

ANA MARGARIDA RAMOS ORCID: 0000-0001-5126-4389  
Universidade de Aveiro

## When Reading Becomes a Game: Parallel Narratives in Portuguese Picturebooks

**Abstract:** The aim of this text is to carry out an analysis of a specific picturebook type that includes two parallel narratives and can be read in two different directions. The first book under analysis, *As duas estradas* (2009) [Two Roads] (text by Isabel Minhós Martins), is organised using two verbal and visual narratives which tell the story of two partially simultaneous journeys in Portugal, from Lisbon to Alcobia do Tejo, in two different cars by members of the same family. The second book, *Olhe, por favor, não viu uma luzinha a piscar?/Corre, coelhinho, corre!* (2013) [Follow the Firefly / Run, Rabbit, Run!], is a wordless picturebook that can be read in two directions, from left to right and from right to left, depicting two different visual narratives that take place in the same scenario, with different characters and specific plots. Highlighting the hybrid, multimodal and chameleon-like nature of the picturebook, our objective is to provide an opportunity to reflect upon this format of contemporary literature, which is in constant development and which allows increasingly more elaborate experimentation in order to stress the ludic or playful nature of picturebooks.

**Keywords:** postmodern picturebooks, wordless picturebooks, interactive reading, playfulness, metafiction, peritexts

### 1. POSTMODERN PICTUREBOOKS

Contemporary picturebook trends (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2015) include a variety of new and challenging proposals, which are increasingly complex and stimulating. Postmodern picturebooks (Pantaleo 2014) are now hybrid, crossover and metafictional, they are targeted at children as well as adults and they cover an immense area of subjects, literary styles and genres. The illustration techniques used are also vast and influenced by contemporary artistic trends.

The picturebook peritexts, including format, size, type of paper, cover and back cover, paper endings, doublespread composition and page credits, are an important element of the design, creating an artistic object where all its ele-

ments are coherent and related to each other. The materiality of the book is underlined in the artistic creation and in the reading process and the graphic designer plays a crucial role in development of the final product. This peculiar synergy of picturebooks creates an iconotext (Nikolajeva 2008: 55) that promotes a specific reading process, combining all picturebook elements, including peritexts.

The extensive and experimental innovations in contemporary picturebook publishing are transforming this format into what may be referred to as a creative experimental laboratory.

In postmodern picturebooks, the readers' role differs from the traditional one as they are expected to participate actively in the construction of meaning and cooperate in the interpretation of the book itself. Most of the time, the reader is confronted with the process used to create the book and tell the story, thus becoming increasingly aware of the fictional devices used. According to Pantaleo, "postmodern picturebooks extend thought and discussion about this sophisticated and flexible art form – the picturebook. Like the postmodern world, postmodern picturebooks reflect the recognition and celebration of heterogeneity and multiple possibilities with respect to format, content, and meaning" (Pantaleo 2014: 331).

The metafictional nature of postmodern picturebooks has been stressed by such relevant authors as Lewis (2001), McCallum (2004) and Sipe & Pantaleo (2008). Sylvia Pantaleo (2004; 2014) has dedicated several studies to this subject, not only analysing the presence of metafictional devices in picturebooks, but also studying the child-reader response to them.

Besides being experimental, postmodern picturebooks seemingly set out to defy conventions and traditions, drawing attention to the material nature of the book and presenting it as an object of value. In this way, the reader becomes an essential element in the literary process as the picturebook invites different interpretations and several readings. This is why Sara Van Meerbergen chooses the "playground" (2012) metaphor to describe the new trends in picturebook publishing. Nikolajeva stresses the playfulness of postmodern picturebooks, underlining that it can also be expressed through the materiality of picturebooks in which elements are perceived as a "playful space" (Nikolajeva 2008: 59).

In order to illustrate a contemporary creative trend in picturebook publishing, this text focuses on the analysis of a specific type of picturebook that includes two parallel narratives and that can be read in two different directions. Both narratives are discernible on the verbal and the visual level, stimulating the reader not only to read two separate stories in just one picturebook, but also to search for and establish relationships between the two plots, as well as to analyse the page composition and the specific space the plots occupy in the doublespreads. This specific kind of picturebook can be created by using different strategies, for instance by paging the book from the beginning to the

end, and then turning the book (upside down), so that it can be read from the end to the beginning. In other cases, the two stories can share the same space and can be read at the same time. Another strategy is to present the characters and the scenario in such a specific way that the reader can follow a different plot depending on whether s/he starts reading the picturebook in one or another direction.

In the field of narratology, parallel narratives are related to simultaneity in narration (Margolin 2014), an effect which it is very challenging<sup>1</sup> to obtain exclusively through verbal discourse. More common in the cinema, for instance using the split-screen option, the use of simultaneity is also emerging in children's books, due to the presence of illustrations allowing an on-going narrative process. As far as is known, this kind of analysis is not very frequent, despite the mention of parallel narratives in picturebooks in several picturebook studies (Nikolaveja and Scott 2001; Beckett 2012; Rémi 2011<sup>2</sup>). Therefore, by using two picturebooks as examples, the systematic approach presented here highlights the specific characteristics and the peculiar reading conventions of this specific kind of picturebook, which, among other aspects, demands a continuous backward-forward<sup>3</sup> movement in the narrative time, as well as in the reading time. Challenging the traditional way of reading, picturebooks with parallel narratives can improve children's reading competence, while playing with the conventional format and structure of the book. They underline the construction process of the picturebook, showing it as an artefact, a sort of a specific artistic object that contains stories and that can be manipulated in different ways so as to be told/read.

The presence of two parallel narratives in a single book is a common strategy used to explore the possibilities of picturebooks, taking advantage of the format, structure or plot. With ironic or reflexive purposes, the presence of two narratives demands closer attention to the book, and to the relationship between the stories. Authors such as John Burningham, with *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* (1977), and *Granpa* (1984), explore the possibilities of using the page gutter to divide a doublespread space between two different points of view. Anthony Browne, in *Me and You* (2010), uses a similar technique in order to give the reader the complete perception of both sides of a traditional and very well-known story.

<sup>1</sup> "The difficulty of representing two or more simultaneously occurring events in a verbal medium stems from the medium's inability in principle to reflect temporally overlapping occurrences iconically, irrespective of the narrating instance's temporal position relative to the narrated events" (Margolin 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The author studied wimmelbooks, mainly the specific reading process and also the combination of playfulness in reading.

<sup>3</sup> Considered a true classic, *The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My* (1952), by the Finnish author Tove Jansson, is also an interesting example of a book who also plays with the back and forward movement by using cut-out holes which allow the reader to catch a glimpse of the next pages.

The Portuguese picturebooks here under analysis, however, have more in common with the work by Jeannie Baker, *Mirror* (2010) – a picturebook that tells two stories of different families within two different contexts – Australia and Morocco. One story is told from left to right and the other from right to left, in two different languages as well. In Portugal, Margarida Botelho created a special series of picturebooks exploring the differences between countries and cultures. Always portraying young girls' routines, the picturebooks depict foreign countries (and small communities) such as East Timor (*Lya/Lia*), Brazil (*Yara/Iara*), or Mozambique (*Eva*).

*Le jardin de Babai* (2004), by Mandana Sadat, is another example of a picturebook crossed by two related parallel narratives that tell the story of a lamb or of a Persian carpet. This picturebook is also bilingual, including the Persian version in every edition, promoting a different way of reading (that of the East). This draws the reader's attention to cultural and linguistic differences and to the diversity of the world.

Reading a picturebook with parallel narratives increases the child's awareness about the book itself and its meaning. It also promotes a reflexive attitude by discovering the links between the stories and the main purpose of the picturebook. Moreover, in some cases, the comparison between plots, characters and narrative points of view allows different interpretations of the stories and gives rise to new questions about the plots. In such circumstances, interpretation of the picturebook is not just the sum of two parallel stories; it requires a process of rethinking the combined narratives.

## 2. CORPUS ANALYSIS. PARALLEL NARRATIVES AND THEIR SPECIFIC READING PROTOCOL.

Bernardo Carvalho (Lisbon, 1973) is a very well-known award-winning Portuguese illustrator, both in Portugal and abroad. Picturebooks with his illustrations have been translated into several languages and published all over the world, from China and Korea to the United States of America, and several European countries. He has published some wordless picturebooks over the last few years and he is particularly interested in experimenting with, and defying the creative conventions of, children's books, exploring new and different ways of telling – and reading – a story. Picturebooks with parallel narratives fit into the kinds of experiments he creates, exploring the possibilities of combining different colours and reading directions. By transgressing the boundaries of the traditional reading process (Lewis 1990: 145), Carvalho's picturebooks could be perceived as examples of postmodernism, including the specific case of metafiction. Pantaleo includes picturebooks within the scope of parallel narratives in an "interactive format" (Pantaleo 2004: 109),

which is an option based on the fact that the reader has to constantly make choices about whether to continue with one narrative or change to another perspective or story. Defined as parallel picturebooks, loop books, two-in-one books or running stories, the type of book under analysis is briefly mentioned in studies related to contemporary picturebooks, especially postmodern ones.

By proposing more than one narrative, these picturebooks defy the traditional way of reading and they also draw the reader's attention to how books work and how they are conceptualised and constructed. In parallel narratives, the way time is dealt with is also different, as these picturebooks do not follow the traditional chronological narration. As Cherie Allan states, "postmodern picture books play with temporal aspects of their narratives, utilizing complex temporal patterns which may involve parallel temporalities or the simultaneous placing of the narrative in past, present and/or imaginary moments in time" (Allan 2006: 78).

The aim of parallel picturebooks is to re-read the stories while physically manipulating and interacting with the book. As such, picturebooks emerge as multipurpose objects. According to Pantaleo, these books are "ideal for re-reading to children because the polysemous texts afford multiple opportunities for creating meaning making and interpretation" (Pantaleo 2004: 186). Interaction and reinforcement of the reader's agency are other advantages which these picturebooks can provide for young readers.

Children's books are perceived as experimental laboratories where the limits of interpretation are extended. Conceived as an artistic object, a picturebook can also be perceived as a play set where reading and interpretation are transformed into a game of discovery through a set of clues.

## 2.1 THE TWO-IN-ONE BOOK: TELLING PARALLEL STORIES.

The first book under analysis, *As duas estradas* (2009) [Two Roads] (with text by Isabel Minhós Martins) (2<sup>nd</sup> CJ Picture Book Awards, 2009, Korea<sup>4</sup>), is organised using two verbal and visual narratives, evolving two different reading directions, which tell the story of two simultaneous journeys in Portugal, from Lisbon to Alcobia do Tejo, in two different cars, by members of the same family. Thus, the picturebook has two covers (fig. 1) and the two narratives share the space in doublespread illustrations. Therefore, the picturebook can be read by following one of two directions, each one corresponding to a colour used in the text and in the illustrations, as well as to a specific route chosen by the car drivers. The way the picturebook is constructed implies that when one narrative is being read, the other one is upside down, and therefore unavailable for reading.

<sup>4</sup> Book rights previously sold for French, Korean and Norwegian translations.



Figure 1 – Picturebook Covers

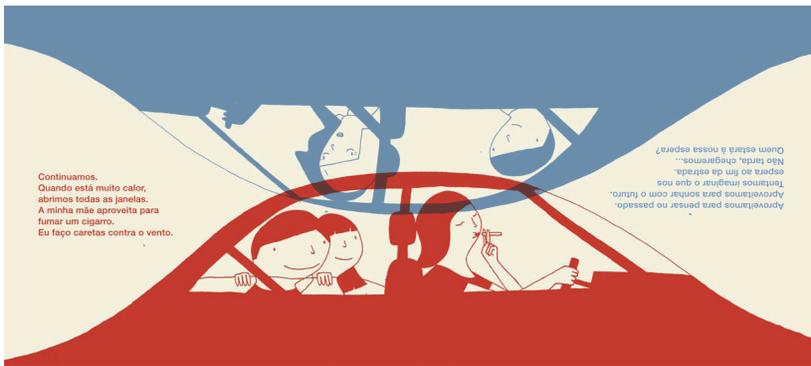


Figure 2 – Example of an Opening/Doublespread

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer includes a reference to this particular picturebook in her analysis of contemporary trends in European picturebooks, stating that it is an example of a picturebook that defies the traditional reading direction:

Several artists even counter traditional picturebook reading habits by printing text and pictures that go forward and backward on the same pages. In *As duas estradas* (On Two Roads, 2009) by Isabel Minhós Martins and Bernardo Carvalho, the reader starts reading the book from beginning to end. When reaching the end, he has to turn the book around and continue reading the story. (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2015: 252)

The researcher did not completely understand the architecture of the book or the relationship established between the two parallel and simultaneous narratives, because it does not necessarily imply continuity in the reading experience. In this case, the main story is about a family of six and a trip from the Portuguese capital to a small, distant, fictional rural village. As they cannot travel all together, because the cars do not allow more than five passengers, the family splits into two vehicles, one driven by the father and the other by the mother. The father takes the grandmother and one son and the mother travels with the other son and the daughter. They choose different routes and, despite having the same ori-

gin and destination, the two trips report two completely different experiences, which accordingly give rise to two completely different stories. The two single colours used in the book, red and blue, reinforce the differences and the singularity of each trip while helping readers to distinguish them visually (fig. 2). The father chooses the highway, and drives at a higher speed, and the mother opts for the country road, taking longer to arrive, but calmly enjoying the surrounding landscape. Both narratives clearly show which route is taken, by presenting the road number, the A1 and the N126 respectively.

Despite the presence of two distinct verbal and visual narratives in the picturebook, the traditional way of reading and of turning the pages is still maintained and respected. Nevertheless, the reading protocol of this book requires the reader to explore only one colour at a time whilst ignoring all the information in the other colour, including the pictures and the text, because it is presented upside down. Therefore, the page composition is crucial for the reading process, demanding the reader's attention and close observation. The images and the text complement each other and the illustrations add details to the story.

The two roads are central elements to the stories and to the illustrations, as they express continuity and balance in terms of page composition, as well as guaranteeing the division of the page between the two narratives. They also create an idea of movement and a sense of progression within the book's narrative.

Generally speaking, as mentioned earlier (Ramos & Ramos 2014), this picturebook is defined by the choice the travellers make of the two trips, as they correspond to different kinds of behaviours, values, personalities and lifestyles (including some gender stereotypes). The blue narrative focuses on the destination (result), while the red one focuses on the journey (process), providing two opposing ways of engaging with life, other people and the world around us. The philosophical and ethical impact of this picturebook does not clash with its ludic and playful nature, and it is the result of a specific understanding of the world, progress and time that allows for a great variety in age and life experience of the reader, transforming the picturebook into a multi-layered one, not only because of the manifold narratives it presents, but also due to the multiple possible interpretations it fosters.

## 2.2 WORDLESS PICTUREBOOKS WITH TWO READING DIRECTIONS

The second book, *Olhe, por favor, não viu uma luzinha a piscar?/Corre, coelhinho, corre!* (2013)[*Follow the Firefly / Run, Rabbit, Run!*], is a wordless<sup>5</sup> picturebook<sup>6</sup> that can be read in two directions, from left to right or from right to left, depict-

<sup>5</sup> Over the last couple of years, critical and academic interest in wordless picturebooks has increased. Regarding this type of picturebook, the work carried out by Arizpe (2014), Beckett (2012; 2014), and Bosch (2014), among others, is particularly noteworthy.

<sup>6</sup> Books rights sold for Brazilian Portuguese, Dutch, English (Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, UK), and Korean translations.

ing two different visual narratives that take place in the same setting, with different characters and specific plots. The first one [*Follow the Firefly*] presents the story of a firefly wandering first across wild nature (forest, river) and then slowly approaching a more urban scenario, asking several animals about something. They all point in a specific direction (the direction of reading) and, at the end of the story, the firefly finally finds what it is looking for, a traffic light at a city crossroads. The other [*Run, Rabbit, Run!*] is told from right to left and presents a small white rabbit being followed by a dog across every doublespread from its cage on a truck (starting at the same crossroads where the firefly discovers the traffic light) into the forest. At the end, against our expectations, the dog and rabbit become friends and they join the other animals enjoying a campfire. Both protagonists of the two plots use the same book pages to follow an opposite path, in the same direction as the reader who follows their adventures.

Unlike the previous book, here the reader does not need to turn the book around to have access to the parallel narrative, as both plots share the exact same page space (fig. 3). One narrative is told from left to right and the other one from right to left. The reader only needs to move the picturebook pages accordingly. Carvalho masters the absence of words by reinforcing the importance of the protagonists, who hold the readers' attention from cover to cover. The use of specific colours and the placement of the characters on the page is crucial to understanding the author's strategy. He also explores the combination of different perspectives and visual layout, in order to highlight the characters that may appear in the foreground or background, depending on the action depicted in each doublespread. These variations are clues given to the reader's eyes, as he/she follows the protagonists' movement through the picturebook pages.



Figure 3 – Picturebook Covers – Two Parallel Narratives

Both narratives tell episodic stories, where the search for something or someone is the main focus of the protagonists. The reader becomes a witness to their quest throughout the pages of the picturebook, a journey characterised by an exchange of space. In this way, the book becomes seemingly transformed

into a narrative set where characters move along, in both directions, depending on their goals and wishes (fig. 4).



Figure 4 – Example of an Opening/Doublespread

Carvalho's work on page composition is quite unique, especially regarding the space distribution between both narratives (plot and characters). The use of different visual perspectives, the strong colour contrast, and the chromatic game between light and shadow, capturing the reader's attention, are some of the most important aspects of the author's creative technique. The dynamic construction of the scenes, which clearly suggests movement, is also a very important contribution to the narrative process. The use of colour is very important, and the illustration technique, using watercolour, allows the entire doublespread to be covered, depicting the settings and their occupants in great detail, without leaving blank spots. Thus, the reader is asked to participate in the story, as he/she is surrounded by a very expressive setting (fig. 5).



Figure 5 – Example of an Opening/Doublespread

The colour variations and the absence of a clear contour intensify the dramatic scenario. Close observation of the images is required in order to identify the natural species and their habitats. It is also possible to discover other stories besides the two central ones, as the pages of this picturebook are full of other characters moving around and doing things. In a second or even third reading, the reader's attention can be drawn to other details on the page, and also to a more philosophical subtext present, related to the celebration of difference, as the protagonists find friendship and affection in unsuspected places.

Humour is a result of a certain cartoon technique used by the creator in the representation of the animals. The use of signs and symbols, such as arrows, also helps to follow the protagonist's path through the pages, as well as the animal's gestures, like pointing in a given direction, or the expression of their eyes. Humour results also from the surprising endings of the narratives, since the firefly is in love with a traffic light and the dog and the rabbit come together peacefully, around a campfire, enjoying themselves with other animals. Bernardo Carvalho plays with the reader's expectations, proposing unexpected endings for both narratives. In their own way, they promote dialogue and understanding as well as the acceptance of what is different, because rival animals became friends and the firefly is in love with an inanimate object. Thus, the last spread of each narrative alters the sequence dramatically by introducing an unanticipated twist in the story, which can be interpreted as fantastic, oneiric, satirical or parodic. The humour can also result from the final situation, shifting abruptly what seems to be a predictable sequence of images.

By choosing two protagonists that stand out from their settings through the use of colour (white rabbit) and light (firefly with a light yellow halo), the attention of the reader is drawn and leads them to focus on that particular character, ignoring what is happening nearby. The titles are, from the beginning, a direct call which encourages close observation of the doublespreads and an important clue to the reading process, as they are focused on the protagonists' quest: in one case by asking a question (the same question that the firefly will ask all the animals), and in the other by making a recommendation to the rabbit, suggesting that he is being pursued by something or someone. All these narrative strategies are crucial to keeping the reader's attention and avoiding distraction or confusion between the two parallel narratives.

### 3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both picturebooks under analysis depict journeys across space, and the physical narrative movement is central to the stories (turning the book around or changing the habitual manner of reading). The readers participate in the journey and they observe the characters' actions and emotions. In the first book, the parallel trips, corresponding to parallel narratives and page composition,

as well as the typography, reinforce this concept in the texts of the picturebook. In the second book, both titles of the two narratives of the picturebook demand a response from the reader in a very pragmatic way. One is a question looking for an answer, implicitly repeated in every doublespread; the other is an imperative phrase, exhorting an action through repetition. In some cases, the reader is even summoned to participate in the narrative, for instance by helping the dog or the firefly to achieve their goals.

Both picturebooks, despite being complex and presenting challenging reading proposals which require specific interaction and physical manipulation, are also playful. In this way they are similar to games of discovery and finding concealed clues. Playfulness appears as an important characteristic of picturebooks, present throughout all the creative processes, including the materiality of the volume itself, seen as a valuable object that demands close observation, manipulation and repeated reading: moving back and forward, searching for details and hidden messages, discovering new information and innovative possibilities for interpretation. Thus, metafictional strategies are not exclusive to picturebooks' architecture and construction, but are also present in their materiality, in the page composition, and in the way/direction they are read.

The presence of humour derives from the use of multiple layers of meaning and different types of information that the reader has to manage, confront and compare in order for the book to make sense. As such, these picturebooks promote repeated readings, over and over again, as well as the recurring observation of illustrations and all of the visual details within the book. These picturebooks tell different stories, with distinct messages for children and adults, and thus require a closer and more precise analysis. Characterised by the presence of manifold narratives and experimental narrative techniques, they explore not only the potential of this specific narrative format, but also the development of literacy, especially visual literacy, as well as literary reading competencies, making readers more aware of textual and visual devices. The causal relations in these books are also related to the simultaneity of actions and they also aid in developing attention, concentration and perceptivity. The attentiveness and the concentration required are compatible with playfulness, as the reading process is transformed into a game of discovery, based on anticipation and confirmation (or not) of expectations.

Clearly perceived as sophisticated picturebooks with layered narratives, the books under analysis have the central question of movement in common, as they both depict trips or displacement through spaces. Conceived as dynamic narratives, the format of parallel stories enables a perfect transposition to the postmodern picturebook, exploring the potentialities of the movement of the turning page as an expression of the sequential passage of time. The space, in particular the transition between urban and rural scenarios (and *vice versa*), is also a common feature of both picturebooks.

Bernardo Carvalho's use of doublespread pages, exploring the composition and distribution of text and image in order to tell two different stories, is quite unique and is also a result of experimental creative work. Self-referentiality is an attribute of postmodern picturebooks and is present in books that draw attention to their architecture and construction by changing traditional reading methods.

Exploring these picturebooks helps readers to understand how they are constructed and how fiction works. In this case, the main message is probably that there are different ways of telling a story and that each story has at least two different versions. The comparison between narratives, including narration perspectives and focalization, increases the ability to read and understand books and the world, and to pay attention to their ambiguity and complexity. Contemporary picturebook readers are becoming increasingly aware of fictional devices and they develop reading skills that promote critical and active reading as well as intertextual and interartistic competencies. McCallum states that "Underlying much metafiction for children is a heightened sense of the status of fiction as an elaborate form of play, that is, a game with linguistic and narrative codes and conventions" (McCallum 2004: 588).

Conceived as polysemous objects of great significance, these picturebooks extend the conventions of this format as well as their reading possibilities and they explore all material aspects of a book. They can therefore be a powerful play device that promotes "playful interactivity" (Nikolajeva 2008: 67), transforming reading not only into a pleasure and into a form of entertainment, but also into a thought-provoking device.

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