

The Application of Some Fantasy Guidelines to the Reading of Picture Books Containing Fantasies

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Abstract

Nowadays, fantasy works are generally accepted by adults for children to read. Children can benefit more from reading fantasy works if they are guided to know some guidelines that are contained in this genre. Since children are more familiar with picture books, this study applies these guidelines into the reading of picture books containing fantasies. The purpose of this study is to use picture books containing fantasies as a springboard to lead children to start their experience of reading fantasy works. The four selected picture books containing fantasies are Allsburg's (1985) *The Polar Express*, Allsburg's (1981) *Jumanji*, Yorinks's (1986) *Hey, Al*, and Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*. This study also lists some questions, which can hopefully help those who are interested in using picture books containing fantasies in the classroom. Children can thus obtain a chance to begin to think about how they can bring about changes to their lives, and thus, the society they dwell in.

Keywords: Society, fantasy, fantasy guidelines, picture books containing fantasies

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I. Introduction

As early as the 1500s, many parents and educators told children not to read fantasy tales or works of fiction (Avery, 1995, chap. 1). The reasons might be that they are considered addictive, escapist, unrealistic, and untruthful. Fantasies cause people to become addicted, because they contain elements that easily draw the readers in. Fantasies are viewed as escapist, because they offer a place where children can indulge themselves in, and thus, can escape from problems and responsibilities they need to face or deal with in their real life (Veith, 2005). In addition, fantasies are considered unrealistic and untruthful, because they are seen as telling lies. Since parents may carry these negative thoughts towards fantasy works, they will naturally discourage their children from reading such tales.

Fortunately, in the 19th century, adults began to find the benefit of reading these fantasy works. That is, they started to discover that such works could contain truth. Sara Coleridge said this to her brother:

‘If you ask me’, she [Sara Coleridge] told her brother Derwent, ‘what advantage a young person could possibly derive from such an issue of unrealities, I should say that every work of fancy in its degree, and according to the merit of its execution, feeds and expands the mind; whenever the poetical beauty of things is vividly displayed, truth is exhibited, and thus the imagination of the youthful reader is stimulated to find truth for itself. (Butts, 1995, pp. 91-92)

Lurie (1990) explained how fantasies could help us get to know the truth about our world we dwelt in, and how they could be applied to our lives:

It would be much better, for children to read simple, pleasant, realistic tales that would help to prepare us for the adult world.

....

After we grew, of course, we found out how unrealistic these stories had been. The simple, pleasant adult society they had prepared us for did not exist. As we had suspected, the fairy tales had been right all along – the world was full of hostile, stupid giants and perilous castles and people who abandoned their children in the nearest forest. (pp. 17 – 18)

Indeed, the city we live in is like a jungle or terrible forest in which various types of creatures dwell. There are giants, dwarfs, elves, witches, fairies, and so on. Some people are like legendary giants who like to bully the weak, some people are like dwarfs who like to play tricks behind our back, some people are like elves who are pure, cute, and innocent, and some people are like fairies who will give help. As fantasies imply and as we understand that our surroundings are like a jungle in which various types of people live and interact, fantasies do not merely help us think about reality in our lives, but they also help us find some truth (Veith, 2005).

Now, people generally accept that children can read fantasy tales, because they know that children can benefit from reading these tales. In fact, it may be possible for children to gain more benefits, if they are led to know some guidelines for reading fantasies, as these guidelines are thought to be able to enhance children’s understanding of fantasy works, and can thus help them think about how to change themselves and society. In the following, we will discuss some of these guidelines mainly taken from Veith’s (2005) perspective.

II. Some Guidelines for Reading



Fantasies

In reading a fantasy, we can find some recurring ideas. These ideas in turn can help us understand a fantasy, if we specifically draw these ideas out. That is, these ideas can become guidelines for reading a fantasy. To discover these ideas, first, Veith (2005) tells us that “a good fantasy sets up its own self-contained world in which marvelous things can occur” (p. 144). As we often see, a fantasy world is its own world. It is independent from its connection with the real world we live in. It is also a world, which allows any possibilities to occur. For example, animals can talk, dragons can fly, trees can walk, flowers can smile, and so on.

Next, Veith (2005) tells us that a good fantasy provides an opportunity for readers to face the very same issues that are operative in their own lives. It often proposes some ideas readers can glean and thus benefit from (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993). For example, an evil giant likes to harass the habitants in the forest, and thus, no one wants to be his friend. By presenting this idea, the author stimulates readers to think about the consequence of bad behavior in their own lives.

Lastly, Veith (2005) tells us that a good fantasy shows why a character changes. As a result, it can influence readers to reflect and make changes in their own lives. Veith (2005) draws from Shakespear’s idea to show us how a fantasy can work:

The characters are introduced in a real world that has become disordered, where parents and children turn against each other, where love has gone wrong, where the innocent are condemned to death, and where society is coming apart. Then the characters leave this disordered world for an enchanted forest or a mystical island across the sea. There, strange

and magical things happen. Then the characters come back into the original world, transformed by what has happened to them in the magical world, and set it right again. (p. 116)

Generally, when we read a fantasy, we may find that it presents itself this way: The story begins with the main characters living in the real world where there are some issues they are involved in. Next, they meet some type of channel such as a rabbit hole, a mirror, or a wardrobe, which somehow brings them into a fantasy world. In this place, marvelous things happen, and characters are transformed. So, when they return to the real world, they are better equipped to deal with the issues.

As we can see, a fantasy has its own pattern in which guidelines are embedded in it. A fantasy presents itself in this type of pattern, as this makes it easier for readers to readily glean ideas from a fantasy. Readers can thus reflect upon what they have read in a fantasy and take the thoughts to apply them to their own lives. So, if we know the aforementioned fantasy guidelines, we are given a chance to better understand a fantasy, and be able to apply what we learn from a fantasy into our lives. If we can bring these fantasy guidelines into the classroom, students can also gain the same benefits.

III. Four Tales

Since children are more familiar with the format of a picture book rather than fiction, this study has chosen the format of a picture book, which contains a fantasy pattern within it for investigation. Therefore, the following four picture books have been picked as samples. They are Allsburg’s (1985) *The Polar Express*, Allsburg’s (1981) *Jumanji*, Yorinks’s (1986) *Hey, Al*, and Sendak’s (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*. If we browse through these four books, we can find that they present their main characters starting



out in the real world, where they are confronted with an issue. They then go through a channel such as a train, a game, a bird, and a child's imagination, and enter a fantasy world. There, marvelous things happen, and most of the main characters are transformed. Summaries of these four tales are provided in Appendix, in which one can get more of a glimpse of the fantasy pattern in these stories. In addition, these four samples that are in the format of a picture book written with a fantasy pattern will be referred to as "picture books containing fantasies" in this paper, as this helps clarify what these samples are.

This study will apply the fantasy guidelines discussed earlier into the reading of the chosen four picture books so that readers can better comprehend how the guidelines can help them understand a fantasy work. This study will also utilize the understanding of this application to list some questions, which hopefully can offer help to those who are interested in using "picture books containing fantasies" in the classroom. The study will then conclude with implications.

IV. A Discussion of the Four Tales

In Allsburg's (1985) *The Polar Express*, the boy's friend tells him that he does not believe that Santa exists. It turns out that a train comes and takes the boy to the North Pole. There, in the fantasy world, marvelous things happen. The boy meets the legendary persons, Santa and his elves. He is then chosen to ask for the first gift of Christmas. After that, the boy gets on the train with other children, and then returns home.

The boy is confronted with the issue about whether or not Santa exists. The boy is then transported into the fantasy world. There, he meets Santa. This confirms the boy's belief that Santa is real. When the boy returns home, he learns the importance

of believing in himself. This story raises the issue children encounter in their real lives. Usually, as children grow and become realistic, they stop believing in Santa. By having the boy go to the North Pole, this story confirms and strengthens children's belief in Santa. This helps children learn the importance of holding onto whatever they believe.

In Allsburg's (1981) *Jumanji*, Judy and Peter are told by their parents that they need to keep the house neat. After Judy and Peter get bored playing with their toys, they go to the park where they find a game called Jumanji. Upon playing it, they both are accidentally drawn into an imaginary world. There, amazing things happen. Jungle animals and natural disasters appear in their house. These things cause their house to become very messy. Judy and Peter then quickly finish the game and put the game back to where they find it. Judy and Peter's adventures stop. They come back to reality. They put their toys away. The house is clean again. When Judy and Peter's parents return home, they do not know what experience Judy and Peter go through.

Judy and Peter are confronted with the issue of being bored. They randomly pick up an unknown game, through which they are transformed into another world. There, they have experiences that really frighten them. When they have ended the game, and the fantasy world disappears, they are back to the real world. They put the game back to where they find it. Through this experience, they learn a lesson to be careful about what they bring home. This story brings up the issue children often encounter in their daily life. When children feel bored and go outside to play, they may pick up some unknown things, bring them home, and through their interaction with them, encounter terrifying experiences, just like the characters in the story did. This story offers the readers a chance to consider being more discerning about what they bring into their real lives.



In Yorinks's (1986) *Hey, Al*, Al is content with his life, mopping and cleaning. However, his dog, Eddie, feels that the life he and Al have is not good because they are struggling. Then, a bird comes to their house, and tells Al that he can take Al to a place where Al can relax and have fun. Al and Eddie then go with the bird to the fantasy place, which is an island in the sky. There, amazing things happen. Al and Eddie have great fun and a good life. However, when Al and Eddie find that they are turning into birds and losing their own identity, they are so scared that they fly away from the island to return home immediately. They then start to paint their house to create a beautiful surrounding. After Al and Eddie have the terrible experiences on the island in the sky, they feel that it is better to keep their identity and live a simple life than to go to a wonderful place where they are not allowed to be themselves.

Al and Eddie are confronted with the issue that they have struggles in their life. A bird comes, and then, takes them into another world. There, Al and Eddie undergo changes. They then discover that these changes cause them to lose identify. So, they quickly leave and return home. They realize that it is better to keep their own identity and create their own paradise. This story brings up the issue of the importance of keeping one's own identity. Sometimes, children think that other places or groups look wonderful. But in order to fit in, they might have to conform and lose their identity. This story offers children an opportunity to ponder the value of keeping their own identity and create their own beautiful world.

In Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max is just like all the other children who are naughty and like to have fun. He hits the wall and runs after a dog. Max's mother is mad and sends him to his room without giving him dinner. Max's imagination takes over and transports him to the wild things' world. There, he becomes even wilder, so

much so that he becomes king of his own fun, wild world. Then, he stops his fun with the wild things. As he is feeling lonely, he smells the aroma of dinner. His imagination begins to wane. He then returns to the real world, and finds his supper on the table.

Max is confronted with the issue of being punished for being naughty. Max ignores his punishment and uses his imagination to take him to another world. There, he continues to have fun and even becomes wilder. It is not until he feels lonely, and smells dinner that he transports himself back to the real world. This tales brings up the issue that normally occurs in a child's daily life. Adults will often scold and punish a child for his or her mischief behavior. But, as seen in the story, punishment leads to nothing as Max continues his behavior in his mind. Such a display creates a chance for adults to think about how they should raise a child. Perhaps, adults should focus on creating new ways to relate to their child and forming alternative environments for their child to grow.

V. Tales and Society

These four tales do not merely bring up issues that are important to individuals, but also inspire individuals to reflect on these issues. This can provide opportunities for readers to think about what they and their society need as well as how to bring changes to the surroundings they live in. Allsburg's (1985) *The Polar Express*, Allsburg's (1981) *Jumanji*, and Yorinks's (1986) *Hey, Al*, show that their characters change after going through some unusual experiences. The boy's belief in Santa is confirmed when he is in the North Pole. After this, his belief in Santa continues throughout his life. This idea inspires us to think about the importance of believing in ourselves. That is, we should have confidence in ourselves. This is what individuals and society need. Judy and Peter learn to be more careful about what



they bring into their lives. Even though the game looks fun at the beginning, it turns into something scary. This message can teach individuals and society to be careful about what they put into their lives. Al and Eddie learn the value of keeping their own identity. Not conforming but having the freedom to be oneself not only benefits individuals but all of society.

Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are* is not a tale that shows how the character, Max, experiences a change after he goes to the place where the wild things are. On the contrary, he becomes even wilder in that fantasy world. However, this is a tale that can draw adults' attention to think about a change regarding the practice of raising a child and inspire them to alter their actions and lives, and thus, their environment. That is, this tale inspires us to think about how to transform what we do and how we live our lives, and thus, our society.

VI. Questions for Guiding the Reading of Picture Books Containing Fantasies in the Classroom

The discussion of the above four tales shows that picture books containing fantasies can be a medium we can use as a first step to guide children to understand fantasy works. Therefore, some questions are listed, which can hopefully serve as some suggestions for those who are interested in the use of picture books containing fantasies in the classroom. The questions are as follows:

1. What happens to the characters in their real lives?
2. Are these characters transported into another world through some kind of ways or means?
3. What does it look like in the fantasy world?
4. What issues do children and adults face in their

real lives, which can be seen in the fantasy world?

5. How do the characters undergo changes in the fantasy world?
6. What do readers think about the characters' changes, and how can these changes influence their lives and society?

Here are some suggestions when one chooses to teach the genre of fantasy in the classroom. We can first briefly introduce a fantasy pattern. We can then encourage children to try to find this pattern in a fantasy. We can also ask children to think about the purpose of why a fantasy work employs such a pattern. Next, we can utilize the six questions listed in this section to guide children to explore and investigate the events that happen in the characters' lives both in the real world and in the fantasy world. After this, we should leave some time for children to reflect upon what they have read and consider if the concepts from the fantasy can be applied to their own lives and society. If there is enough time, we should have children share their responses in the classroom. Children can then learn from each other's viewpoints.

The purpose of this suggestive classroom plan for teaching the genre of fantasy is to initiate children's interest in getting to know fantasy works. These suggestions can therefore be added to or altered to fit one's students' needs.

VII. Implications

These aforementioned reading guidelines and suggested classroom application hopefully can help children become familiar with picture books containing fantasies so that children can later have an easier chance to comprehend fantasy works written as fiction. The ultimate goal is to help children to understand that there is a relationship that exists between tales, individuals, and society. New



generations can thus gain an opportunity to realize that reading might be an important activity for reflecting on how a person could grow and influence society.

Appendix: Summaries of the Four Tales

Allsburg's (1985) *The Polar Express*

On Christmas Eve, there was a boy, lying in his bed, trying to listen to the ringing bells of Santa Claus. His friend said that there was no such thing as Santa, but he did not believe what his friend said. Later that night, he heard the sound of a train outside. He put on his robe and went out to see what was happening. The conductor asked him if he was going to the North Pole. The boy replied "yes," and got on board. On the train, he saw many children eating, drinking, and having fun together.

The train passed by the street lights, and into the forest. It went up mountains, into plains, and onto an ice cap. Finally, the conductor announced to the children that they had arrived at the North Pole and that one kid would be chosen by Santa to receive the first Christmas gift. The children got off the train and went into the city center to join the elves waiting for Santa. When Santa arrived, he pointed to the boy and asked him to choose the first gift he was about to give out. The boy told Santa that he wanted a silver bell from the sleigh that Santa drove. So, he got a bell and gave it to the boy. The boy put the bell in his pocket, and got off the sleigh. Santa then went up into the sky on his way to deliver the presents. All the children got back into the train and got ready to return home. On the train, other children asked the boy if they could see the silver bell. When the boy reached into his pocket in search of the bell, he found nothing but a hole.

The boy sadly returned home. On the next day,

the boy and his little sister, Sarah, were opening presents. When they thought that all presents were unwrapped, Sarah found a small gift by the Christmas tree that was for the boy. He opened his present and discovered a silver bell lying in it with a note from Santa that said that he found the bell in his sleigh and that he needed to fix the hole in his pocket. The boy rang the bell, and only he and Sarah could hear the beautiful sound it made, while his parents said that the bell must be broken since they could not hear anything. At one point, the boy's friends and Sarah could hear the sound of the bell, but after years, it started to fade, and then it finally fell silent. But, as for the boy, the bell still rang for him, because he truly believes in Santa.

Allsburg's (1981) *Jumanji*

One day, Judy and Peter were told by their parents that they were going out, and when they returned, they would bring some guests with them. Their parents thus wanted Judy and Peter to keep the house neat. Then, their parents left.

Judy and Peter were really happy. They took out all their toys and played with them. Soon they got bored, and so they went outside and played. Then, behind a tree, Peter found a long thin box. It was a game called JUMANJI. Judy persuaded Peter to take the game home. When they were at home, they started to play it. Peter went first. He rolled and moved his piece seven squares. The space he landed on said "lion attacks." Then, Peter turned around, and saw a lion lying on the piano. Peter felt like crying. Then, Judy rolled an eight. The square she landed on said "Monkeys steals food." Soon, Judy and Peter heard lots of loud noise coming from the kitchen. The monkeys were banging and breaking things there.

Peter and Judy went back to the game. Peter took his turn to roll the dice. The square he landed on said "Monsoon season begins." It suddenly started



raining. Then, Judy took the dice and rolled it. This time, the space she landed on said "Guide gets lost." Soon, the rain stopped and a man suddenly appeared looking at a map. Judy handed Peter the dice. He rolled a six and the space he landed on said "Bitten by tsetse fly, contract sleeping sickness." Then, a bug suddenly landed on Peter's nose and bit him. Soon, he fell asleep.

Judy tried to wake him up, but it did not work. Then she took the dice and rolled it. The square she landed on said "Rhinoceros stampede." Soon Peter woke up. Then, Judy and Peter heard a loud noise coming closer and closer. Suddenly Rhinoceroses ran through the living room door and broke everything in their way. Then, Peter quickly rolled the dice. The space he landed on said "Python sneaks into camp." On the fireplace, suddenly an eight-foot python appeared. Then, Judy rolled the dice; the square she landed on was a blank. Peter thus snatched the dice and rolled a three. The space he landed on said "Volcano erupts." The room began to feel hot inside. Lava came pouring down from the fireplace. Soon, steam was everywhere in the room. Then, Judy rolled the dice and her space said "Discover shortcut, roll again." Thus, Judy rolled the dice again, and she got a twelve. She was allowed to leave the jungle and enter the city of Jumanji. She then yelled JUMANJI. After that, everything was turned back to the way it was.

Judy and Peter both fell silent. They then put the game back into the box, ran back to the park, and put it where it was before. After they returned home, they picked up their toys. Then, the house was clean. Soon, Judy and Peter both fell asleep. After a little while, Judy and Peter's parents returned home and introduced Judy and Peter to some of their guests. The story ends when Judy and Peter saw a guest's two sons running while holding the game box they left in the park earlier.

Yorinks's (1986) Hey, Al

There was a janitor named Al, and he lived in a room with his dog, Eddie. They did everything together, but one day Eddie started to complain about getting a house and not having to struggle all the time. One morning, a bird came by their bathroom window while Al was shaving, and asked Al if he felt that he was working too hard. The bird told him about a place where Al could just relax and put all his worries aside. Then, the bird invited Al to go to that place.

The next day, Al and Eddie were packed and waiting at their bathroom for the bird to come. After a while, the bird appeared and took them to an island high up in the sky. Green grasses and hills were everywhere, with trees and waterfalls and different species of birds. Al and Eddie were amazed. They ate, drank, swam in the pool, and had a lot of fun. Al loved the place and said that he could stay in a place like this forever. Days went by. One day, after Al woke up, he screamed, because he found that he started turning into a bird, and the same thing happened with Eddie. Al told Eddie that they have to get out of the island. So, Al took Eddie, and they started trying to fly back home. But, Eddie kept flying higher. He became exhausted, and he thus fell into the ocean and was gone. Al got home, and was extremely sad when he thought that he had lost Eddie. But, fortunately, Eddie was a great swimmer and got home right after Al. Al was so happy to see Eddie, and they were glad that they returned home. They then started to paint their house to make it beautiful. After experiencing this fantasy world set on an island in the sky, Al realized that paradise could not be wonderful if he could not keep his own identity.

Sendak's (1963) Where the Wild Things Are

Max liked to make mischief. He pounded the wall, and then, chased after a dog. His mother



scolded and called him “Wild Thing.” Max was angry and said to his mom that he would eat her up. Max was then sent to bed without his supper. However, in his room, Max did not care about what his mother said. Instead, he used his imagination to come to the place where the wild things were. There, he made those wild creatures obey him, and became their king. He led those wild things to become wilder and they all had great fun. It was not until Max felt lonely and wanted to be loved and treasured that he said goodbye to those wild creatures. Retuning back to reality, Max found that his mother had already set dinner on a table, and it was hot waiting for him to eat.

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幻想作品元素在童書的應用

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摘 要

現今，家長普遍接受讓他們的小孩閱讀幻想作品，假如我們可以幫助小孩知道幻想作品內可能含有的元素，小孩更能知道如何閱讀幻想作品。因為童書是小孩比較熟悉的媒材，本研究因此將本文內所討論的幻想作品元素應用在童書之閱讀，而所選擇閱讀的童書，聚焦在用幻想手法寫的童書。本研究目的是希望能說明用幻想手法寫的童書可以是引領兒童進入幻想作品的有用媒材，本研究選出的四本用幻想手法寫的童書分別是 Allsburg (1985)的 *The Polar Express*, Allsburg (1981)的 *Jumanji*, Yorinks (1986)的 *Hey, Al*, 和 Sendak (1963)的 *Where the Wild Things Are*。本研究也列出一些問題，希望能對使用幻想手法寫的童書引領兒童了解幻想作品之有興趣者提供些許幫助，終極目標希望藉由幫助兒童認識幻想作品，兒童能有機會進而思考如何改變他們的生活與環境。

關鍵字：社會、幻想作品、幻想作品元素、幻想童書

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