



Reviews



Postmodern Picture Books, the Postmodernesque, and Queer Failure

—Lian Beveridge

Allan, Cherie. *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012. 216 pp. \$90.00 hc. ISBN 978-0-23031-949-3. Print. *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature*.

Bossio, Paula. *The Line*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2013. 32 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-894786-84-3. Print.

Clanton, Ben. *Vote for Me!* Toronto: Kids Can, 2012. 40 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-822-5. Print.

Fagan, Cary. *I Wish I Could Draw*. Toronto: Greenwood, 2014. 32 pp. \$12.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55498-318-6. Print.

Maclear, Kyo. *Virginia Wolf*. Illus. Isabelle Arsenault. Toronto: Kids Can, 2012. 32 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-649-8. Print.

Rogers, Stan. *Northwest Passage*. As seen by Matt James. Toronto: Greenwood, 2013. 56 pp. \$24.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55498-153-3. Print.

Watt, Mélanie. *Chester's Back!* Toronto: Kids Can, 2013. 32 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55453-461-6. Print.

Young, Cybele. *Ten Birds*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2011. 32 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-568-2. Print.

For those who study picture books, the postmodern picture book has a particular allure because of its promise to take this complex and versatile genre in new and unusual directions. Cherie Allan's recent book-length study, *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque*, offers insight into this contested and fascinating area. Allan's book was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2012 as part of the Critical Approaches to Children's Literature series edited by Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford. The text offers a solid grounding on postmodernism and picture books, with chapters on modes of representation, reality, representations of the past, and difference. It analyzes a wide range of international picture books published between the 1980s and 2012. While Allan acknowledges that "the majority of children's books still conform to a traditional modernist approach," she argues that, "nevertheless, the influence of postmodernism on children's picturebooks is significant and warrants an investigation" (19). She introduces, in her final chapter, the concept of "postmodernesque" picture books, noting that these are "not so much postmodern picturebooks as picturebooks about postmodernity" (141). She observes that "postmodernesque picturebooks have emerged from the postmodern tradition and yet exhibit a sufficient shift in direction to warrant a separate designation" (24). She offers several examples of such books as well as an illuminating discussion of how these picture books

interact with the modern and the postmodern. Allan's work is clearly written, and the new terminology she suggests is a fruitful way to think about contemporary picture books.

Allan's work provides a useful frame to consider seven picture books published by Canadian presses between 2011 and 2014. These picture books cover a wide range of topics, from Virginia Woolf's childhood to a competitive election race, and represent a range of aesthetics, from delicate chiaroscuro illustrations to childlike pencil drawings. They all contain postmodern elements, some to a greater degree than others, and most illustrate an interest in the creative process, from drawing dragons with a Sharpie pen to building a catapult. Through an application of Allan's work in conjunction with Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, I argue that, while the picture books meet Allan's definition of postmodern and postmodernesque picture books only in some ways, they do offer radical possibilities through their failures.

As we know, the term "postmodern" is contested and shifting, and inherently resists definition. As Allan notes, "[f]ew terms have been subjected to such intense debate as has *postmodernism*" (6). Nonetheless, she offers several useful ways to conceive of the postmodern picture book. Many of the picture books reviewed here fit the genre because of their use of metafiction. As Allan explains, "metafiction refers to self-reflexive fiction which intentionally draws attention to its status as fiction

and, in so doing, poses questions about the relationship between fiction and the reality it purports to represent" (27). Several of the picture books draw attention to their status as fiction in that they are books about making a book. *I Wish I Could Draw*, published by Groundwood in 2014, consists of "words and (bad) pictures by Cary Fagan" and focuses on Fagan's inability to draw. It opens with the words "I really, really wish I could draw" and features black and white illustrations rendered in Sharpie pen. Fagan comments self-consciously on his "stinky" drawings throughout the book, thus drawing readers' attention to the conditions of creation of the work. The picture book becomes metafictional after the narrator wonders if his pictures "will look even better if I use them to tell a story. After all, I like making up stories." He tries creating an illustrated story, annotating the process throughout with musings such as "Now I need something exciting to happen." Fagan also breaks the fourth wall by suggesting that the reader "go and draw your own stinky pictures." *I Wish I Could Draw* is intended as an encouraging text for young readers. The back cover blurb explains that it "will inspire readers to pick up a pencil and let their imaginations do the rest!" Although this book articulates explicitly that people can make exciting picture books even if they "stink at drawing," the story has little content beyond Fagan's feelings about drawing. As a genre, picture books rely heavily on illustrations and the interaction between words and images. As Perry Nodelman argues, placing

words and images "into relationship with one another inevitably changes the meaning of both, so that good picture books as a whole are a richer experience than just the simple sum of their parts" (199). Unfortunately, Fagan's illustrations, while charming in their honest clumsiness, do not add much information or interest to the story, so the picture book lacks this rich experience. *I Wish I Could Draw* certainly meets Allan's definition of postmodern metafiction in its self-reflexivity, however.

Originally published in Spanish under the title *El Lapiz*, Paula Bossio's *The Line* contains no text, but it is also a metafictional book about the act of making a book. The main action of the story is made by a line with which a little girl is interacting. The book is reminiscent of Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, with a story that revolves around a simple line that becomes a slide, bubbles, a monkey to play with, and so forth, and finally a scary monster who is scared off by a bear. The book is less explicitly metafictional than *Harold* due to the fact that the protagonist is not the one creating the line. The final page of Bossio's text reveals that a little boy is the one drawing the line; the little girl is simply reacting to the conditions he creates. Considering the recent publication of this text, I found this ending disappointing, since it reinscribes old stereotypes of boys as active participants and girls as passive objects in need of rescue (in this case from a monster). That said, this book demonstrates the power of a simple line in a way that Fagan's book does not



Drawing attention to the conditions of production through metafictional strategies denies readers an easy slip into a fictional world.



quite manage. Bossio's lively, childlike pencil illustrations capture the changing emotions of the protagonist and keep readerly interest high even without the driving power of words.

Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's collaboration, *Virginia Wolf*, demonstrates successfully the power of drawing as well. The picture book tells the story of a young Virginia Woolf, who is suffering from the "doldrums," and her sister Vanessa, who tries to cheer her up. Maclear's hand-lettered text makes strong use of dialogue. For example, Virginia says, "DO NOT WEAR THAT CHEERFUL YELLOW DRESS" and "DO NOT BRUSH YOUR TEETH SO LOUDLY." Arsenault's ink, pencil, watercolour, and gouache illustrations are aesthetically pleasing and evocative. They are reminiscent of illustrator Suzy Lee's *Shadow* in her unusual use of silhouette and shadows. Arsenault's drawings are rendered mainly in blacks and greys when Virginia's mood is grumpy, but they blossom into colour when Vanessa paints a huge garden mural on the bedroom wall. Vanessa's painting includes "trees and strange candy blossoms and green shoots and frosted cakes [and] leaves that said *hush* in the wind and fruit that squeaked." The two sisters dance and play in a liminal space that is partially in front of the mural and partially inside it. In the last double spread of the book, when Virginia's mood has lifted and the two girls are going out to play, they enter a space that looks much like the mural Vanessa painted. The picture book is about the creation of a beautiful illustration that then becomes the book itself.

Although less obviously metafictional than the other two books I have discussed so far, *Virginia Wolf* introduces subtly what Allan calls "the ontological structure of texts and fictional worlds" (81). Drawing attention to the conditions of production through metafictional strategies denies readers an easy slip into a fictional world. Readers

are always aware that they are reading books written and drawn by individuals. The picture books I have discussed also emphasize the idea that readers (and particularly child readers) could make their own books. Readers are encouraged, more or less explicitly, to draw pictures and escape into their own fictional worlds. Drawing upon the work of Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, Allan writes, “readers are rarely allowed to remain as mere observers; rather they are invited to become ‘active participants’” (50). Allan means this notion of participation not just in the direct sense of picking up a pencil to draw a line or a paintbrush to make a mural, however, but in terms of meaning-making: “In making explicit the conventions and strategies of realist fiction through metafictional devices, postmodern picturebooks playfully create uncertainty, fragmentation and ambiguity within their narratives, rather than offer readers the certainty, coherence and resolution of more conventional ‘realist’ picturebooks” (29). The picture books I have considered illustrate a complex relationship to this concept in the way they represent fictional worlds as always available for escape for the characters. These fictional worlds seem to offer certainty, coherence, and resolution for the characters in the picture books. Fagan, the little boy, and Vanessa all achieve resolution and happiness within their self-created worlds, even if readers of these picture books are denied the same easy entry into the fictional worlds contained within them.

Ben Canton’s *Vote for Me!* makes readers participants in the text by breaking the fourth wall; the picture book is told exclusively through dialogue, and the characters address readers directly throughout. For example, the book begins with a direct address: “Hey, you! Yes, YOU with the great hair and that dazzling smile.” It goes on to follow the struggle of a donkey and an elephant to win an election. The book makes clever use of colour and design elements. In the opening pages, the donkey is represented on a blue page and the elephant on a red page. As the animals stop fighting and begin to engage in dialogue, the background turns purple, and by the end of the book, when it is apparent that they have both lost to a third candidate, the background is a neutral off-white. Canton’s frame-breaking strategy is an effective tool for gaining readers’ attention. The audience for *Vote for Me!* is unclear. In some ways, it appears to be intended for adults, as few children are likely to be interested in electoral politics and its focus on verbal sparring would have limited use as a pedagogical tool for learning about elections. Many children participate in the kind of playground brawling depicted in the pages, however, and the implied reader may be one who is assumed to enjoy following the antics of characters who call each other names such as “big, STINKY pooper scooper” and “BOOGER-BREATH!”

Another postmodern element of the picture books under discussion is the use of metalepsis and its

related struggles over authorship and narration. Allan refers to Gerard Genette in defining metalepsis as “the transgression of logical and hierarchical relations between different levels of narration” (234–35; qtd. in Allan 34). As she explains, “These metaleptic disruptions create shifts in who has ‘control’ over the narrative which, in turn, has implications for the particular points of view being presented to readers” (34). Mélanie Watt uses metalepsis and shifts in points of view to excellent effect in her picture book *Chester’s Back!*, a sequel to her popular picture book *Chester*. Like the earlier title, this extremely funny picture book is about a battle for narrative control between author Watt, who writes in black typeface, and cartoon cat Chester, who writes with a fat red marker. *Chester’s Back!* takes the idea of a struggle for authorship to extremes: Watt and Chester threaten each other with physical violence, Watt fires Chester and auditions replacements for his character, Chester fires Watt and offers a jellybean reward for a replacement picture book creator, and they both deface or destroy each other’s creative work. For instance, at one point Chester writes, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I, the GREAT CHESTERDINI, will now attempt to saw this boring drawing in half!!!” Watt responds, “Chester . . . Don’t do it!” (ellipsis in original). The image features Chester brandishing a saw over the illustration of the previous page. This struggle for authorship makes the book chaotic and somewhat challenging to read (especially aloud, since preliterate

child readers may miss the cues of font colour and style), but if one accepts the challenges of this postmodern picture book, the rewards are great. Allan writes of polyphonic picture books that they “are deliberately constructed to offer multiple meanings (polysemic) rather than containing one, authorised meaning. These meanings often remain unstable, resisting total recuperation or resolution and allowing readers to consider a number of possible viewpoints rather than accept a single perspective” (35). The metalepsis in *Chester’s Back!* undermines narrative authority and creates multiple meanings. Readers are forced to consider the two contesting viewpoints and enjoy the pleasurable struggle between them.

The Line also has some degree of narrative struggle in its surprise ending, when readers discover that a little boy and not the girl protagonist is controlling the line and thus authoring the text. Allan writes that narrative disruptions “create indeterminacy, ambiguity and lack of closure” (33), but Bossio’s shifting authorship does not. Rather, this situation is more of a twist in a tail than a postmodern exploration. It is not that the little girl and the little boy are offering multiple viewpoints, but rather that readers have misunderstood the *true* authorship. *The Line* is postmodern in its metafictional elements, but the authorship is too definitive to meet Allan’s definition.

Conversely, *Chester’s Back!* offers no such certainty of authorship. Allan writes that

when readers become immersed in a realist text, any awareness of the text as a representation is often “naturalised” and, as a result, readers may come to accept the particular representation as “true” or “real”. . . . In picturebooks that are influenced by postmodernism the representative nature of narrative is often foregrounded, making it less likely for readers to be drawn into the “naturalised” ideologies of the text. (78)

Certainly, readers do not leave Watt’s picture book naturalizing the ideology that humans will or should rule over animals or that a picture book should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Nothing in Watt’s clever book is simply “true” or “real,” which makes for an enjoyable if challenging postmodern reading experience. In contrast, *The Line* seems to naturalize an ideology of male control and to offer a “true” answer to the question of who is drawing the line and controlling the action.

Allan writes of shifting points of view that, “[r]ather than the construction of a fixed point of view, readers are encouraged to view the narrative from a range of positions that contributes to the uncertainty, fragmentation and ambiguity characteristic of postmodern fiction” (51). Another picture book that uses this strategy effectively is *Northwest Passage*, a book based on Stan Rogers’s 1981 song of the same name, reinterpreted by Matt James. This picture book

is, according to the blurb on the dust jacket, “the dramatic story of the search for the elusive route through the Arctic Ocean to the Pacific.” The main narratives contained in the book are Rogers’s song lyrics, the 1845 journey of John Franklin and his ships, and a textbook-style narrative of the history of human interactions with the Arctic from 6000 B. C. E. to the present day. The media contained in the book include James’s dramatic acrylic paintings, historical documents, maps, and painted copies of documentary photos (including a photo of Lady Jane Franklin, the only woman who appears in this fifty-six-page book). Of course, to appreciate the picture book fully, readers must listen to an audio recording of the song or take the picture book to the piano and play the sheet music of the original song, which is included. The picture book engages visual, verbal, and musical senses. The fragmented narratives in this text are jumbled together with very little explanation of the different strands. This mix of genres, media, and voices creates uncertainty, fragmentation, and ambiguity.

Northwest Passage meets Allan’s description of historiographic metafiction, as it mixes historical and fictive elements, challenges the conventions of narrative, destabilizes notions of continuity, and exploits intertextuality and anachronism (96–97). This book makes us consider “conventional notions of *time and space*” in a postmodern manner in the way it leaps between narratives (35). The illustrations use perspective

and scale in bold and unusual ways that dislocate readers and force them to see the North in new ways. It also contains anachronistic elements, such as the illustration of Stan Rogers in a “Free Stan Rogers” shirt, looking Franklin eye-to-eye over Franklin’s ship’s wheel. The words between these two figures read, “How then am I so different from the first men through this way?” These lyrics indicate the slippage between Rogers’s original lyrics, which do not mention the Inuit people and indeed use words such as “savage” to describe the North, and James’s more culturally aware approach. James’s preface points out that “the people who already lived in Canada’s North knew the land and how to survive on it intimately.” James’s historical narrative mentions frequently the wealth of knowledge that the Inuit hold, but Inuit voices are only heard second- and third-hand in the picture book. For instance, James tells us that, “[a]ccording to Charles Francis Hall, an American who lived with Inuit from 1864 to 1869, there were Inuit eyewitnesses who claimed to have visited a frozen ship, seen men staggering around and dying [and] found evidence of cannibalism.” The voices of the Inuit people themselves would be a valuable addition to the polyphonic text. Nevertheless, *Northwest Passage* uses historiographic metafictional techniques very effectively. Allan writes that “[i]t is through historiographic metafiction that history is shown to be a signifying system constructed from the textual remains of the past. This textualisation of the past makes

problematic any claims to ‘the truth’ of, or about, historical events and personages” (96). This picture book foregrounds its construction from the textual remains of the past and its complex understanding of historical events.

Cybele Young’s *Ten Birds* has some postmodern elements in its thwarting of expectations. This picture book is, at heart, a counting book: ten birds make their way over a river one by one, thinning the crowd from ten to zero. Readers can count the birds on each page and find the appropriate numeral hidden in the illustration, implying very young children as the intended readers. Young’s illustrations undermine this expectation as they are in black and white, with heavy chiaroscuro shadows dominating most pages. The birds are depicted in a barren and slightly eerie landscape, building complex architectural contraptions in order to cross the water. The birds themselves are small and round, almost featureless, and they appear emotionless as they use their stilts, catapults, and pulleys to cross the deep water. This setting and sombre tone are unexpected for a book intended for young children, as the common convention is that such books should contain brightly coloured pictures of familiar objects. Despite flaunting this convention, *Ten Birds* is a pleasurable picture book to read in terms of both its careful language and its intricate illustrations. The language contains a good balance of repetition and variation, and the unusual names for the birds such as “Shows Great Promise”



The refusal to
provide child readers
with resolution meets
Allan's understanding
of postmodern
picture books.



and “Highly Satisfactory” add a pleasing silliness to the picture book. Young’s illustrations are engrossing in their detail, and their distinctive setting and lack of overt emotion add a sense of mystery to the text. The book ends with the realization that the birds could simply have walked across the bridge rather than build their machines. The final page reads: “And the one they called ‘Needs Improvement’ got to the other side just the same . . . leaving none behind” (ellipsis in original).

While *Ten Birds* has a clear ending, not all the picture books in my selection share this characteristic. As Allan notes, “[c]onvention . . . dictates that stories have a satisfactory conclusion in which loose ends are tied up and closure is achieved. This convention is particularly observed in children’s literature where the accepted wisdom seems to be that children need resolution with, preferably, a satisfactory outcome” (64–65). Postmodern picture books can disrupt this convention by refusing to provide narrative closure. For instance, *The Line* ends without the little girl discovering who is drawing the line with which she is playing. The ending implies that the little boy will continue tricking people, as he is giggling behind his hand. Similarly, *Chester’s Back!* ends with Chester offering a reward of “500 gazillion red jellybeans” for a new picture book creator; the argument between Chester and Watt is far from over. *Vote for Me!* ends with a long argument between the donkey and elephant. They banter back and forth:

“NUN-UH!”

“YUH-HUH!”

“NUH-UH!”

“YUH-HUH infinity!”

“NUH-UH infinity and one.”

“Well, YUH-HUH one more than whatever you say next and there is nothing more, so that is THE END.”

It seems unlikely that the matter will rest there. In each case, the pleasurable play of the story continues its momentum past the end of the text. Allan defines postmodern picture books as those that “resist the traditional narrative consolations of resolution and certainty; instead they often offer indeterminacy and lack of closure” (10). The refusal to provide child readers with resolution meets Allan’s understanding of postmodern picture books.

Allan states that her approach to postmodern picture books draws on Linda Hutcheon’s “designation of postmodern fiction as those texts that *both* subvert the strategies and devices of conventional narrative *and* interrogate dominant discourses of liberal humanism” (16). The selection of picture books in this article does not fit in Allan’s categories of either the postmodern and the postmodernesque in many ways, however. Allan suggests that postmodernism is inherently concerned with the other: “Underpinning [postmodernism’s] attention to difference is a postmodernist tendency to promote the politics and ideology of the marginalised rather than those of the centre” (124). As I have suggested, however, the picture books I discuss do not interrogate dominant discourses of liberal humanism for the most part. They do not even concern themselves

primarily with children, who are, in some ways, a marginalized group. *Virginia Wolf* and *The Line* are the only texts that are primarily about childhood. Allan writes of the “reversion to a liberal humanist perspective” that accords with the general aim of children’s literature to “foster socio-cultural values in order to enculturate children into the prevailing ways of the society in which they live” (53–54). Unfortunately, the picture books I consider demonstrate this reversion in that they are largely resistant to representing the lives of those on the margins. As I will argue, however, these picture books fail in some ways to enculturate children into central tenets of contemporary Western culture such as capitalist success and reproductive heterosexuality, and this failure is an opportunity for escape from liberal humanist perspectives.

In a chapter section entitled “The (Im)possibility of Postmodern Fiction for Children,” Allan proposes that, “rather than persist with the label *postmodern*,” we use the term *postmodernesque* instead (24).

Postmodernesque picture books

turn their attention to the critique of the postmodern world: a globalised, mediated, hyperreal world in which, seemingly, the only way to make any sense of it is through the rampant consumption of goods, services and signs, and in which individuals construct multiple identities and learn to navigate through multiple realities. (141)

The picture books reviewed here, while postmodern in some ways, are curiously lacking postmodernesque features. They are, on the whole, set in either a specific historical period or a seemingly timeless era lacking contemporary technology, and therefore do not tackle globalization, new media, or hyperreality explicitly. They do refer briefly to consumption and multiple identities, but these features are not sufficient to warrant the label of postmodernesque. Two of the picture books in my selection are about specific historical periods: *Virginia Wolf* is set in the mid-1880s, whereas *Northwest Passage* is focused primarily on the 1840s. *Virginia Wolf* is rendered nostalgic to some degree. Both the girls are wearing pretty pastel dresses and oversized bows in their hair, and they amuse themselves by making birds and butterflies from paper, looking at clouds, and playing the violin (rather than playing videogames on Xbox or sending selfies on Snapchat, for instance). Both characters are realistic and complex, however, so the text resists nostalgia. *Northwest Passage* has a complex relationship with the past, as befits this complex text. In some ways, the picture book is nostalgic for a period in which one could crack “the mountain ramparts” and make a path for others to follow. Most of the book is about the horrible ways in which these “brave” men died, however, which certainly undermines any rosy view of the period. In addition, the text makes several scathing comments about the British emphasis on new technology and about the men’s wilful ignorance of Inuit expertise. For instance, the

text suggests that “[t]he English were so impressed with their own technology that they were convinced, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that tinned food would prevent scurvy.” Comments such as these suggest both a lack of nostalgia for the past and a caution to be suspicious of contemporary innovations.

Both *I Wish I Could Draw* and *Chester’s Back!* are set in an ahistorical present, but they feature many drawings of a generalized past, including castles and dragons, cave men, and dinosaurs. These books represent the past as a wellspring for creativity and adventure. *The Line* and *Ten Birds* are both set in a timeless era but lack contemporary technology. The birds use traditional materials such as wood, rope, and cloth to create their contraptions, and the little boy in *The Line* is drawing with a pencil on paper, rather than, for instance, a stylus on an iPad. Clanton’s *Vote for Me!* is one of the only texts in this selection that is set clearly in a modern (if not postmodern) period. It certainly features characters who create a commodified self that is designed to appeal to a market (Allan 167), as the characters jostle for votes with statements such as “I’m a SUPER CUTE elephant! How can you NOT vote for someone as adorable as me?” The technology represented in the text extends itself only as far as the megaphone, however. A postmodernesque picture book, following Allan’s definition, would surely feature the characters using Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, and flashmobs to market their commodified selves.

In addition to focusing on consumption and self-marketing, the postmodernesque self takes on “the postmodern contention that identity is often destabilised and problematic” (Allan 75). *Chester’s Back!* does have a postmodern moment of fragmented identity when Watt fires Chester as the main character of the book and auditions characters to replace him. A double spread shows forty or so animals of many species dressed in Chester costumes, lined up to replace him (in a witty intertextual nod, one of these copycats is the Scaredy Squirrel from Watt’s picture books of the same name). The real identities of these animals are visible in their clearly exposed (non-feline) faces, however, and Chester is re-established as the protagonist within two double spreads. Chester’s distinctive individual identity is never seriously in doubt.

On the whole, these picture books meet Allan’s definition of the postmodern only partially and certainly do not meet the definition of the postmodernesque. What these picture books achieve relates to the fact that all these books, in more or less oblique ways, are about failure, and thinking about them through this lens opens up new possibilities for child readers, in that they offer postmodern understandings of self and relationships between others. Halberstam argues that failure can be understood as “a category levied by the winners against the losers and . . . a set of standards that ensure that all future radical ventures will be measured as cost-ineffective” (174). She points out that “[u]nder certain

circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). Halberstam frames failure as a queer resistance to normativity and linear narratives, quoting Quentin Crisp: “If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style” (qtd. in Halberstam 87). The characters in the picture books examined here fail in three broad ways: self-actualization, capitalism, and reproductive heterosexuality. According to Halberstam’s theory, these failures open up new possibilities.

Many characters fail to achieve a self-actualized, liberal humanist identity. The little girl in *The Line* appears to be an autonomous character who is in control of her surroundings and her creative process, but in the end readers learn that she is merely a toy for someone else. Nine of Young’s ten birds fail to realize that they can use a bridge to cross a river; the only one who succeeds is the one labelled explicitly as a failure, the “Needs Improvement” bird. *Virginia Wolf* offers a striking example of a failure of self-actualization. In this picture book, Vanessa succeeds in lifting Virginia’s “wolfish mood” with her painting, and the book closes with Virginia feeling “MUCH BETTER,” but the book is haunted by its inevitable intertextual failure. While the young, fictional Vanessa and Virginia dance off happily hand in hand, the real Virginia Woolf could not shake off a “bad mood” so easily. We know she grows up

to fill her coat pockets with rocks and wade into the river. Vanessa's art fails, and both Vanessa and Virginia fail to achieve happy, successful personhood. Most of the characters in my selection of books fail to meet the demand of contemporary society to be happy and successful. Halberstam argues that failure allows us to "poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). She discusses the North American cult of self-esteem and positive thinking, and her work encourages us to consider that failing to control a pencil line, cross a river, or fight depression can allow us to think about "the gross inequalities of everyday life" (4). We can see these failures as an opening point to think about structural inequality, rather than as a result of individual inadequacy. Why does our culture still value female helplessness? Why does it demand a stream of new disposable products rather than look for existing solutions? Why does it underestimate and ignore mental illness? Although the picture books under review on the surface do not appear to consider the marginalized, they offer a postmodern critique of self and suggest a broader and more productive way to conceptualize the world than liberal humanism.

The picture books also fail at capitalism and at achieving fame and fortune, although many of the characters dream of such success. Chester fantasizes about being "VERY famous" and having "GIANT billboards with MY face on them all over the CITY!" Watt undermines his dream, however, by interpreting

his desire to be a "BIG STAR!!!" literally, presenting him in a "funny-looking star outfit" that makes him look like a star in the sky rather than a Hollywood star. The characters in *Vote for Me!* spend the book fighting to win an election, but, in the end, they both lose when the Independent Mouse wins the vote and becomes "the Big Cheese." Most dramatically, *Northwest Passage* is about failures who are celebrated as heroes. Doomed white explorer after doomed white explorer appears on the pages trying to find a trade route to "the Orient," and readers are invited to admire their weathered bones later in the text. The picture book documents the ways in which Western culture has glorified these failures, including spending millions locating and analyzing their ships and frozen corpses as well as naming places and institutions after them. As Halberstam points out, "[f]ailure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism. A market economy must have winners and losers, gamblers and risk takers, con men and dupes" (88). These books demonstrate to child readers the flip side of the capitalist system—all but one of the candidates will lose the election. They open the possibility that, rather than enter an inequitable system, readers should look for alternatives to capitalism.

Curiously, the books also fail at reproductive heterosexuality. Allan notes that "the picturebook has a long tradition of representing the primary world of the child, her/his family and everyday environment" (80). Few of the books in my selection are interested in

representing this primary world, however. Specifically, none of them is about a family. The exceptions are one doomed pair of sisters in *Virginia Wolf* (Vanessa and Virginia) and a doomed married couple in *Northwest Passage* (Lady Jane Franklin financed expeditions to look for her husband's body and ship). In fact, one of the only mentions of family is in Clanton's *Vote for Me!*, and that reference is hyperbolic and ridiculous. The donkey says, "Speaking of family. . . . As it turns out, I know your friend's mother's aunt's gym teacher's pastor's duck-billed platypus. So we're practically FAMILY, and you've GOT to vote for family" (ellipsis in original). This disconnect in the text from family and reproductive heterosexuality opens up queer possibilities. Halberstam discusses heterosexuality and queer failure at some length. She suggests that "[w]e may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and usable pasts" (70). These picture books enact a de-emphasis of family, if not a rejection of it (Halberstam 72), and therefore open the possibility of the new. Halberstam suggests that we attempt the "possibility of rethinking the meaning of the political through queerness precisely by embracing the incoherent, the lonely, the defeated, and the melancholic formulations of selfhood that it

sets in motion" (148). These picture books contain lonely, defeated, and melancholic characters who can be perceived as queer failures. They introduce the possibility of a life that does not focus on marriage, reproduction, and the everyday but that is non-traditional and supported by alternative kinship models.

Halberstam's work on failure offers a useful way to nuance and extend Allan's definition of the postmodern and the postmodernesque, enabling us to read even conventional picture books in ways that suggest postmodern possibilities. Although the picture books under review appear initially to be engaging with the postmodern only in limited ways and do not appear to fulfill Allan's original concept of the postmodernesque, when viewed through a lens of failure, we can see the ways in which they reject traditional discourses of self, consumption, and family. In these ways, the picture books offer a resistant and queer postmodern world view and open up possibilities for an enabling failure. Halberstam frames failure as a queer resistance to normativity and forward-moving narratives. She suggests that "[t]he queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (88). This type of failure opens up new possibilities. Whether or not these picture books are postmodern or postmodernesque, they contain the possibility of a radical failure.

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