



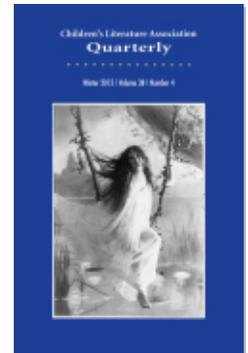
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On Using Balloons Springly

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ever walk so long that your feet felt like they were as big as your body? That's how Harriet felt when she was scrubbing floors.' (Lanes 170)

Lanes continues with the following analysis:

Here Lester has hit on something fundamental to all books for small children. On the one hand, there is the book and its author's experience. Then, there is also the adult reader and his experience. The superior children's book will often unlock something in the adult reader's experience and . . . make it available to the child listener. The hearer is then doubly blessed. (70)

The word "author" can be changed to "illustrator" and the word "hearer" can be revised to read "viewer." The viewer is doubly edified when the author-illustrator team shares something of its experience with the reader/viewer, whether child or adult. In those books which can, appropriately, be called African-American children's literature, the creators invoke and interpret some aspect of African American life and culture. They contribute to a youngster's insight into the many meanings and implications of "blackness." They advance the visual literacy and the understanding of all their readers, regardless of color.

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On Using Balloons Sparingly

by Frieda F. Bostian

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Reading comics aloud to a pre-literate child can be trying. We must point to the character who is speaking, change voices for each speaker, or add the prefatory "X says" before reading each bit of dialogue. Yet far from objecting to this extra baggage, most children love comics. Why? Their affection probably stems from both the historical and the semiotic implications of the "balloon" device, the direct speech bubble encircled with a line and placed within the picture itself.

A brief history will explain some of the pleasurable expectations associated with the balloon format. Modern comics evolved from nineteenth-century drawings in newspapers and humor magazines, where dialogue was printed beneath the picture (Harvey 643). Later, artists for these publications began inserting some of their dialogue into balloons within the pictures, and

the association of the device with humor began. These drawings usually appeared in a single frame, though; the first American comic strip to use balloons sequentially was Rudolph Dirk's "The Katzenjammer Kids," appearing in 1897 (Plunkett). Like much of children's literature, the Katzenjammer Kids began as a strip for adult audiences, but many children soon found the strip—and indeed the format—appealing. Probably adults who read the comics to small children conveyed some of the expectations of humor that the device had come to signal for them.

The word *comic* also suggests humor, or at least a non-tragic ending. The plural form *comics*, meaning "comic paper," was first used in 1889 by *The Catholic Household* (OED). The device was not confined to England and America, though. So popular was the speech balloon internationally that the Italian word for comics is *fumetto*, or "little puff of smoke" (Kunzle).

Though dialogue-containing balloons often signal a transitory piece of writing, Earle J. Coleman defends the form by

citing John Dewey's observation that the average person does not acknowledge as art the art forms that are most vital for him or her (89). Furthermore, as several spirited analytical articles demonstrate, books like the Asterix series and Herge's Tintin adventures constitute an art form in themselves, a genre that needs no apologies (see Apostolides and Moss).

A semiotic approach also helps to explain the balloons' appeal to children, who appreciate clarity and respond to a wide variety of clues to decode their world. As Margaret Higgonet has pointed out, the bubble is "both a directional sign . . . and a separating device." It is a classic, if obvious, "indexical sign," to use C.S. Peirce's terminology (Hawkes 129). Or, to borrow Roland Barthes' vocabulary, the "associative total" of this non-linguistic sign (Hawkes 131), coupled with the content of the words placed within its circle, constitutes a full sign, as Ferdinand deSaussure used the word (653).

In less theoretical terms, for children the balloon may be a ready-made link between the visual and the verbal: incorporated into a picture, it contains words, blending sight and sound congenially if not seamlessly. However, artists for children's books who use dialogue balloons on occasional pages are probably aware that these bubbles force certain artistic compromises. A reader tends to see a picture as a whole composition, whereas the presence of a balloon in the midst of it dictates a left-to-right, top-to-bottom pattern of eye movement. Abbott has noted that bubble-encased words influence the reader's perception of the picture, perhaps limiting or at least guiding it (159). Also, the balloons take up space, requiring that the artist sacrifice part of the picture (Harvey 650). Their conventions limit them to *dialogue* (solid line surrounding the words), *thought* (cloud-like lines around the words), and *exclamations* (jagged lines around the words) (Abbott 156). Perhaps because of these constraints, bubbles are often neglected in illustration theory. For example, Uri Shulevitz's *Writing with Pictures*, currently used as the main text in the children's book illustration course at the Rhode Island School of Design, does not even discuss the technique; instead, a section on free-hand lettering refers to it obliquely (112).

In return for these limitations, artists gain, in Berger's words, an "opportunity for a fusion of art and language which allows ideas to be presented in images that are often emotionally gripping" (165). Such an opportunity could persuade even Martha Alexander, who confessed to the 1988 Children's Literature Conference in Charleston, SC, that she was almost completely "a visual person," to use speech balloons in at least one of her books. She and other serious artists who use this format occasionally in their books for children are not capitulating to a lowest-common-denominator technique. Instead, they use the balloons on certain pages not only to convey information but also to signal other important messages.

A few authors have vigorously defended this practice. Elizabeth Coatsworth sees nothing wrong with "books that are intelligent comics The question is one of attitude. It is vulgarity of mind of which one must beware, not any particular form" (9). Edward Ardizzone, who often uses the technique, cautions: "balloons . . . must be used sparingly; otherwise one's book might take on the character of a strip cartoon, which would be sad indeed" ("Creation of a Picture Book" 291).

Despite the artists' defense and the obvious audience appeal of the balloons, the conjunction of words and pictures in the same frame imposes two different tasks on the reader. Perry

Nodelman explains the tension well: "Because they communicate different kinds of information, and because they work together by limiting each other's meanings, words and pictures necessarily have a combative relationship; their complementarity is a matter of opposites completing each other by virtue of their differences" (221). Nodelman refers here to standard picture books and illustrated books; the problem might seem exacerbated by dialogue-balloons. Developing the semiotic implications mentioned earlier, though, we see instead that these bubbles in the hands of an accomplished artist can create a subtle composite of word and image.

An informal survey reveals four signals that artists for children's books send by means of the balloons: 1) "This is dialogue"; 2) "This is important"; 3) "This is interesting"; 4) "This is a secret."

The first of these uses—announcing dialogue that in the remainder of the book simply appears in the text—is the most obvious. Yet a good artist can use this indicating function effectively. Even the self-confessedly visual Martha Alexander has done so at least once: her book *No Ducks in OUR Bathub* has a double-page spread that climaxes the book. In it, a dismayed father whispers "103 frogs," as his delighted son yells "frogs"; both sentiments are enclosed in balloons. Since Alexander's remaining dialogue occurs as the text itself, the balloons here replace the text: instead of the ducks his hard-hearted parents have prohibited, the son has been rewarded with a tubful of hatched tadpoles. Alexander adroitly uses different type sizes and colors to emphasize the difference in the father's dismay and the boy's delight at the same phenomenon.

Where Alexander uses balloons to announce dialogue on only two pages, Maurice Sendak employs the device for the same reason in almost an entire chapter of *Higglety Pigglety Pop! Or There Must Be More to Life*. Since this chapter, nine, fulfills dog Jennie's ambition to be leading lady in a production of the World Mother Goose Theatre, Sendak's use of balloons in it to denote the dialogue spoken by Jennie and her co-actors cleverly notifies the audience that the entire chapter is a play, and thus distinct from Jennie's narrative adventures in the remaining chapters.

A second use of bubbles—to reinforce or intensify the text—signals "This is important" to a child. Three books by Marjorie Sharmat, each illustrated by a different artist, do so. In *Gila Monsters Meet You at the Airport*, Byron Barton uses balloons to duplicate the drawl of western Americans stereotypically envisioned by a child who doesn't want his family to move west. In *Say Hello, Vanessa*, Lillian Hoban uses different-sized letters within balloons to illustrate Vanessa mouse's difficulties in regulating the volume of her voice, and in *Walter the Wolf*, Kelly Oechsli repeats Naomi beaver's warning to the insensitive Walter before Naomi gives him a taste of his own medicine and bites him: "'SO!' said Naomi."

In the book of poems *Father Fox's Pennyrhymes*, artist Wendy Watson frequently uses balloons. Sometimes, like Sharmat's illustrators, she makes them reinforce author Clyde Watson's text. For example, on page 5 is the following verse:

Knickerbocker Knockabout
Sausages & Sauerkraut
Run! Run! Run! The hogs are out!
Knickerbocker Knockabout

In the accompanying watercolor, a fox leaning from a dormer

window warns the town, via balloon, "Lock your doors! The hogs are in town!" (4). Here the bubble clearly serves as a device for emphasis.

Edward Ardizzone, defender of balloons, occasionally uses them similarly—to reinforce text. In *Diana and her Rhinoceros*, for example, Diana's startled mother exclaims "Ooee! Ooee!" (4), in both text and balloon, when she first sees the rhinoceros that has escaped from the zoo into their sitting room. This duplication effectively underlines the point: Diana's mother is more than a little distraught. Shortly afterwards, an adamant Diana refuses in both text and balloon to let the zoo keepers shoot the rhino: "No I won't. Its [sic] nice" (15).

As the previous examples show, artists use balloons to reinforce the text principally at crises in the narrative. A more subtle use of the device is to hint, "This is interesting"—to interpret the text. Sometimes this application includes information that the text merely suggests. Ardizzone champions this practice as an efficiency measure: "Now this is where the old convention of the balloon coming out of a character's mouth, with writing in the balloon, can be invaluable" ("Creation" 290). Ardizzone draws his balloons casually, and the words in them are hand lettered, with little regard for comma conventions. This technique minimizes the intrusion of the verbal into the visual. One of the occasions when he relies on it to amplify the text occurs in *Diana and her Rhinoceros*. The narrative merely mentions that Diana and her parents are having tea, but balloons in the accompanying illustration have Diana's father saying, "Don't spare the butter Diana," while her mother worries, "Hush my dear is that the baby" (4). These balloons accomplish a lot: they suggest the desirability of plenty of butter on toast, an idea that will be developed later as Diana doctors the sick rhinoceros, and they reveal Diana's mother as a worrier, as she proves very shortly when she croons "Darling darling darling did the naughty rhino frighten you?" (12) to a very placid baby. Other worriers are revealed later: the text tells us that people are coming to see the rhino, but one balloon in the illustration reveals a parent saying "Are you sure it's quite safe my dear," while a child requests, "Can we play with it Miss?" (22-23).

Ardizzone uses balloons to flesh out the text in at least two other books. In *Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain*, the text simply has a sailor telling stowaway Tim, "Come along with me, my lad, the captain will have something to say to you," but in the illustration, this sailor has Tim by the ear, and Tim's balloon notes "Ow! ow! You're hurting me!" Later, an industrious Tim has redeemed himself to the point that the text states, "Even the captain said he was not too bad for a stowaway," a somewhat negative statement of approval that the balloons in the picture develop positively: a young sailor says, "Thank you my lad" to a helpful Tim as the Captain observes, "He seems to be quite a useful boy." At the end, when brave Tim, who has remained with the captain on his sinking ship, is rescued, concerned onlookers murmur via balloon, "Poor little boy I hope he's alright [sic]," an efficient way to emphasize both the danger and bravery that the situation evinces.

A later book of Ardizzone's, *Tim to the Lighthouse*, also occasionally uses balloons to add material to the story. For example, one illustration conveys the protagonists' reactions to a miscreant crew of wreckers. Had Ardizzone incorporated these details into the text, the brisk pace of the story would have faltered. Instead, the balloons add information without slowing the action.

Father Fox's Pennyrhymes also uses balloons this way, as two of numerous examples show. The text of one poem follows:

Mister Lister sassed his sister
Married his wife 'cause he couldn't resist her,
Three plus four times two he kissed her:
How many times is that, dear sister? (2)

What this text suggests, the balloon-laden illustrations on the facing page confirm: Mister Lister's sister is a termagant ("Get busy! Do the dishes!" she greets him as he enters the house) who gets her comeuppance ("Let me out!" she demands from her temporary prison beneath a table as the newlyweds make happy music on the violin and piano) (3). In the second example, balloons efficiently particularize the notion of mayhem in the illustration for the following poem:

Uptown, downtown
Wrong side to,
Goodness me
What a hullabaloo!

Upstairs, downstairs,
Roundabout,
Backwards, forwards,
Inside OUT! (22)

The accompanying picture shows Aunt Gertie Fox welcoming her nieces and nephews in the first frame ("Come in, Darlings," her balloon says); by the last frame, the destructive little foxes have wrecked their aunt's house and Gertie exclaims "Good riddance!" as she packs them out the door (23).

Interpreting or elaborating a text with balloons in this fashion is fairly easy to justify. What about carrying the usage a step further and incorporating balloons that present material not implied by the text? Artists take serious risks here. At best, they signal "This is a secret" and intensify the pleasure. Ardizzone, for example, in *Diana and her Rhinoceros* has Diana's father say via balloon as the animal is banished outside, "Oh my poor garden" (19). This comment, which seems extraneous to the text at the time, later proves germane when the rhino begins eating the dahlias.

Wendy Watson even more often uses balloons to present material not implied by the poems themselves. Sometimes this additional dialogue derives closely enough from the verse that it enriches the reader's appreciation. For example, one illustration shows Father Fox with daughter Nanny on his knee; readers assume that he is singing the following text from the facing page:

Nanny Banny Bumblebee
Nanny is my cup of tea
I'm as happy as can be
When I've got Nanny on my knee. (18)

Even though the text concludes here, it seems quite appropriate that the illustration includes a counterpart: Mother Fox swinging son Tom on a grapevine and singing, according to her balloon,

Bimbo, Bombo, Tomkin Pie
He's the apple of my eye.
Swing him low or swing him high,
He's the apple of my eye. (19)

Another poem presents a peddler's visit to the home of the fox family:

Knock! Knock! Anybody there?
I've feathers for your caps
And ribbons for your hair.
If you can't pay you can sing me a song,
But if you can't sing, I'll just run along. (21)

The accompanying illustration shows an accomplished Fox family, rich in voice if not in money, singing to pay for their purchases. This is appealing, if unremarkable. By using balloons, though, Watson inserts another story: one of the junior foxes can't sing for sour apples, as his ballooned blats, screeches, and squawks make painfully clear (20). Happy resolution comes in the last frame when one of his older sisters hands him a wooden flute to play; it's one of the items for which the family has bartered. This parallel story enriches the text.

At worst, though, this "Let's share a secret" use of balloons becomes a coy mannerism. Little except distraction results when Watson has a bird in a tree say, "No one gave me a Valentine" (12) as part of a sequence of pictures illustrating a poem about a fox-suitor giving a Valentine pumpkin to "little Jenny/ Half-a-penny/ Valentine sweetheart" (13). Most often, though, Watson uses the technique consummately; even a ballooned statement that at first glance has little to do with the text of the poem eventually proves subtly linked. A fox daughter's statement that she's going to marry a rich farmer, for example (32), seems extraneous to a verse about the candy for sale at a country store until the reader notices that in the second part of the illustration, Mother Fox is tugging at Father Fox's coat sleeve, pointing to the food items in the shop that the family needs far worse than the stereopticon-like machine Father is buying. A youngster from such a family might well want to marry a rich farmer.

Another artist who uses balloons to suggest material not implied by the text is Wallace Tripp. In *Granfa' Grig Had a Pig*, some of his illustrations use balloons for unconventional and often hilarious interpretations of these traditional rhymes. The last lines of the verse about Blue Bell the dog, for example, are "I sent him to the cellar, to draw a pot of beer,/ He came up again and said there was none there." This seems straightforward enough, but the illustration shows an inebriated dog announcing disingenuously, via balloon, "None there" (11). Readers know exactly where the beer has gone. Tripp's illustration for "Doctor Foster Went to Glo'ster" is even more unconventionally funny: the elephant Dr. Foster, furious because he is mired in a pond-sized puddle, is being hauled out by Clydesdale horses attached to an enormous block-and-tackle; meanwhile a tiny nurse-gopher cheerfully announces to him, "Sir Richard is feeling much better, so you can run along home now" (14-15). It's clear to the reader that this particular Doctor Foster won't be running anywhere for awhile.

Other artists besides those discussed above have, of course, employed words in balloons. Those who invest in the technique risk aesthetic denigration as strip cartoonists. Instead, sensitive artists are employing a semiotic device that offers their preliterate and neoliterate audiences the perfect bridge between the visual and the verbal. Unafraid of the "little puffs of smoke," many children may in fact learn to read by mastering these integral parts of the pictures in some of their favorite books.

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