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Mary E. Jellema
Hope College

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Professional Materials

Looking at Picture Books. Written by John Warren Stewig. Highsmith Press, Fort Atkinson, WI 53538. 1995. 269 pp. US\$49.00.

Mary E. Jellema
Hope College at Holland, MI

Looking at Picture Books may not create instant art critics, but it does give essential, basic information for people who stammer or grope for words when asked to evaluate picture storybooks. The presentation is orderly and comprehensive; it assumes little critical expertise on the part of the reader. Helpful marginal notes give definitions, further references, and background information. There are also several appendices and an index.

The first four chapters provide predictable information: the variety of books within the picture book category; pictorial elements such as line, shape, and color; compositional principles such as visual unity, variety, balance, and rhythm; and a fine chapter on a wide variety of media.

In addition to these basics, Stewig includes a valuable chapter on book design, a topic often overlooked by beginning picture book critics. This section shows the complexity of the total book-making project, a project that requires many collaborative decisions by illustrators and editors: What size and shape will the book be? Weight and texture of the paper?

Material for the binding? Design of the endpages and book jacket? Typefaces? Layout of text and pictures? Amount of white space? These questions cover most conventionally formatted books, but when one considers more innovative works, Stewig points out that one may encounter paper engineering wizardry as well as partial pages and die-cut features.

Picture book fanciers who think some illustrations belong in an art gallery can find justification for their views in Stewig's last chapter, "The Influence of Art Movements." This section takes us beyond the obvious: it supplies a short, accessible history of modern art and demonstrates how such movements as expressionism, pointillism, abstraction, and surrealism influence illustrators of children's picture books. For example, Stewig notes the similarity between the heavy outlines that define figures in John Steptoe's early works like *Stevie* and the bold linear qualities of Georges Rouault, a painter in the French group called *les fauves*. With this information, the alert reader may immediately consider David Diaz's thick lines in his illustrations for the 1995 Caldecott award winner, *Smoky Night*, and be enriched by understanding the historical context.

Looking at Picture Books would be a valuable resource for teachers, children's librarians, students of children's literature, children's booksellers, as well as aspiring illustrators. Several sections at the end of chapters, however, are aimed particularly at teachers and librarians. Some of the suggestions sounded wise and manageable for most elementary schools. For instance, at the end of the chapter on pictorial elements, Stewig suggests using several illustrated versions of a single folktale to compare and contrast styles and techniques. He also wonders if studying art in picture books could teach children ways to solve their own art problems.

An effective program for either teachers or librarians is presented in the final chapter: an "illustrator-of-the-month" program in which as many books as possible of one illustrator are read, discussed, and displayed for a month. I know of a kindergarten teacher who does this, and by the end of the year, the five-year-olds in her class are astonishingly perceptive about the visual quality of the books they view. Stewig also wisely includes a short section discussing the pros and cons of using film and video versions of picture books. He also touches on adaptations of picture books to computer programs.

As a whole, the book is inviting, although the presence of only twelve colored plates (amid numerous black-and-white prints) seems rather few for a book entitled *Looking at Picture Books*. Some reference gaps exist, for instance, Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter* is discussed in Chapter 6, but it is not listed with his other books at the end of the chapter. The text also needs more careful proofreading. In spite of these flaws, I would recommend this book enthusiastically to my college children's literature classes, knowing that their visual literacy quotient would rise significantly by reading it.

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