theory, revolved around what that work might consist of. Aesthetic quality, however elusive the concept, does not always have a monopoly over gaps: even picturebooks which certain scholars would doubtlessly prefer to call “illustrated texts” present gaps, spurring the reader into action without saying so in words or pictures. Many works of literature, whether for adults or for children, whether prize-winning or formatted for supermarket sales, are as narratively holey as a cardboard target in a shooting range.

But picturebook gaps appear particularly worthy of technical attention, particularly connected to ideals of aesthetic merit, and particularly relevant to children’s experiences of reading—why? This article suggests that the “central feature” of picturebook theory, echoed in empirical research on children reading picturebooks, is intriguingly ambiguous: sometimes content-free, sometimes full of “messages.” With the readerly gap, I shall argue, researchers celebrate the freedom of the child and laud the artistic control of the creators, but this enclosed “readerly” space is not entirely an elsewhere of the iconotext: it remains within its didactic transaction.

MEETING THE CHILD IN THE GAP

The child reader is never far from purely theoretical descriptions of picturebooks. Engaging in picturebook theory from the premises that (good) picturebooks are “more than the sum of their parts” is already a form of reader-response criticism. It is impossible to talk of the interplay between words and images, and of the resulting necessity to put them together, without alluding to the person who should be doing the putting-together. The large amount of empirical research on children which focuses on their effective ability to navigate the gaps in picturebooks stands in contrast with empirical research on readers of children’s or Young Adult novels, which is more frequently concerned with ideological and ethical judgements and identity construction. The questions which dominate empirical research with children reading picturebooks—How do they manage to read complex iconotexts? How do they make sense of them?—testify to the primacy in picturebook scholarship of a medium-focused approach.

I would like to make a number of statements regarding the nature of empirical picturebook research when it tackles the question of children’s abilities to fill in the gaps of sophisticated picturebooks. Firstly, such research tends to show a rather deferential attitude of the adult researchers towards children reading picturebooks. Many articles and books of empirical research on children reading picturebooks betray reverence, indeed even a fascination of sorts, for the child participants’ ability to make sense of complex iconotexts. The independence of the reader is often mentioned when speaking of this gap, emphasised by terms such as “imaginative” or “interpretive” reading, with the child engaging in “co-authorship” (Pantaleo 2004, 9; 2012, 66; Sipe 2011, 247). This respect for the child reader’s independent meaning-making implies that there is little possibility for the adult researchers to anticipate children’s responses to picturebooks; whatever interpretation lies in the gap is for the children to create, and for researchers to then decode. Children’s responses are thus seen as lying outside of the scholarly reading of the picturebooks. Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles’s seminal work on children’s responses to complex picturebooks (2003) thus mentions how much the child participants “surprised” the researchers.
Perry Nodelman reportedly criticised *Children Reading Pictures* for its “optimism.” But this “optimism” is fairly characteristic of most picturebook criticism, theory, and empirical research that focuses on readerly gaps. Of all domains of children’s literature research, picturebook scholarship is perhaps the most animated by the desire to show how imaginative, creative and interpretive child readers can be. Susan Fremantle (1993, 7) points out that children can be “better readers” than adults; this thought is echoed by Lawrence Sipe (2008): “It is possible that young children are more comfortable than adults with this new definition of text as a collection of signifiers with infinite possibilities for meaning making” (234). This stands in contrast with contemporary theories of children’s literature more widely, which tend to assert the conservativeness of this type of text and the fact that it perpetuates adult domination over children (Rose 1984; Nodelman 2008; Nikolajeva 2010; see also Beauvais 2015). Arizpe and Styles seem “optimistic,” because, I think, picturebook theory and empirical research is situated ideologically in direct opposition to the scholarly notion that children’s literature is inherently aetonormative, that is to say normalising adulthood to the detriment of childhood (Nikolajeva 2010).

There is a mostly unarticulated notion, within empirical picturebook research, that children are not oppressed but in fact privileged readers of picturebooks made for them by adults. Their skill in making sense of these picturebooks is particularly perceived as connected to gaps. Empirical research on children reading picturebooks is animated by researchers’ genuine excitement at the possibility of reaching, through the children, an un-adult-erated, “childly” way of constructing meaning from text and images (Hollindale 1997). Of course, never does any researcher assume an essentialist viewpoint: completely independent interpretation being impossible, children’s influences are often foregrounded. But it is sometimes made clear that a childly nature is an essential ingredient in the alchemical process towards good picturebook-reading. As Arizpe et al. (2008) write, “the children were aided in their endeavours by the huge range of contemporary visual media they have access to, all the time laughing and playing as they orchestrated a complex array of elements with flair and grace” (220).

Such descriptions could be labelled Romantic in the loose sense, in that they place emphasis on the child’s experiences and constructs as more open and more explorative than adults’. William Blake’s linguistic heritage in the quotation above is particularly striking. Children are portrayed not so much as influenced than as inspired readers, who are almost always equipped to be launched into interpretive no-man’s-lands to invest and imagine. Sipe (2008) offers a glimpse of interpretive freedom in children’s reading of *The Three Pigs*: “At this point, the field is wide open for their interpretation, with little or no help from their intertextual knowledge …. These comments were followed by a set of fascinating metaphysical speculation” (231). Janet Evans (2011) uses a similar rhetoric: “This question was rather like opening a dam. It instigated a long discussion that was very philosophical” (204). The children’s interpretations, triggered by readerly gaps, appear to call upon intuitive wisdom.

This is connected to the belief, transparently proclaimed in many studies of children reading picturebooks, that encounters with picturebooks can reveal yet undiscovered facts about individual children’s capacities. Often research is conducted, as indeed it ought to be, on struggling readers. Such experiments can have a great impact on children. This is from McGuire et al. (2008):

> The children embraced and wrestled through the newness and ambiguity, playing, debating ... voicing their own stories. Faced with these texts, students often labeled as deficient were in fact able to form sophisticated literary interpretations. (205)

There is no mention in the above quotation as to who did the “facing,” or who watched the children. Researchers frequently adopt a humble attitude, assigning the success of their experiments not to themselves and their guidance, but to the picturebooks and the methodologies employed. This relative self-effacement contributes to the understanding outlined earlier: children’s abilities to decode picturebook gaps can reveal elements of their personalities and potential which were until then undiscovered by adults.

Secondly, empirical research on children reading picturebooks is by necessity marked in itself by other gaps—those in the data obtained. Those gaps are due in part to the verbal “limitations” of the participants. The missing pieces of the picturebook jigsaw, often, are not easily be framed by words, and if child readers enter this dimension of the picturebook, they cannot always verbalise it. Arizpe and Styles’s (2003) work repeatedly mentions that, although children relish this unspoken realm, they sometimes express it creatively (through drawing) better than through a language which they do not
fully control. Maybe this readerly gap, to be verbalised, would require vocabulary that is inaccessible to younger children. Arizpe’s recent work on wordless picturebooks highlight the implicit bias of researchers in favour of verbalisation (Arizpe 2013; Arizpe et al. 2014); in response, Arizpe foregrounds the value of silence as an affordance given by such picturebooks in an otherwise word-filled world; rather than asking children to “immediately add their own [words],” she recommends “[allowing] them to make the most of this silent space” (2013, 175). Arizpe’s research can be said to have pioneered the use of non-verbal responses to picturebooks, with notable studies including, for instance, photographic data (Arizpe and McAdam 2011).

This unspeakability of the “contents” of the gaps for individual readers is both a motivation and a challenge for much empirical research on children reading picturebooks. Such research relies on scholars’ abilities to decrypt, frame and rearticulate children’s responses, by looking into the gaps of the children’s discourses (whether verbal, visual, photographic, or indeed gestural). The scholarly analysis of children’s words and pictures—and of the gaps in-between—is in itself iconotextual; researchers replicate, analysing their data, what children did when interpreting the picturebooks. There is a mise en abyme of gaps in such research, from gaps in the picturebooks being interpreted by children to gaps in the “childly” data being interpreted by adults. This Chinese-box hermeneutics is marked by the adult sense that the child is the ideal interpreter of picturebooks, but that they can do so only in a Pythia-like manner which the adult must then interpret. In this double interpretation we witness the hope for an understanding of the child’s mind across all its—well—gaps.

Perhaps picturebooks are less at stake in such studies than the discovery of that childly elsewhere of interpretation, and what it can tell adults. Empirical research on children reading picturebooks and exploring their gaps is indeed often characterised by an interestingly counter-didactic ethos. Researchers are interested in how children fill the gaps because the gaps, it is frequently implied, could potentially be filled with anything; possibilities are “infinite,” as Sipe says. Children are entry-points into this infinity of possibilities. The most often used words in empirical research of this kind evoke epistemological relativism: there are no right or wrong answers but rather an array of reactions. Children “respond to,” “make sense of,” “interpret” picturebooks. Such words denote, as is common in social science, a constructionist epistemology. However, this constructed knowledge is frequently associated with the attitude towards children developed earlier, which leads to a latent, and again rather Romantic, assumption that children could teach adults about what could be found in picturebook gaps.

This assumption is openly stated in many a work of research; Arizpe and Styles, already vocal about this counter-didactic move in their earlier work (2003) reiterate these thoughts in a later work (Arizpe et al. 2008, 207): “We were delighted by the way children responded to postmodern picturebooks, inspiring us with their enthusiastic and insightful interpretations of multimodal texts.” The vocabulary here draws from the lexical field of religion, with the words “inspire,” “enthusiasm” (etymologically: “God is in us”), “spiritual.” It is not an exaggeration to say that the child symbolically becomes angelic through such descriptions, passing on a message to the adult which she/he has to interpret in turn. The child thus temporarily becomes a teacher to the adult by navigating picturebook gaps. Susan Fremantle (1993), along the same lines as Arizpe and Styles, declares: “Enjoy [picturebooks] with children. Let them teach you. Just for once we need not know any answers . . . All the children need is “space” and freedom from our expectations. Perhaps that’s what we need too” (13). When the child does not directly “teach” the adult, the picturebook can be presented as affording the suspension of the didactic, even at the heart of a school; this is visible, for instance, in Maria Ghiso and Caroline McGuire’s (2007) study of the flexibility of teacher readalouds in the classroom when the picturebooks have sparse verbal elements. As Sandie Mourão (2013) puts it, as teachers, “We are all guilty of taking a picturebook into the classroom and assuming that it contains one story, our story” (112); yet the iconotext resists such monologic thinking, and so should educators. Such studies foreground researchers’ hopes for a counter-didactic or non-didactic space in the encounter between child and picturebook, whether at home or at school. This space stems from the presence of gaps in the picturebook themselves, from which adult authority is absent.

Children’s literature may be a conservative arena, a battleground of adult influences; but picturebooks, with their numerous gaps, appear in scholarly discourse to be less constrictive. There are no “expectations,” says Fremantle—in other words, the adult cannot predict what can be found
in gaps. Free from certainty, the gap is turned into a blind spot of adult authority, which the child is at leisure to fill with anything—and then tell us. This telling is akin to teaching, and it is not simply teaching about what could be in the gap, but also about the childly mode of thinking which dominates these discoveries.

**READERLY GAPS OR DIDACTIC GAPS?**

Picturebook theory, criticism and empirical research stand out as highly attuned to the latent power of childhood in a field rather dominated by the warning that children’s literature can be oppressive to children; they are oases of adult humility and curiosity for children as people rather than as constructs. However, it is important from a metacritical angle to note the implications of all research positions, and I would like to probe those particular ones, especially as they connect to the concept of the picturebook gap.

To recapitulate briefly what has been previously said: the theoretical and critical study of picturebook gaps, especially in postmodern picturebooks, is paralleled with empirical explorations of the ways in which children navigate and respond to these gaps. Such empirical research has been characterised—not universally, but for a large part—by a number of epistemological standpoints: firstly, that children are often “better” at reading picturebooks than adults and at exploring the picturebook gaps; secondly, that adult researchers must in turn act as interpreters of the gaps in the children’s discourses; thirdly, that children’s abilities to read picturebook gaps can teach adults or at least suspend unequal pedagogical relations. These standpoints are underscored by another, which is that the picturebook readerly gap is a space somewhat outside the didactic.

One implication of this statement is that the gap temporarily expiates adults of their didactic ascent over children. The impression that the picturebook gap is free from didactic adult influence, reinforced by the term “readerly,” deactivates for a particular, highly contextualised moment the aetonormative nature of the children’s literature researcher’s work. The readerly gap is thus, I think, in theory and in practice, of somewhat redemptive value for the adult: it positions “us” adults as listeners, learners and inherently lacking, and instates the child reader as authority and teacher. The readerly gap makes us temporarily innocent of the authoritative tendencies over children that children’s literature theory tends to denounce. Within the iconotexts, readerly gaps are theorised as interpretive sinkholes, into which right and wrong disappear. This hermeneutic collapse is celebrated as a time when the reader gains control. It is, however, encircled with solid interpretive ground; although it is not always possible to pinpoint gaps, they do not occur in a vacuum. Moments of loss exist only as affordances within an ordered system.

However, the idea that the readerly gap is non-didactic is contestable. To begin with, the presence of readerly gaps—not of a space of exploration for the reader—is often associated, in theoretical and empirical research, with a tangible adult authority: not the researchers, but the adult creators of the picturebook. Indeed, picturebook theory is perhaps the field of children’s literature scholarship which most often quotes creators, either to reinforce its findings or to nuance them; many pieces of picturebook research begin and/or end with creators speaking (Arizpe and Styles 2003; Sipe 2008; Evans 2009; Sipe 2011; Arizpe et al. 2014). These creators tend to confirm that gaps in picturebooks are the result of careful work. Anthony Browne says: “What excites me . . . is working out the rhythm of the story and seeing how much is told by the pictures, how much by the words, and how much by the gap between the two” (interviewed by Evans 2009, 194). In picturebook theory, the author-illustrator’s creative processes are probed almost as intently as the children’s reactions. Many articles and books use sentences implicating the author-illustrator as active subject rather than the less specific “narrator,” and attributing clear intentions to creators: “Was Colin Thompson linking Norman’s life to reality?” asks Evans (2011, 207), before adding: “Of course this is for the reader to respond to and decide” (id.). Thus an interesting tug-in-war between author-illustratorial intentions and readerly responses is established, with readerly gaps as its privileged arena. David E. Low (2012) puts this forward in his exploration of the gutter in comics as readerly gap: “Together, author and reader co-construct a meaning that cannot be said to definitively exist on the page itself” (372–373).

On a superficial level, it could seem like speaker and addressee are considered as equally free, and the picturebook’s numerous gaps as a shield against didactic transaction. However, I would say that it is not quite the case. This quotation by Judith Graham (1990) illustrates the issue: “Children respond to the respect which these serious author/illustrator accord them and learn how to read the important message that books can bring” (107). Graham is here saying that the adult picturebook
I said *almost* infinitely, because gaps cannot reasonably accommodate all readerly interpretations. Eco (1995), analysing a particularly patchy extract from *Tristram Shandy*, concludes:

> Avant-garde narrative has often tried not only to upset our expectations as readers but even to create readers who expect complete freedom of choice from the book they are reading. Yet this freedom can be enjoyed precisely because—on the strength of a tradition thousands of years old, comprising narratives ranging from primitive myths to the modern detective novel—readers are generally willing to make their own choices . . . on the assumption that some will be more reasonable than others. (8)

The “reasonable” extrapolation and controlled freedom allowed by readerly gaps in *Tristram Shandy* transfer well to an analysis of gaps in children’s picturebooks. The child reader cannot be expected to be fully familiar with the literary “tradition of a thousand years old” which will have taught them to limit interpretive freedom according to the parameters of the text they are reading. And yet, as Eco shrewdly implies, it is only when this interpretive freedom is *curbed* to espouse the possibilities raised by the text that it becomes valuable.

In other words, the young reader is “free” to interpret the ending of John Burningham’s *Granpa* (2003) as the grandfather’s departure to a retirement home, as his death, as a kidnapping by aliens, or as his having shrunk so much that he is not visible to the naked eye anymore. But only the most liberal educator (and certainly no literary critic) could insist that these various interpretations are equally valid, and most readers young and old could arguably rank them in order of plausibility. The freedom of the reader to fill in the iconotextual gap loses meaning when it overlooks the more or less gentle pushes of the iconotext, everywhere around the gaps, towards certain interpretations.

This is something that many picturebook researchers of course recognise, particularly when they are interested in the study of picturebooks from a pedagogical perspective. Coosje van der Pol (2012) proposes the following definition of literary competence, enhanced by encounters with indeterminacies in picturebooks:

> Competence is itself defined by a particular interpretive community and its norms of what is acceptable; moreover, that normative frame of reference may be adjusted to accommodate new readings if they are communally deemed suitable. However, it will
Ironically perhaps, gaps therefore have paraphrasable content. Even a sophisticated iconotext such as Anthony Browne’s *Zoo* (1992) can be summed up in a “reasonable” way. Jane Doonan’s analysis of the iconotext thus includes, on the same level as the description of the pictures, a description of its “message”: “The composite text . . . questions the value of caging wild animals for the casual pleasure of the majority of visitors” (Doonan 1993, quoted in Arizpe and Styles 2003, 77). There is little doubt, here again, that the gaps are fully part of the didactic discourse of the iconotext: they have ideological purposes, and there is a limit to how far their interpretation can go.

Of course this is an adult interpretation, and “reasonableness” is here highly aetonormative. But Arizpe and Styles’ (2003) study shows that “most children read *Zoo* as a book which is severely critical about animals being held in captivity,” though “there is no reference to this in the written text” (79), and “for children to judge that this is a book about how humans treat animals . . . they have to be able to interpret irony and read moral ideas into pictures” (id.). The development of this interpretation coincides with the acculturation of the child, and their increased engagement with iconotexts. If anything, the didactic nature of the gaps in picturebooks could be said to increase alongside readerly sophistication. These gaps are not only inherent to the didactic discourse of the iconotexts; any shrewd interpretation of them by the child reader can only occur with a “reasonable” amount of (aetonormative) iconontextual literacy.

Rather than bemoaning this fact, Arizpe and Styles of course note that it is a good thing that children did not miss out on this understanding of *Zoo*. Yet this interpretation is indubitably didactic, controlled to a large extent by the iconotext. While other elements of the picturebook, such as the presence of a very fast snail, can give rise to fanciful explanations by children and adults alike, there is a sense that the denunciation of the treatment of animals is the unspoken manifesto of *Zoo*, contained in the didactic gaps of the iconotext. The implied child reader and didactic addressee is constructed by the text as the decoder of this implicit message over other interpretations. There can be no meaningful action spurred by this picturebook if the young reader fails to grasp the contents of the main readerly gap, or rather didactic gap, at its core. Nodelman (1988) perhaps exaggerates the problem when he says that “we confuse the ignorance of children with imagination far too often” (191). Though this might have been the case in the late eighties, researchers now make it very clear, both explicitly and implicitly, that there is a didactic purpose to the gaps, and a normative interpretation of them.

This is why research on children reading picturebooks has been used so much, and with no overt contradiction, in order to trigger reflection, for instance, on philosophical issues (Haynes and Murris 2012; Maagerø and Østbye 2012), to awaken spirituality (Kendall 1999), to tackle complex political and identity questioning (Arizpe et al. 2014). So gaps do contain adult knowledge and authority, and the possibility for fully didactic—in the non-pejorative sense of the word—pedagogical explorations, framed by adults inside and outside the book. What gaps do not contain, however, is a clear injunction as to what is to be done with this knowledge, and that is what empirical and theoretical research is truly engaged in deciphering. If the child fails to interpret the gaps in *Zoo* as a critique of zoos, the picturebook loses an important part of its meaning. But the part of the gap which still remains to be filled is far beyond the adult’s control, and far beyond the reading of the book: it concerns the modification of the child and future adult’s actions according to this implicit “message.” This modification is unpredictable. This is where the full potential of the didactic address arises: in a temporality unavailable to the adult authority, and therefore influenced but not predicted by the didactic address. The critique of zoos is still entirely on the adult’s side of the children’s picturebook. But acting upon that critique meaningfully is the domain of the child reader.

The celebration of readerly gaps in picturebooks, I think, highlights two conflicting phenomena in the scholarly adult authority: a desire to channel the child reader into a fruitful line of reflection, and a desire to trigger unpredictable responses branching out from that line of reflection. The second desire suggests that, to an extent, the adult authority does not perceive itself as having the answers to the questions it asks, nor the power to act upon the considerations they trigger. The didactic gap in picturebooks epitomises the problem of the limit of adult power, and the ensuing respect, and rightful reverence, for an elsewhere of childly freedom.

**Note**

1. According to Evelyn Arizpe herself, who responded to that comment in her paper at the Stockholm picturebook conference, September 2013.