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## Moving Across Rural Spaces: A Content Analysis of Contemporary Realistic Fiction Picturebooks With Rural Settings

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## Moving Across Rural Spaces: A Content Analysis of Contemporary Realistic Fiction Picturebooks With Rural Settings

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### Abstract

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Romanticized rural storytelling creates difficulties for rural children in finding mirrors, seeing people like themselves and places like their homes as principal characters and settings in picturebooks. The same romanticism likewise makes it unlikely for picturebook readers in cities and suburbs to find realistic windows into rural life. Despite children's book publishers' purposeful increases in realistic representations of children across racial and cultural groups in recent decades, realistic and diverse narratives within rural spaces remain underrepresented, if not invisible. Drawing on critical rural theory (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014; Williams, 1973) and tenets of nostalgia and the rural idyll (Boym, 2001, 2007; Sanders, 2013), this article examines representations of rural life in picturebooks with integral rural settings, focusing on stereotypical representations of isolation, nostalgia, and rural childhoods. The analysis highlights how depictions of movement have a direct effect on how characters interact across the rural space and how movement from one place to another, or lack thereof, influences agency, time, and story endings. The authors call for more diverse books focused on rural narratives that would work to dismantle the single story that stereotypes contribute to and to do justice to the complexity and diversity of rural life.

**Keywords:** *rural picturebooks, rural settings, critical rural theory*

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When young readers encounter rural narratives in picturebooks, what are they likely to find? How will children who live in contemporary rural places see themselves in picturebooks? Will they be invited into or shut out of these imaginative worlds? Stereotypes of rural life in children's literature marginalize young readers (Eppley, 2010) just as stereotyping race, gender, religion, home language, and culture do (Johnson et al., 2019; Stephens, 1999). Normalized media forms mean minority readers and viewers seldom encounter main characters like themselves or experience settings like those they see in life (Johnson et al.,

2019). Children in rural places are a minority in the United States (Powell et al., 2013) and rural children of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender minorities, including children with disabilities, have even lower chances of seeing themselves in media (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014; Rieger & McGrail, 2015). Even among recent calls for diverse literature that “reflects and honors the lives of all young people” (We Need Diverse Books, 2021, para. 1), authentic narratives that might reflect the lives of the 9.3 million students who live in rural spaces (Blad, 2020) are still underrepresented.

Researchers of rural life (Azano, 2014; Eppley, 2010; Fulkerson & Lowe, 2016; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014) identify two common tendencies: (a) rural settings are stereotyped as deficient, vilified as dangerous and wild places from which people would want to escape or which they should tame and urbanize, and (b) rural settings are nostalgically stereotyped as abundant, happy, idyllic, and simple places to which people would want to escape. Media that build up either of these stereotypes perpetuate a binary *single story* (Adichie, 2009; Bishop, 1990; Tschida et al., 2014) of rural childhood. The prevalence of these two versions of rurality amounts to a kind of propaganda, encouraging people to reenact the image of life they see portrayed in media (Behrens, 2017; Jonasson, 2012).

However, among recent rural picturebooks (2010 to present), we found few that treat rural settings as deficits. Instead of a dangerous and threatening space, picturebooks have a tendency to depict the isolated and nostalgic rural childhood as safe, idyllic, and simple. Because picturebooks deliver mostly pleasant and benign stereotypes, critical conversations about rural life are difficult to start (Eppley, 2010). Any art form open only to romantic stereotypes is still reductive of human experience even when these representations feel harmless. Make no mistake: We are glad young rural children will not find a trend of picturebooks that identify their homes as backward and dangerous and the people of their communities as ignorant and needy. But the mere absence of negative representation is not all we hope for.

If picturebooks can act simultaneously as a space for critical conversations (Cueto & Brooks, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Koss, 2015; Schall et al., 2019; Sciorba & Jenkins, 2019) and as tools for nostalgic acculturation (Nodelman, 1988; Salmose, 2018; Sanders, 2013), readers will need to recognize and read against stereotypical representations of isolated, nostalgic, and idyllic rural childhoods. Reading against isolation means recognizing representations of movement and considering what those mean. Also, reading against nostalgia means recognizing the picturebook as a known vehicle for cultural transmission. Reading against idyllic rural childhoods means recognizing stereotypical images and words and countering them with accurate, current, and diverse realities.

Movement across and within rural spaces is significant in depicting the realism of relationships that characterize rural life. Repeating the trope of the isolated and separated rural space subordinates and marginalizes the relatedness and connectedness of rural life and people (Fulkerson & Lowe, 2016; Hayden, 2014; Williams, 1973). Distant does not have to mean disconnected. Even though the idyll of a simplified, tranquil, and leisurely rural space may play on the actual remoteness of rural areas, this is not always at the center of what life means for rural residents in the United States (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001). Realistic representations of rural life in children’s picturebooks should include not only visions of remoteness, which are certainly appropriate, but also connectedness and relationships among rural settings and other places. Roads are symbolic of this connectedness, with the human action they represent and the time they take to travel comprising one way of interpreting rural life (Balfour et al., 2011; Mandrona &

Mitchell, 2018; Williams, 1973). Mandrona and Mitchell (2018) challenge researchers to examine what roads might mean to diverse people and whether paths lead characters to the rural space or away from it. Because movement has a concrete presence in illustrations and narrative structures, attention to movement became a central lens for our analysis.

The effort in curating a text set of rural picturebooks merged our passion for children's literature with the challenges of preparing preservice teachers to teach in diverse rural areas in our state (Eckert & Petrone, 2013). Having lived in diverse rural places across the United States for extended periods of time, we each had a personal stake in looking for authentic rural narratives and searching for existing mirrors and windows in picturebooks for this underrepresented, or nearly invisible, population. To this end, we conducted a critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2019) of realistic fiction picturebooks with integral rural settings published in the last 10 years.

## Theoretical Frame

### Critical Rural Theory

Critical rural theory is a current extension of critical rural literary theory initiated by Raymond Williams (1973), who was an early critic of the tendency to romanticize rural life. More recently, sociologists Fulkerson and Thomas (2014) emphasized how power relationships between urban and rural life codefine each other and how a process of "urbanormativity" subordinates and marginalizes rural life by isolating it from the city and by viewing rural life through urban eyes. In picturebooks, as in film, television, video games, and other media (Fulkerson & Lowe, 2016) pure isolation ignores the connectedness of rural spaces and enables a fully stereotyped rurality (Balfour et al., 2011). When readers notice and consider moments of movement, they make openings for describing and critiquing representations of isolation. Researchers on rural life Balfour et al. (2011) found that transit between places underpins everyday living, both organizing rural space and lengthening time, and "this elongation of time in turn affects identities, since these are mostly constituted in relation to communities that exist in relative isolation in space and time from each other, and in greater isolation from urban centres" (p. 101). The concept of movement within and across rural spaces gave us a lens for reading against stereotypes of isolation and for understanding how rural settings are constructed in picturebooks.

### Nostalgic Representations of the Rural Idyll

According to Sanders (2013), nostalgia is "the rewriting of childhood according to the longing of adults and the acculturation, the attempted indoctrination of children into a social order over which adults have dominance, are both built into the nature of picturebooks" (p. 68). When the nostalgic nature of picturebooks as an art form is joined with the nostalgic metaphors for rural spaces, the indoctrinating effect is doubled. Eppley (2018) suggests that readers must deconstruct iconic images of material culture, gender roles, and daily activities to learn whether nostalgia for the rural idyll has positioned them to accept these images as truth (Boym, 2007). Idyllic storytelling emphasizes the rural as simple, leisurely, and tranquil. Because restorative nostalgia (Boym, 2001, 2007) presents itself as truth, it compounds the ways realistic fiction already positions readers to accept constructed narratives as truth since "in many ways, realistic fiction persuades the reader to ignore the workings of language, blurring the line between reality and fiction" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 209). The rural idyll suggests a fulfilling and satisfying childhood for all but refers to a leisurely, conflict-free rural life that is generally the vision of privi-

leged outsiders (Williams, 1973).

The theoretical lenses of movement and the nostalgic rural idyll guided our readings, helping us appreciate, analyze, and deconstruct fictional images of contemporary rural life.

## Review of Literature

### Authentic Rural Mirrors and Windows

Despite purposeful increases in diverse books across recent decades, realistic rural spaces remain invisible (Eppley, 2010, 2018). If children's literature can map onto children's identities, what do children see when reading and viewing visual narratives that romanticize the rural spaces where they live? Bishop (1990) suggests books should act as both *windows* and *mirrors* for readers. Adiche (2009) reminds us that "the *single story* creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (12:55, emphasis added). Both ideas are at the forefront of children's literary criticism and comprise a demand for realism over romanticism. Although these ideas have been applied mostly in calls for realistic representation of racial, cultural, and gender diversity in children's literature (Crawley, 2017; Johnson et al., 2019, rural children also deserve authentic mirrors and windows that work against stereotypes (Eppley, 2010, 2018; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014). When rural life is depicted in contemporary realistic fiction, do children see only people unlike them in an idyllic life or do they sometimes see themselves and the complexity and diversity of their rural community? Just as no single racial, cultural, or gender experience exists, no single rural experience exists. The call for authentic mirrors and windows is as relevant for rural children as for any marginalized group.

Botelho and Rudman (2009) argue that developments in *realistic fiction* should be connected with developments in multicultural education. Through this genre, the idea of mirrors and windows has developed. The quality of a mirror or window in a rural children's picturebook depends on how its creators represent the setting since "setting can serve a number of functions within a narrative: establish genre expectations, establish the affective environment, instigate plot development, comment or assist in character creation" (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 61). As students map their place in the world, exposure to settings and places that are both similar to (mirrors) and different from (windows) their current place is important (Eppley, 2010). Rural settings in literature often symbolize naivete, whereas urban settings signify maturity (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Readers need to understand how such artificial contrasts influence perceptions and build stereotypes. Within picturebooks where there is an enhancing relationship between text and image, setting is carried nearly entirely through visual images (Cotton, 2002; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Because current critical analysis of rural children's picturebooks is still widely lacking for rural settings (Eppley, 2010, 2018), unanswered questions about representation of rural diversity exist. For example, do we see authentic representation of diverse rural regions and geographies (Parker et al., 2018; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001) and, within these settings, do we see racial and cultural diversity?

The nostalgic orientation of picturebooks in general primes rural picturebooks specifically as a ready repository for stereotypically idyllic settings (Jones, 1997). Setting a rural landscape in a picturebook doubles down on nostalgia by making the setting into a symbol for naivete and simplicity (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Consideration of insider/outsider perspectives and OwnVoice narratives (Acevedo-Aquino et al., 2020; Arnold & Sableski, 2020) is also an issue with rural narratives. Some authors and illustrators may

have lived in a rural space in their youth and write or paint through a sense of restorative nostalgia (Boym, 2007; Sanders, 2013), attempting to recreate moments in time that they view as innocent and pure. In such cases, “rural settings reflect the adult writer’s idealization of the child, which goes back to the romantic view of childhood as innocent, happy, and natural” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p. 71).

Reading against this idealization means understanding how picturebooks in general are nostalgic objects (Nodelman, 1988; Salmose, 2018; Sanders, 2013) and how rural settings are constructed to represent nostalgic innocence and simplicity (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Salmose, 2018). After our initial readings of the books and as we looked forward to analysis, we had to resist our own acceptance of the single story as authors represented realistic stories through aesthetically pleasing images and well-constructed text (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

### **What Should a Rural Mirror or Window Look Like?**

An accurate and respectful rural mirror or window in contemporary realistic fiction is not only about books. It also involves understanding current rural childhoods. Despite the prevalent image of the midwestern family farm, rural spaces are topographically and regionally diverse (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001). The seaside, the prairie, the mountains, the forest, and the desert can all be rural. Demographics show only 11% of people living in rural spaces work in agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020, p. 4). The other 89% work in diverse industries such as service, tourism, government, education, manufacturing, mining, health care, and energy (Parker et al., 2018).

Researchers on rural life (Bialik, 2018; Powell et al., 2013) have reported realities and values of rural people that acknowledge accuracies in the stereotyped rural idyll while describing a more inclusive set of characteristics. For example, rural children discuss their love of the freedom they experience in wide open spaces, yet they also clearly know the dangerous places they cannot go and the property boundaries that prescribe their adventures.

The research on mirrors and windows and content analysis of diverse representations in children’s picturebooks is wide and varied (Acevedo-Aquino et al., 2020; Arnold & Sableski, 2020; Cueto & Brooks, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Schall et al., 2019; Scieurba & Jenkins, 2019; Wee et al., 2018) yet not inclusive of rural spaces and people. In addition, publishers in recent decades have answered the “We Need Diverse Books” movement (We Need Diverse Books, 2021) with a storm of children’s titles foregrounding racial, cultural, linguistic, and gender diversity, such as *Hair Love* (Cherry & Harrison, 2019), *Lubna and Pebble* (Meddour & Egneus, 2019), *Milo Imagines the World* (de La Peña & Robinson, 2021), *Saffron Ice Cream* (Rashin, 2018), *Sulwe* (Nyong’o & Harrison, 2019), and *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* (Ho & Ho, 2021). However, calls for diverse representation in children’s literature, such as the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s review of diversity (Tyner, 2021), fail to recognize rurality as a major category of diversity. Also, too little research about rural narratives for children, especially for picturebooks, currently exists. We echo Eppley’s (2010, 2018) calls for more research and more realistic rural picturebooks.

### **Methodology**

We conducted a critical content analysis (CCA) focused on contemporary realistic fiction picturebooks with integral rural settings. Short (2019) explains that “critical content analysis involves bringing a critical lens to an analysis of a text or group of texts

to explore the possible underlying messages within those texts, particularly related to issues of power” (p. 9). Critical content analysis involves a particular process for analyzing children’s literature. We selected picturebooks for analysis, utilized a theoretical frame to inform the reading and analysis of those picturebooks, engaged in close reading of the text, and then employed analytic tools for analyzing visual narratives. Utt and Short (2018) further explain, “CCA demands that the researcher’s stance and critical frame be explicit and must clearly inform every aspect of the research process—from the theoretical positionality to the text selection to the coding and analysis to the presentation of implications” (p. 2). A number of scholars (Crawley, 2017; Cueto & Brooks, 2019; Schall et al., 2019; Sciorba & Jenkins, 2019) have used CCA both as a way to select and recognize positive and authentic representations in children’s literature and as a way to recognize various power structures at play across visual narratives and other forms of text.

Using our theoretical frame as a lens, we selected titles from 2010 to the present (to keep the idea of contemporary within the most recent decade) and analyzed each book for its handling of movement and the nostalgic rural idyll. The following research questions guided this study: (1) What types of movement are depicted in contemporary realistic fiction picturebooks with integral rural settings in the last 10 years? (2) How do various types of movement or lack of movement to and from, in and out, of rural spaces influence character, agency, time, conflict, and endings? We used Painter et al.’s (2013) analytical tools for interpreting how character and action are realized in picturebooks as an opening for examining nostalgia and the rural idyll. To inform our understanding of how movement was represented, we drew on the Hallidayan ideational metafunction (Painter et al., 2013) and Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) visual representational meaning, which helped us look not only for direct representations of movement, but also for the figurative relationships among peritextual features such as covers, endpages, and title sheets. These helped us describe how movement was represented, how movement as action influenced the rural narrative, and how movement in the books compared to the realities of rural life.

### **Creating a Text Set**

To begin our analysis, we searched for all the picturebooks we could find with rural settings. We started by scouring our own bookshelves and pulling titles from the local bookstore. We searched for existing lists of rural picturebooks in professional and scholarly literature and in popular online sources for lists, such as Goodreads, Amazon, Google searches, librarian lists, and blogs. Although we found some lists focused on novels, we found no existing book lists or recommendation articles that pulled together titles of rural picturebooks.

A librarian colleague helped us search databases with descriptive terms such as *rural*, *farm*, *country*, *hunting*, *plains*, *hiking*, *outdoors*, *nature*, and *mountains*. This yielded a wide set of over 200 texts, including many with only loosely construed rural settings. For example, the search terms brought us many gardening books. Were they rural, urban, or suburban? Nothing in the books helped us distinguish. Also, we looked at many books strongly featuring outdoor activities but where the peritext gave clear clues that the setting was urban or suburban. To sort and narrow the 200 books, we applied the following selection criteria: (1) include only books with integral rural settings; (2) include only books with narrative structures that fit genre descriptions for contemporary realistic fiction (Tunnell et al., 2015) while excluding historical fiction, informational, fantasy, and poetry genres; and (3) include only books with publishing dates in the past 10 years.

We chose contemporary realistic fiction because this genre is well suited to the call for authentic mirrors and windows for diverse people in marginalized groups (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) and because realism has been identified as a key countermovement in rural literature, pushing against the power of the rural idyll (Williams, 1973). These criteria helped us narrow down, through multiple rounds of reading and sorting, a list of books we would analyze. See Appendix A for our final selection of 37 picturebooks, including summaries of each text.

### Coding and Analysis

With this specific text set selected, we first read and responded to each book without analysis. After gaining this first level of familiarity and aesthetic response, we then read again looking for depictions of movement in words and images. Next, we began to describe whether and how movement was occurring in the book: when characters left home, returned home, used a path, rode in a vehicle, walked somewhere, or planned to go somewhere. When coding books for their depiction of relationships among rural and urban settings, we considered evidence in words or images that expressed that relationship in terms of roads or paths. The road as a part-to-whole token for the larger concept of the relationship between urban and rural life meant we looked for roads, tracks, and power lines as well as for cars, boats, planes, trains, or other ways of moving across wide spaces. As we identified patterns in depictions of movement, we developed descriptive categories that helped us begin to sort the books for further analysis.

For each book, we described where characters began their journey, where they went, and whether they returned home, and we looked to the end of the stories to see how the movement and ending were connected. For example, we noticed many books featured movement in a home-away-home structure recognized as a hallmark theme in children's literature (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). Looking for patterns helped us name and describe categories, answering our first research question about identifying types of movement. Then we began to sort the books into categories describing these types of movement.

The first category, which we named *cyclical movement*, included 15 titles. In this category, characters began at their rural home; journeyed into the wilderness, town, or rural community; or visited a rural space and returned home. The second category we named *unidirectional*, also with 15 titles, with movement from one place to another and no return. The last category included seven books where we saw *no movement* or only movement inside a narrowly bounded space. See Table 1 for an outline of the categories and subcategories and Appendix A for a complete list of sorted books.

After our sorting discussions, we began to reread and analyze how each book's version of movement influenced characters, action, conflict, setting, and endings. We completed a visual analysis of movement drawing from the work of Botelho and Rudman (2009) and Botelho et al. (2014). We also drew from the first author's work with analysis of peritextual features (Youngs & Loyd, 2020; Youngs & Serafini, 2011; see Appendix B). We looked for visual and textual evidence of diversity within settings (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Botelho et al., 2014). We also drew on Painter et al. (2013) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) concept of ideational meaning, which helped us focus on three aspects of experience in rural settings: participants, process, and circumstance. These concepts helped us notice and discuss character manifestation and appearance, character engagement in action, actions depicted, significance of action, causal relation between events and actions, circumstantial meaning, and intercircumstance options as they related to settings and movement (Painter et al., 2013).

## Results

The results are organized by the type of movement (cyclical, unidirectional, and no movement), which provides a structure for presenting our analysis of character, setting, and action. We found that movement had a direct effect on how characters interacted across the rural space. We also noticed how movement from one place to another, or lack thereof, influenced agency, time, and story endings. Two subcategories of movement focused on visiting rural places. We limit the results to exclude these visits since they do not intend to represent rural spaces as home to the principal characters. In Appendix A, each of the 37 books is listed within its category along with a brief summary of each book.

### Cyclical Movement

#### *Rural Home → Wilderness → Rural Home*

In eight cyclical books, child rural characters move from home to the wilderness and back: *When the Moon Comes* (Harbridge & James, 2017), *The Hike* (Farrell, 2019), *Pinny in the Fall* (Schwartz & Malenfant, 2018), *A House That Once Was* (Fogliano & Smith, 2018), *On a Magical Do-Nothing Day* (Alemagna, 2017), *Song of the River* (Cowley & Andrews, 2019), *In the Red Canoe* (Davidson & Bifano, 2020), and *Over and Under the Snow* (Messner & Neal, 2014). The characters explore rural spaces and wilderness safely without adult supervision, intervention, or presence, showing an abundance of agency in page-to-page actions with complete autonomy to make choices along the path. In six of the eight wilderness stories, characters make decisions, demonstrating their agency, because of their familiarity with the rural space. All characters walk to the wilderness from their home, following a known trail. Only in *The Hike* do they need a map.

All eight of the wilderness narratives have a wraparound image on the cover framing the story inside the natural space, and each depicts the main character(s) on the cover positioned within the wilderness. On the cover of two, where the story is more about appreciation of the river (*Song of the River*) and snow (*Over and Under the Snow*), the characters are small in comparison to the wilderness, remaining that way throughout the story until, in one, the character goes to bed. By contrast, in the other six, where there is more of a conflict and focus on character, characters are positioned in the center of the wilderness and are much larger, taking up a good portion of the cover. The covers infer movement and adventure as the characters are positioned within the wilderness, even though the opening pages of each narrative depict scenes in each character's home. Transitions from peritextual features (covers, endpages, and title pages) to opening scenes depict movement between rural homes and the wilderness. Interestingly, the title pages tended to symbolize what characters would take away from their adventures.

In *Song of the River* and *Over and Under the Snow*, characters are dominated by nature. Each small character moves right across large open settings as they head toward adventure. In four books, illustrators use medium shots with dominating wilderness backgrounds until the climax. Once characters accomplish their goal, they dominate visually over the wilderness, showing a shift in perspective and importance. For example, in *The Hike*, once the girls reach the mountain peak, they take up most of the right side of the page, showing very little of the mountain. In *When the Moon Comes*, characters look back to the left from a high vantage to reflect on their moonlit wilderness hockey adventure, promising to return again. *Pinny in the Fall* uses a close-up of all three characters once they save a ship in the fog. Movement relates directly to accomplishment and a

conquered wilderness.

There are moments in each narrative when authors and illustrators zoom in on specific actions and moments in a story. When they zoom in on this action, they have a tendency to exclude relationships to other spaces. Paths in and out of or leading to where the action is taking place are missing, and the immediate day's adventure frames the entire story in time. This zooming in ignores the influences of the broader community and positions the reader to assume exclusivity and dependence from urban areas. For example, in *On a Magical Do-Nothing Day*, *Pinny in the Fall*, *Over and Under the Snow*, *In the Red Canoe*, and *The Hike*, the words and pictures zoom in on the wilderness, the cabin, and the path with no representations of the wider community outside the frame. When authors and illustrators zoom out of the context slightly, as in *When the Moon Comes* and *Pinny in the Fall*, we locate the immediate context of adventurers within local and isolated communities. When zoomed out to include broader context, such as in *Song of the River*, the characters appear in wide panoramas taking in the home, a mountain community, the river, and a distant city where the river leads. In this last example there is more of a realistic depiction of the relationships between rural and urban areas.

We also observed that all wilderness travel is done on foot—no snowmobiles, four wheelers, bikes, or scooters. The trek to the wilderness is framed as playful and adventurous and is sped along in a few pages, with more pages devoted to the adventure spent inside the wilderness. Local roads from home lead toward wilderness and the trail characters will follow. On returning, trails and roads lead to safety and home. In *The Hike*, the girls all move from left to right across the page along the mountain trail, even during their return home. In *On a Magical Do-Nothing Day*, *A House That Once Was*, and *When the Moon Comes*, characters move to the right as they venture into the wilderness, and then at the height of action, a variety of movements and directions are illustrated showing the slowing down of time while in the wilderness. In each of these books, once characters leave the road, their movement is dictated by the wilderness: the path of the river, the coastline, and the mountain trail. The characters experience no realistic boundaries, such as fences, gates, or no-trespassing signs, even the children who explore an abandoned house in *A House That Once Was*.

On the return home, in most cases we find characters safely in bed or sipping a cup of cocoa after removing protective outdoor clothing. *Song of the River* and *Over and Under the Snow* do not depict a story climax but rather a growing appreciation for the wilderness, ending with reflection of what the characters learned. The other six books end with reflection as characters look back to the adventure, a nostalgic move where the adult author's longing and memory are superimposed onto these last moments of the story.

### ***Rural Home → Town → Rural Home***

When characters cycle from home to rural town or around a rural community and back, they have other people with them, as in *Carmela Full of Wishes* (de la Peña & Robinson, 2018), *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero & Peña, 2019), *The Farmer and The Circus* (Frazee, 2021), and *Thunderstorm* (Geisert, 2014). Movement progresses sequentially from scene to scene, leading readers through a whole community. Compared to the rural-to-wilderness cycle, the rural-to-town cycle does not speed up the departure or the return. Each stage is given nearly equal pages and pacing throughout the story. *Flood* (Villa, 2014) and *The Farmer and the Circus*, both wordless picturebooks, have an omniscient illustrator showing us scenes away from the main character: in *Flood*, the devastation after the family has retreated, and in the *Farmer and the Circus*, the monkey

and clown imitate the farmer's actions remembering their visits to his farm.

When moving to town, characters engage in work rather than play and adventure. In *Thunderstorm*, a family travels around delivering hay. When a storm devastates neighbors' farms, they help clean up and then return to the hay. In *Flood*, the family leaves for the city when learning about dangerous weather, returning to the work of rebuilding with a cooperative community. In *Carmela Full of Wishes*, the brother and sister go on a circuit of errands around their small hometown. In *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*, the dad takes his daughter on a tour of all the different work places where he knows people around town. As compared to the home-wilderness-home pattern, where movement represents play and challenge, these books frame movement in terms of work and a struggle against nature or time. Here a relationship among adults and children is present (where wilderness journeys tend to be children-only), as is shared agency in terms of being able to cooperate in understanding people and work.

Development of the family or group is central to these cyclical narratives. The group controls time, space, and action and solves problems together as they traverse roads and paths toward the ending. Each story highlights the power of family, including siblings, a father and daughter, and a mother creating an example for her children. While Carmela's father is awaiting paperwork to return to the United States, she wishes for her family to be united, for her mother to have comfort, and for her brother to accept her. Peritextual features, covers, endpages, and title pages, orient the reader to the rural community as the images zoom out to show a vision of the wider community, as in the circular map of Corona, California, on endpages of *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*, the wide shots of produce fields and workers on endpages in *Carmela Full of Wishes*, and panoramic shots on the covers of *Thunderstorm*.

Endings of these books involve the return home. In *Carmela Full of Wishes*, the brother and sister have reconciled. The words say they return home while the image shows Carmela looking to the right off the page. Similarly, in *Thunderstorm*, the pickup truck heads toward the right side of the page, toward the white space of the end frame. In *Flood* and *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*, the endings portray people back at home together, sharing a peaceful moment of reflection. In *My Papi*, *Carmela*, and *Thunderstorm*, movement and action describe a circuit around the local area before returning home. In each story, problems are solved by the family and the community mobilizing resources to cooperate with each other. The endings of the rural-to-town journey structure are nostalgic, where the return home symbolizes safety, hopefulness, resolution of rural conflicts, and the promise of tomorrow.

### **Unidirectional Movement**

#### ***Rural Place* → *Rural Place (Inside the Rural Community)***

Unidirectional stories depict characters moving from one place to another, with no return. Each story zooms in on a defined rural space, but one with opportunities for wide movement, such as the range in *Real Cowboys* (Hoeffler & Bean, 2016), the rural community in *Call the Horse Lucky* (Havill & Lane, 2010), the woods in *Singing Away the Dark* (Woodward & Morstad, 2017), and the town and farm in *A Very, Very Noisy Tractor* (Pavón et al., 2013). In these four stories, the visual narrative emphasizes travel across pages, with power lines, paths, and roads cutting through the rural settings. The intent is not to get *to* a rural space but to enjoy and experience the journey *across* the rural space. Each of these stories is a direct counternarrative to the rural idyll: working to break gendered stereotypes of cowboys and female farmers, bringing awareness of neglected

animals and needed rescue efforts, and facing and overcoming fears of nature.

Book covers for this type of movement feature a main character on the cover with rural space in the background. Covers and endpages in *Real Cowboys* and *A Very, Very Noisy Tractor* prompt readers to consider breaking stereotypes of people in ranching and farming, with a nurturing cowboy taking care of a calf and an eccentric woman farmer driving a tractor. In *Singing Away the Dark* and *Call the Horse Lucky*, the peritext foreshadows events yet to come, depicting an implied safe return home and a fully healthy and happy rescued horse, respectively. In each, the path to changed perspectives is drawn out in page-to-page movement, slowing down action on the way to the conclusion. In *Call the Horse Lucky*, dirt roads lead the reader toward pages of details involved in restoring the horse to health and finding it a home on a therapy ranch. In *Real Cowboys*, the cattle drive is presented as a realistic current event, progressively illustrating ebbs and flows of the landscape while following the work of cowboys and cowgirls on a cattle drive.

Books for this type of unidirectional movement end with characters reflecting on the journey: Cowboys consider their work and futures, the farmer reflects on not listening to what people say about women, the little girl considers how she walked to school when she was 6, and the horse rescuer reflects on her growth.

### **Rural Place → City**

This next unidirectional category focuses on books with characters moving from a rural place to a city. Four books depict characters that move away from the rural space: *House Held Up by Trees* (Kooser & Klassen, 2012), *I Know Here* (Croza, 2013), *From There to Here* (Croza, 2014), and *A Little House in a Big Place* (Acheson, 2019). Across these narratives, movement impacts characters' growth and development as they respond to their journey. Reasons for movement are for work (*I Know Here* and *From There to Here*), new opportunities (*A Little House in a Big Place*), and inability to thrive in a rural area (*House Held Up By Trees*). Movement is symbolic of opportunity beyond the rural space, but each story looks back nostalgically to the rural home.

Covers and endpages for these books indicate change and movement. In *I Know Here*, the hard cover shows the main girl flying in an airplane over her mountain home and the endpages show a wide map of Canada, including the present rural home and the city they will move to. On the cover of *A Little House in a Big Place*, the small rural village gets cut through by a train, with endpages showing the pattern of the kitchen tablecloth, symbolizing the stable home the main character can return to at any time. In *House Held Up By Trees*, the cover foreshadows the inevitable abandonment of the house and the endpages frame the book in images of tree seedlings blowing in the wind, symbolizing the futility of the fight against nature.

Books for this type of movement dwell on a sense of loss and also attachment by slowing movement down in the beginning of the story, as characters remember and savor time in the rural home. The story is about what they are leaving behind more so than where they are going. Rather than spending their agency on adventures, these characters make decisions that help them cope with the uncertainty of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In *House Held Up By Trees*, the characters constantly struggle against wild nature. In *I Know Here* and *From Here to There*, double-page spreads slow the reader down as the character wonders if others will know what she knows about this special rural home: a series of trailers along a small road, the beaver dam and stream nearby, the bus that brings grocery delivery, and the small nine-student school trailer. Similarly, in *A*

*Little House in a Big Place*, we see an identifiable main character look to the left at the home she leaves behind as she decides to leave the rural area for college in the city.

Each ending for this category is distinct. In *I Know Here*, the final page shows the girl holding her memories in hand and standing on the road before her move. In *A Little House in a Big Place*, the young woman finds an accepting and warm community in the city. Although most of these endings are hopeful, in *House Held Up by Trees*, the ending darkly emphasizes how nature takes over the abandoned house and lifts it off its foundation.

### **Move → Rural Area (From Another Place)**

For this last category of movement, we discuss narratives where characters move to rural areas. *Building Our House* (Bean, 2013) and *Lenny and Lucy* (Stead & Stead, 2015) focus on families moving to rural homes. Movement is shown in the cover, end-pages, and title sheets, quickly pacing the transit from the city to their new rural location. Movement and action in *Building Our House* is depicted through an ongoing series of cutout panels sequencing the necessary steps to build a new house. The road in *Lenny and Lucy* winds through a dark landscape of trees with no straight path forward, mirroring the fear the boy has about moving to this new rural space. The story is focused on friendship, but the rural space is framed as a place to be feared. The boy uses his imagination in building protective pillow people that draw the attention of his neighbor who then becomes his new best friend. The endings of both of these stories show togetherness of family and friends and an acceptance of their safe new homes. For *Lenny and Lucy*, this ending represents a change for the main character, who hated the new home and feared the woods, whereas in *Building Our House* the ending shows what the characters have worked for all along.

### **No Movement: Isolated Rural Setting**

We identified seven books that show no appreciable movement across spaces: *Sonja's Chickens* (Wahl, 2015); *Sleep Tight Farm* (Doyle & Stadtlander, 2016); *The Hundred Year Barn* (MacLachlan & Pak, 2019); *Hello, Horse* (French & Rayner, 2018); *When You Are Camping* (Lee, 2012); *The Farmer and the Clown* (Frazee, 2014); and *We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020). These books zoom in on characters who walk around inside one narrowly bounded space, with no roads leading in or out. No cars, trucks, boats, planes, or trains—only an occasional tractor—exist in these stories. This kind of visual representation mostly zooms in on the isolated idyllic setting, cutting out broader connections and contexts, but in many ways pretending they don't exist at all. The iconic family farm, disconnected from the world, is central in five of these books. The exception is *We Are Water Protectors*, which zooms out in context to include both depictions of ancestral history and the conflict between rural Native Americans and the building of a pipeline. The cover of each of these books invites readers directly into the rural space with the use of both panoramic and close-up shots.

Realistically, people on these isolated farms are involved directly with daily work, showing that farming is not just leisurely, simple, and tranquil. While repairing barns, tending chickens, and winterizing equipment and crops, the characters show a mix of cooperation and individualism. In *Hello, Horse*, patience and repeated effort pay off for a character who wants to overcome his fear of horses, and in *Farmer and the Clown* the sadness at being left behind is lessened when the farmer shows the clown how to milk a cow and gather eggs. Compared with many home-away-home stories, action in these isolated farm stories slows down time, with pages or panels lingering on rural work. Each

story ending shows the results of the labor: the clown is comforted and returns home, the boy can handle horses, the barn is ready for more years of wear, the farm is ready for winter, and new chickens replace those eaten by the fox.

### Discussion

We analyzed 37 contemporary realistic fiction picturebooks with integral rural settings. Overall, these books represent stereotypical versions of rural settings, whether the idyllic or the dangerous (Fulkerson & Lowe, 2016). We found only one character who actually wanted to leave her rural home (*A Little House in a Big Place*). The idyllic stereotype was by far dominant, with freedom to explore, fulfilling hard work, and close relationships to nature and animals crossing 34 of the 37 books. However, we do not dismiss these books, even if they contribute to the single story, because these representations do match true value statements of rural children. Throughout their research, Powell et al. (2013, 2016) found that children value closeness to nature, the ability to explore wide open spaces, and the creativity employed for an interesting life in a remote setting. Only three books represented rural space as negative, threatening, or frightening (*House Held Up by Trees*, *Lenny and Lucy*, and *Singing Away the Dark*). We wonder, however, if even these negative attitudes belie an idyllic perspective as the children in each of these stories are shown making the most of the isolated spaces because they can't leave—a creative resilience demanded by isolated spaces.

In addition to the stereotypically positive and negative depictions of rurality, we also found books that challenged aspects of the rural idyll by emphasizing complex and conflicted relationships with nature, work, and people, as in *Flood*, *Thunderstorm*, *Real Cowboys*, *I Know Here*, and *Carmela Full of Wishes*, or by showing women in power as in *A Very, Very Noisy Tractor*. Narrow options created conflicts for families who faced relocation or rebuilding. Environmental issues and change in the rural space challenged the idyll with images of abandoned homes, as in *House Held Up By Trees* and *A House That Once Was* or the image of disruptive pipeline construction in *We Are Water Protectors*.

In terms of diverse rural geography, we found the following representations: 21 books were set in the forest or woods and 13 in plains or other farmland, while only two were coastal and only one was set in the desert. Racial diversity was low, with readers most likely to see White main characters. In five books featuring African Americans, these characters were often visiting wilderness for an outing such as a hike. Beyond these books, the effort at racial inclusiveness involved one biracial character, two Latinx characters, one indigenous character, and four groups of children with multiracial friends. In terms of gender diversity (Crawley, 2017), this text set is binary-gendered, with only traditional male/female representation. Seventeen books feature a female as the main character, and 12 feature a male protagonist. The rest of the books feature dual or shared male/female protagonists or mixed-gender groups where boys and girls hold equal status. No characters with disabilities are represented at all. Because children's literature creators and researchers aspire to be inclusive and reflect the range of diversity, the set of realistic rural books available needs to represent a wider range of rural geography (Eppley, 2018) and diversity in ethnicity, gender, and ability (Acevedo-Aquino et al., 2020; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Cueto & Brooks, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019; Koss, 2015; Rieger & McGrail, 2015). Although current children's publishers increasingly accept the task of representing a diverse U.S. population, rural picturebooks seem to be stuck in the 1900s (in many cases even stuck in the 1800s) and need to be moved forward (Botelho et al., 2014; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Johnson et al., 2019).

Seven of the 37 books contributed to the stereotype of the rural setting as isolated and disconnected. However, we are hopeful because we saw more realism in movement than expected, with 30 of 37 stories featuring interconnected rural and urban settings. This should represent opportunities for mirrors and windows, since rural people are likely to have many real-life relationships and experiences that cross from rural homes to other places (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014; Williams, 1973). We saw this interconnectedness when authors and illustrators consciously zoomed out cinematically to include contexts beyond the immediate story, such as showing an overhead shot of an entire town, passing by a variety of community locales, or placing a map on the endpages. When movement centered on both adults and children, we saw more depictions of realistic work and effort. When the movement centered solely on children, we saw more idyllic play, exploration, and adventure.

The seven books with no movement not only were isolated in a bounded, zoomed-in setting, but also showed no representations of current realistic vehicles. If all the no-movement books were a text set, the overall set of messages about rural spaces would be that everything you need is inside this self-contained space and even if you wanted to leave, no car is available. In our own experience of rural life, we recognize the iconic role of modern vehicles both for recreation and for work, like the new king-size pickup or a trailer filled with ATVs, boats, and snowmobiles. Would modern transportation break the spell of nostalgia (Sanders, 2013) for the contemporary reader?

Even among stories with more movement, we noticed a repeated nostalgic icon of the old farm truck and the old red tractor and only a few pieces of modern equipment or technology. Although the cyclical and unidirectional settings were zoomed out and connected, young rural readers of today are not likely to feel themselves “riding along” with the characters in many of these books. Embracing rural values of resiliency and self-sufficiency does not have to mean isolation in a self-contained nostalgic idyll (Balfour et al., 2011; Mandrona & Mitchell, 2018; Williams, 1973).

### **Implications**

Publishers seem content with the single story of rural America, where people live in and visit rural spaces mostly because of the rural idyll. Despite the fact that one can identify many desired characteristics of rural picturebooks from research on multicultural literature (Eppley, 2018; Koss, 2015), rural literary theory (Williams, 1973), and rural life (Azano, 2015; Matthews et al., 2000), we have identified no book that is a perfect mirror or window. Would writing a book where rural settings are interconnected and related to other areas; where the idyllic image of leisure, simplicity, and tranquility is broken up; and where the rural setting is populated by strong, diverse characters be so hard? Why are publishers not taking on critical issues in rural areas? We see diversity emerging in children’s literature writ large, yet among rural picturebooks we see an abundance of the nostalgic rural idyll.

This study is a direct call to the industry to bring its excellent editors, storytellers, and visual artists to the task of challenging the rural idyll. Our disappointment as readers came when our analysis showed us that many beautiful and engaging aesthetic artworks (Sipe, 2001) helped to tell the single story. We are not asking that publishers simply check off ideological boxes. Readers of picturebooks need realistic rural mirrors and windows. We have identified aspects of rural life that both readers and picturebook creators themselves should be able to use.

Because rural spaces are so diverse, young readers will need support to recog-

nize when authentic features of rural life are lacking or when the rural idyll is not being challenged. Teachers play a central role in facilitating reading against the text and questioning representations of society found in books they read with children since “viewing reading as a sociocultural practice opens possibilities to reread and rewrite the past and present toward social justice” (Botelho et al., 2014, p. 49). Each book in our current text set can provide a glimpse into some aspects of realistic rural life, but together the books could provide a broader picture of rural realities (Azano, 2015; Balfour et al., 2011; Eppley, 2018; Mandrona & Mitchell, 2018).

Our research has highlighted ways for teachers and readers to analyze picturebooks with rural settings. Young readers need to consider how these stories map onto their own daily rural, suburban, and urban lives and to consider the quality of the picturebook as a mirror or window. Because picturebooks can act as a space for critical conversations (Johnson et al., 2019; Koss, 2015) and nostalgic tools for authors and illustrators (Nodelman, 1988; Salmose, 2018; Sanders, 2013), readers will need multiple experiences recognizing stereotypes of rural childhoods.

That highly romanticized books are bestsellers produced by major national companies, employing award-winning authors and illustrators, unwittingly lured into the romantic myths that perpetuate a single rural story (Adiche, 2009) is highly concerning. Notions of romanticism should be called into question to provide realistic contemporary rural spaces complicated by known facts about many rural spaces: single-industry economics, relative isolation, fewer resources, and less access to services (Bialik, 2018; W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001). Diverse rural children, just like any others, need to see themselves in the mirrors of children’s books (Eppley, 2010)—not in every book, but in just enough so that young readers can experience feeling invited into the book culture. Part of our duty in a multicultural society is to help nonrural people look through literary windows into authentic rural settings, where interesting, complicated people solve problems and live informed contemporary lives.

To support young readers in recognizing stereotypical representations of isolated, nostalgic, and idyllic rural childhoods in picturebooks, teachers and other adults first need to become critical readers themselves and then learn how to create space for critical conversations. These guiding adults, who Sanders (2013) calls reading chaperones, need to also recognize the power of picturebooks as multimodal texts that communicate through both text and image. The power of images as carriers of meaning is often overlooked during picturebook read-alouds in favor of the words (Sipe, 2001). Both the visual analysis guide in Appendix B and critical multicultural analysis tenets put forth by Botelho and Rudman (2009) offer openings for questioning how picturebooks represent diverse people and how to read against often unnoticed stereotypes. Children need to learn how texts position them and that “teachers are no longer keepers of textual meaning” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 12). Teachers and students can begin dialogue about rural narratives that question the nostalgic moves of authors and illustrators. Because there is no single understanding or definition of rural life (Eppley, 2018) and because of the complexity of rural life, readers and teachers need to consider how to notice and dwell on details and gaps in the books they share and read aloud, guiding readers toward a more complicated representation of rural life.

Given our familiarity with rural life and children today, we can imagine stories that challenge the rural idyll in connected and interrelated spaces, where the unique conflicts and issues of the rural setting become central conflicts in a story, and where the pe-

cular arrangement of diverse children apply their agency to solutions of story problems. Rising to the challenge of representation implies a cooperative effort among researchers, publishers, and educators who bring books to children.

### **About the Authors**

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Table 1

*Movement Categories*

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**Cyclical movement: Home away home (HAH)**

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- (HAH) rural home → rural community → rural home
  - (HAH) rural home → town → rural home
  - (HAH) rural home → wilderness → rural home
  - (HAH) city → wilderness → city (visiting)
    - Visiting rural space (camping, hiking, outings)
    - Visiting rural residents (grandparents)
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**Unidirectional movement**

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- Rural place → rural place (inside the rural community)
  - Move from rural area to city
  - Move to rural area (from another place)
  - Visiting rural space: City to wilderness
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**No movement: Isolated rural setting (no connection to larger rural community or to other communities)**

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## Appendix A

### *Movement Categories and Descriptions, With Included Books and Brief Book Summaries*

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#### Book

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#### Cyclical Movement

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Cyclical movement (home-away-home structure). In this category characters began at their rural home, journeyed into the wilderness or town or rural community, or visited a rural space and then returned home. The cyclical structure includes four subcategories:

1. Rural Home to Rural Community and back home again, as in *Thunderstorm*, where the reader follows a family delivering hay throughout the community as a destructive storm threatens their work. At the end of the day they are safely on their way home.
2. Rural Home to Rural Town and home again, as in *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*, where a girl and her father start from home on a motorcycle tour of the changing landscape of Corona, California, and return home at the end of their ride.
3. Rural Home to Wilderness to Home, as in *When the Moon Comes*, where characters travel from their rural home to the mountains on foot to play a moonlight game of pond hockey and then return home.
4. Visiting Rural Spaces Return Home; in these books characters who live outside the rural space, as in *The Not So Great Outdoors*, go hiking and return home when the hike is complete. See all books below.

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#### Cyclical movement

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#### (HAH) rural home → rural community → rural home

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*Thunderstorm* (Geisert, 2014)

*Thunderstorm* follows the course of a storm through midwestern farm country minute by minute, hour by hour, from late morning into late afternoon.

*The Farmer and The Circus*  
(Frazee, 2021)

When the Farmer comes to visit his circus friends, what will happen as he meets the rest of the circus family? (Final book in the trilogy, which includes *The Farmer and the Clown* and *The Farmer and the Monkey*.)

*Flood* (Villa, 2014)

This beautiful wordless picture book is about the effects of a flood on a family and their home.

*My Papi Has a Motorcycle*  
(Quintero & Peña, 2019)

When Daisy Ramona zooms around her neighborhood with her papi on his motorcycle, she sees people and places she's always known but also a community rapidly changing around her.

*Carmela Full of Wishes* (de la Peña & Robinson, 2018)

When Carmela turns 7, she joins her big brother on errands throughout their neighborhood, where she finds a fluffy dandelion growing in the pavement. She reflects on her family's situation while deciding what to wish for when she blows the dandelion into the air.

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**(HAH) rural home → wilderness → rural home**

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*When the Moon Comes*  
(Harbridge & James, 2017)

A group of kids watches the changing seasons, waiting for just the right moonlit night for a midnight hike into the woods for the first hockey game on the newly frozen pond.

*The Hike* (Farrell, 2019)

Three young girls each contribute their strengths to a day's hike through the woods to a mountain peak.

*Pinny in Fall* (Schwartz & Malenfant, 2018)

On a crisp fall day, Pinny packs for a day of adventure outside, including a windy game of tag, a call for help from the lighthouse, and a surprising encounter with the falling autumn leaves.

*A House That Once Was*  
(Fogliano & Smith, 2018)

A boy and a girl explore an abandoned house, moving from room to room, exploring left-behind objects and imagining the lives of the people who once lived there.

*On a Magical Do-Nothing Day*  
(Alemagna, 2017)

A young boy is bored and only wants to play his video game on a rainy day but then his mother encourages him to go outside and explore. On his adventure he discovers the wonders of nature all around him and returns home to the comforts of home as he tells his mother all about his "Magical Do-Nothing Day."

*Song of the River* (Cowley & Andrews, 2019)

Cam the mountain boy follows a river from its trickling source in the mountains through forest, farms, and towns of North America to the salty wind of the sea.

*In the Red Canoe* (Davidson & Bifano, 2020)

Ducks and frogs, swallows and dragonflies, beaver lodges and lily pads—a multitude of wonders enchant the child narrator and her grandfather in this tribute to the fragile, wild places that still exist.

*Over and Under the Snow*  
(Messner & Neal, 2014)

Over the snow, the world is hushed and white, but underneath we join a secret kingdom of squirrels and snow hares, bears and bullfrogs, and other animals living safe and warm, awake and busy, under the snow.

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**HAH—Visiting rural space: Urban home → wilderness → urban home**

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*The Not-So Great Outdoors*  
(Kloepper, 2019)

A grumpy urban kid begrudgingly joins her family on a summer camping trip, missing the sights right under her nose as she longs for the lights and stimulation of the city. When will she start to see what she is missing?

*These Bees Count!* (Formento & Snow, 2012)

As the children in Mr. Tate’s class listen, they learn how bees work to produce honey and make food and flowers grow. Bees count—they’re important to us all.

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**Unidirectional movement**

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Titles that are identified as unidirectional have characters who move from one place to another, with no return. There are four subcategories in this type of movement:

1. Rural Place to Rural Place. *A Very, Very Noisy Tractor* is an example of movement from rural town to rural home. The story begins with a woman returning from town on her tractor, and along the way she encounters other rural community members who try to tell her she can’t be a female farmer. Once she is home, her husband is cooking dinner for her, and she tells her daughter that she can be anything she wants to be—even a farmer. This book has an implied home-away-home structure, but the details in the book only show movement in one direction. Other similar books include *Real Cowboys* and *Call the Horse Lucky*.
  2. Move From Rural Area to City. In this subcategory characters move away from the rural area to a city or another place. In these books individual characters or families move from the rural area mostly for economic opportunities. For example, in *I Know Here*, the family moves because the dad is done building a dam and his work is taking the family to a city. In *House Held Up By Trees* (Kooser & Klassen, 2012), the dad tries to make a go of building a house in a remote wooded area but can’t fight back the forces of nature. He eventually gives up and abandons the house and moves to the city to be near his grown children. In *A Little House in a Big Place*, a young girl grows up and realizes her dreams of leaving her rural remote home for opportunities in the city.
  3. Move to Rural Space, as in *Lenny and Lucy* (Stead & Stead, 2015) and *Building Our House*.
  4. Visiting Rural Space. These narratives depict families or individuals visiting a rural space to hike or camp or to visit relatives. *Hiking Day* depicts a family visiting the wilderness for a hiking trip, and the story ends on the mountaintop.
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**Rural place → rural place (inside the rural community)**

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*Real Cowboys* (Hoefler & Bean, 2016)

The myth of rowdy, rough-riding cowboys and cowgirls is remade, revealing a multifaceted lifestyle that is as diverse as it is contrary to the historical cowboy we’ve come to expect.

*Call the Horse Lucky* (Havill & Lane, 2010)

*Call the Horse Lucky* presents the issue of horse neglect in simple, straightforward language and compelling illustrations that enable young readers to identify with the girl, Mel, and the horse, Lucky.

*Singing Away the Dark* (Woodward & Morstad, 2017)

On a windy winter morning, a little girl must walk a mile to catch the school bus, facing wire gates, dark shadowy woods, a bull grazing with the cattle, and wickedly cold wind. Will she be able to sing her way through the dark morning?

*A Very, Very Noisy Tractor* (Pavón et al., 2013)

A woman drives a tractor through town and, thanks to the tractor's noisy engine, can't hear as people comment on her clothes and hair, confused about why a woman is driving a tractor in the first place.

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### Move from rural area to city

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*House Held Up by Trees* (Kooser & Klassen, 2012)

When the house was new, not a tree remained on its perfect lawn. The children resorted to neighboring lots, where thick bushes offered secret places to play. When they grew up and moved away, their father continued to battle against sprouting trees until he also moves away. As the empty house begins its decline, the trees begin their approach.

*I Know Here* (Croza & James, 2013)

A little girl who lives in a trailer near a forest finds her world familiar and precious. But her father's job is nearly finished, and the family is moving to a city she knows only as a big red star on the map. She wonders, "What can I take with me to remember it all?"

*From There to Here* (Croza & James, 2014)

A little girl and her family have moved, and their new neighborhood in Toronto is different from their home in the Saskatchewan bush. At first everything about *there* seems better than *here*.

*Little House in a Big Place* (Acheson, 2019)

Every day a girl stands at her window and waves to the train engineer passing her prairie home. She is curious about where he came from and where he goes. Will she go away, too, someday?

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### Move to rural area (from another place)

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*Building Our House* (Bean, 2013)

Join a girl and her family as they pack up their old house in town and set out to build a new one in the country. Mom and Dad are going to make the new house themselves, from the ground up.

*Lenny and Lucy* (Stead & Stead, 2015)

Arriving at his new home in the woods, Peter wants to turn back. Scared of the things hidden in the woods, he makes piles of pillows into two guardians, Lenny and Lucy, and finds friendship is not far behind.

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**Visiting rural space**

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*Winter Sleep: A Hibernation Story* (Taylor & Morss, 2019)

A child and his grandma explore a winter landscape and how the Earth goes to sleep for winter. Spot sleeping animals as the tale unfolds, and learn about animals' hibernation from informational pages at the end.

*Adventure Day* (Dowd & Gocotano, 2017)

Armani and her friends are going on a hike. What will they see? What adventures await? With Finn, Leola, Olive, and their moms, they will soon all find out.

*Billy's Camping Trip* (Ko & Fiorentino, 2017)

When Billy's family arrives at the campground, they know they forgot to bring everything. The house is too far to go back. What should they do?

*Because Your Mommy Loves You* (Clements & Alley, 2015)

When a little boy and his mom go camping, mini-disasters abound, with plenty of chances for the mom to fix everything. Instead, with a loving touch, this mom shows her child how to do things for himself.

*Hiking Day* (Rockwell & Rockwell, 2020)

A young girl and her family go hiking up a nearby mountain for the very first time. As they climb to the peak, they see everything from a friendly toad to a porcupine, tall leafy trees to tiny red berries.

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**No movement: Isolated rural setting**

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In our last category we included books where we saw no appreciable movement, or only movement inside a bounded space. *Sleep Tight Little Farm* is an example of no movement as no characters left or visited the farm. A number of these titles were on the border of being excluded because there was only a hint of a conflict that could make the story work as realistic fiction, but we included them because of their integral rural settings. Other titles we identified as isolated or having what we called a "zoomed in" depiction of rural life include *The Farmer and the Clown*; *We Are Water Protectors*; *Sonja's Chickens*; *The Hundred Year Barn*; *Hello, Horse*; and *When You Are Camping*.

*Farmer and the Clown* (Frazee, 2014)

A baby clown bounces off the circus train and lands in a lonely farmer's vast, empty field. The farmer reluctantly rescues the little clown, and over the course of one day together, the two of them make some surprising discoveries about themselves and about life.

*We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020)

Inspired by the many Indigenous-led movements across North America, *We Are Water Protectors* issues an urgent rallying cry to safeguard the Earth's water from harm and corruption.

*Sonja's Chickens* (Wahl, 2015)

Sonya raises three chickens from chicks into hens who give her a wonderful gift: an egg! One night, Sonya hears noises and discovers that one of her hens has disappeared. When she learns the natural answer, she experiences the joys and sorrows of caring for another creature.

*Sleep Tight Farm* (Doyle & Stadtlander, 2016)

*Sleep Tight Farm* connects each growing season to the preparations at the very end of the farm year, painting a picture of what winter means to the farm year and the family that shares its seasons.

*The Hundred Year Barn*  
(MacLachlan & Pak, 2019)

As seasons passed, the barn weathered many storms. The boy who left now returns as a man to care for the barn again. It has stood for one hundred years and will stand for a hundred more: a symbol of peace, stability, caring, and community.

*Hello, Horse* (French & Rayner, 2018)

When a little boy isn't sure if he likes horses, Catherine assures her friend this horse Shannon will like him. She patiently teaches him how to get to know Shannon. But is he ready to climb on her back?

*When You Are Camping* (Lee, 2012)

An ode to the joys of experiencing nature firsthand, *When You Are Camping's* sister protagonists make everything from watching the rain to catching fireflies fascinating, appealing, and accessible.

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## **Appendix B**

### ***Visual Analysis Guide for Realistic Fiction Picturebooks: Rural Narratives***

#### **Participants/Character**

- How are characters engaged in action?
- What is the significance of that action?
- Who solves the conflict?
- How are characters visually represented in the climax?
- What are the details of the character (age, ethnicity, class, gender, family role, etc.)?
- Are any attributes symbolic?
- How much of the character do we see?
- How do they appear when we first meet the characters?
- Are they on the cover or the title page?
- Does their appearance change throughout the story?
- Do the characters have names?
- How would rural children read this story?
- What is unknown about the characters?
- Do characters challenge the rural idyll?
- Is independence encouraged or supported?
- Are identities or norms challenged?
- Do characters live in the plurality of rural life? Marginalization or anti-idyll?
- How are characters connected to home? Community?
- How do we get to know the characters? Actions? Narrator? Visual cues and objects in setting? Words? How do others react to them? What do others say about them?
- What are the female characters doing?
- Are female characters passive, inactive, active, dependent, independent, submissive, nurturing, concerned with the community?

#### **Agency**

- How are power and agency connected?
- Is agency connected with action?

- Do characters believe they can make a difference?
- Who has power to choose and act?
- How did they get it?
- Are there shifts in power?
- Does anyone resist power?

### **Setting/Circumstance**

- How do the illustrations depict the physical rural space?
- Circumstantial meaning: How are the details of the rural space presented?
- Are there differences in the rural space as characters move across and within?
- How is home presented? What is home?
- Are there roads? How do the roads depict a relationship between urban and rural life?
- Are there tracks and power lines?
- What modes of transportation exist (cars, boats, planes)? Do the characters use them? How are changes in the setting illustrated across successive images?
- Are there any changes in perspective?
- What changes happen to how the home is depicted?
- Do we view the setting from inside or outside the home? How does this relate to home and movement?
- How does the setting contribute to the physical environment the characters are in?
- Does the setting establish genre expectations?
- Does the setting contribute to the affective climate?
- Does the setting influence the plot development?
- Does the setting influence the character in any way?
- Is the setting a symbol or metaphor?
- Does the rural setting represent idealized and romanticized childhood?
- How do the illustrations create a sense of place?
- Does the rural space support agency or independence?
- How is time represented? Past or time neutral?

### **Process/Actions**

- What are the characters doing? Who waits? Who does things?
- How do they interact with others?
- What type of action is depicted (action, verbal, or mental)?
- How are two events related? How is time related to the series of events and actions?
- How much time is devoted to the series of events? How does this relate to movement?
- Expectancy and risk: Do readers predict what comes next in the series of events?
- What is the scale of the activity sequence?
- What are the size and significance of the activity sequence?
- Is there a causal relation between events and actions?
- Is the usual way of doing things challenged?
- How do characters relate to the community?
- How much time is devoted to actions?

### **Movement**

- What is the movement? To or from the rural space?
- Are there roads or paths to follow? Do they lead to or away?
- What is the mode of transportation?
- Is the movement to or away from the rural setting represented or implied?
- What is the connection of the rural setting to other areas?

### **Time**

- Is the passage of time integral to the story
- How is time related to the sequence of events or number of pages devoted to various actions?
- How does movement and time interrelate?
- What does time and movement do for the story (trains or other ways of moving across wide spaces)?

### **Conflict**

- How is conflict portrayed visually and textually?
- Does the setting influence the conflict? the resolution or the denouement?

### **Ending/Resolution**

- Who solves the conflict?
- What happens to the characters at the end of the story?
- Is it open or closed ideologically?
- How does the ending relate to nostalgia?
- How does the ending relate to constructions of rural childhoods?

### **Visual**

- Spatial relationships
- Color
- Demand/offer
- Framing

### **Peritext**

- How are characters portrayed in the peritext?

### **Cover: Front and Back and Jacket**

#### ***Cover Setting***

- What setting is portrayed on the cover?
- How is the rural setting portrayed?

#### ***Cover-Character Representation***

- Are any characters represented on the cover?
- How are they positioned in relation to the rural settings?

#### ***Endpages***

- Do the endpages contain a visual narrative?
- Do the endpages contribute to the visual continuity of the picturebook?
- Do the endpages illustrate the rural setting?

#### ***Title Page***

- How is the rural space depicted on the title page?

### **Nostalgia**

- What are the dominant messages?
- Is the author an insider? How does that connect to the characters?
- Is the author writing about a past childhood experience?
- Is nostalgia used as a code for understanding rural spaces through stereotypes?
- Whose story is it?
- What is the point of view?
- What are the themes?

Adapted from the work of Botelho & Rudman (2009); Botelho et al. (2014); Youngs & Loyd (2020); Youngs & Serafini (2011).