

Photographs as Illustrations

Terry Barrett and Kenneth Marantz

A photograph is simultaneously an expressive artifact and a frozen instant of history. Some photographs direct our attention to their own artificiality, most to their descriptive factuality, and a few to both. Like all forms of history, the photograph is constructed and ought to be examined critically before it is accepted as truth. Photographs can be said to fit on a continuum with two poles: at one end are those that are straightforward, direct, and realistic renderings of actual objects, people, or places; at the other end are those that are overtly and obviously directed, manipulated, and fictional, using props and models or actors.

Books written and illustrated for children increasingly are using photographs as illustrations, and these photographs fall throughout this continuum. These books can be divided by authors' and editors' intents into three categories: informational, developmental, and fictional. Children deserve the best that the photographic medium can achieve, and professional photographers working in fields other than children's literature have set standards that we can match with the efforts of children's book editors, authors, and illustrators. What follows is a critical sampling, from an aesthetic point of view, of some books for children that use photographs as illustrations, with particular attention paid to how and to what effect they are used.

Children's books that utilize photographs for informational illustrations stress the factuality of the medium rather than its artificiality. For example, Hans Reich's compilations of photographs by several photographers in *Children of Many Lands* (1958) is dependent on the factuality and credibility of its photographs. The book's effect is dependent on our seeing these children as real and living children in real and locatable places in the world. Its photographers and their sensibilities and skills are secondary to the pervasive theme of the book, so much so that credits for the photographs are small items in the front of the book and captions

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under each photograph identify the country where the photograph was made and not the photographer. The objectivity of the camera's lens is maximized, and the fact that these photographs are made by subjective individuals is minimized. Because the children in Reich's book are photographed in a straightforward manner, rather than painted or drawn, the viewer is assured that they exist in the world rather than in an illustrator's imagination or merely as ink on paper. Roland Barth's (1981) claim that "in photography I can not deny that the thing has been there" (p. 76) is apt for these photographs. The "thing" in these books are children, mothers, and fathers, and they are presented in rich and realistic detail. Tattered shirts and smudged faces appear tattered and smudged because they are, not because of the stroke of a brush or the smudge of graphite.

Reich is a photographer who also edited several photography books for children including *Laughing Camera 1* (1957), *Children and Their Fathers* (1964), and *Children and Their Mothers* (1964). As sources of information for children, these books have the educational value of presenting many diverse examples of what they intend to portray. In *Children and Their Mothers*, several mothers of various ages and looks from many lands are shown. If readers form generalizations about mothers, fathers, and children, their generalizations will likely be composites from several samples rather than from one. Similarly, as sources of developmental information and motivation, *Children of Many Lands* offers young viewers liberating, alternate viewpoints by showing a great variety of children in a great variety of lifestyles.

A caution, however, about Reich's books and any others that photographically portray in realistic style: they are seductive by their look of objectivity. The more realistic the photographs appear to be, the more ideologically persuasive they become; realistic looking photographs of real persons and real places tend to become "transparent" to the viewer. That is, the subjective photographer behind the lens tends to drop out, the objectivity of the mechanical lens masks the photographer's biases and beliefs, and we begin to grant unskeptically these photographs a "seeing is believing" truth. Parents or teachers may want to investigate with children what the photographer has done or not done, included or not included, so children come to realize that camera images, whether in books or on screens, are made by people with beliefs and biases who make persuasive images from their points of view.

Night (Keats, 1969), a book photographically illustrated by Beverly Hall and published about the same time as Reich's books, is in marked contrast to them. It is illustrated with flamboyantly manipulated photographs that are collages, reversals, double exposures, and high contrast prints from which Hall has eliminated all grays. Her technique is quite obvious and quite dependent on handiwork after the picture is taken. The snap-

ping of her camera's shutter is merely the starting point. Hall's method of working is closer to that of painters or printmakers or collage artists who make images by painting and painting over them, cutting and pasting and rearranging them. This is very different than Reich's photographers, who seek to capture aesthetically charged happenings in the world by means of a perceptive eye and quick finger. Neither way is necessarily better, but Hall's is painterly and Reich's is photographic.

In the context of other children's books illustrated with photographs in the 1960s, Hall's work is aesthetically innovative. But the techniques she uses were common around the turn of the century and in the 1960s in art photography. The choice of photographic illustrations for the theme of night is peculiar since photography, by nature, is dependent on light. Hall meets this challenge frequently by taking photographs in daylight and then printing them out as negatives. The descriptiveness of her photographs before they are reversed into negative images works against them being read as metaphors.

The text of *Night* is a compilation of brief quotations about the night by such writers as James Baldwin, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust. Hall's juxtaposition of her images and these texts are simplistic. The blackness of the book's paper and the small white type of the text do as much to convey night as Hall's photographs. In her photographic illustrations we see technique first and must struggle to see any insights she may have added to the sophisticated texts.

A more recent children's publication that uses an overtly manipulated approach is *Tools* (1983) by Ken Robbins. It is very indulgent in technique, seemingly for its own sake. The book shows 24 black and white photographs of hand tools that have been tinted with a paint brush against a blank white background. The only words, printed in a stencil typeface, are tool names. Sometimes the coloring is realistic and sometimes not: Robbins colors a c-clamp gold, metallic green, and pink. Some of the photographed tools are brand new, and some show dignity earned through use and age. Some are of the discount store variety. There is no apparent logic to the sequencing of the tools, and with each pictured against a blank white background, there are no clues as to how the tools are meant to be used. The content of the book is informational, presenting tools and their names, but the overall feel is highly aesthetic. In this case the mix of the aesthetic and the informational is paradoxical. The tools that Robbins has chosen vary in aesthetic worth, but all are hand tinted with a generic patina of pale transparent tones. The book could have been more informational by displaying a sequence of handsome tools that revealed the variety available for similar but subtly different functions. Then the expense of four-color printing could have been dedicated to straightforward color photographs to enhance our appreciation of objects designed for ultimate function and durability.

As it is, *Tools* is a testament to the skill of the artist in hand tinting, a highly indulgent product, with no particular reason for being other than showing that black and white photographs can be handsomely tinted in color with brushwork. Hand tinted photographs have been with us from the turn of the century, and in the past two decades there has been a resurgence of this old technique in contemporary artistic practice. But the decision to render new tools and old tools with a similar antique gloss is aesthetically suspect. Although the publishers of *Tools* and *Night* should be lauded for backing an exploratory photographic aesthetic for children, we feel these particular explorations are only partially effective.

Two publications that successfully combine information and aesthetic appeal are *I Carve Stone* (Fine, 1979) and *Monster Movers* (Ancona, 1983). The first combines a text written by Joan Fine with photographs of her carving a block of marble into an abstract sculpture. Fine's language is direct, honest, and noncondescending and works in harmony with David Anderson's clear, accurate, and unromantic photographs of her working process and her finished product. Fine and Anderson match each page of text with a black and white photograph that clearly shows what she is doing as she describes her thoughts, including her discouragement as well as her excitement during three months of working on the block of stone.

Appropriately, the photographs supplement rather than echo Fine's words. When she describes the wide variety of hand and power tools she uses, Anderson's photographs show them in use, revealing their appearance, how they are handled, and what they do. When she verbally expresses concerns for changing curves on the piece, defining its edges, smoothing its contours, the photographs show what she means. Photographing the subtly changing nuances of the white stone's textures, which are so important to the sculptor, is not an easy job for the photographer: too much light erases those textures and flattens the dimensions of the sculpture's roundness; too much shadow hides the details for which she has labored; and a wrong exposure turns the glistening white marble to dull grey stone. In this book Anderson's skill and work go unnoticed but without them so, too, would Fine's.

Monster Movers is a typical information book. It informs about facts of the world through text and photographs, describing huge machines that move huge amounts of material and the people who design and use these machines. It is very informative. One or two paragraphs of text accompany large photographs of a variety of machines, including walking draglines, rotary car dumpsters, stacker-reclaimers, pneumatic grain unloaders, and crawler-transporters, which scoop, dump, stack, lift, load, and unload. Author and photographer George Ancona adequately explains these engineering feats through pictures and works without oversimplifying them.



I CARVE STONE

Joan Fine photographs by David Anderson

Ancona's photographs are descriptively clear and use conventional scale relationships, frequently with workers placed in or alongside the machines for effective size contrasts. A theme of the book is size, staggering size; a bucket on a 300-foot boom scoops 85 cubic yards at a time; a chute pours 5,000 tons of iron-ore pellets an hour; and a crawler-transporter weighing 6.3 million pounds moves at one mile per hour carrying space shuttles up to 11.6 million pounds. Ancona enhances the size of the objects by photographing them from low vantage points, using acute perspectival views, and filling his viewfinder with the machines rather than minimizing them with background. Despite Ancona's effective photographic techniques, the book leaves us with a realization of the inadequacy of factual photographs, even when accompanied by descriptive

TANA HOBAN

Is It Rough? Is It Smooth? Is It Shiny?



words, in portraying experience. Although "11.6 million pounds" can realistically be described and photographed, such enormous weight must be experienced to be fully appreciated.

Developmental literature for children increasingly is being illustrated with photographs: reading readiness books and books for simple concept clarification (*What's Next?*, Wood, 1982; *Here A Chick, There A Chick*, McMillan, 1983), books for sensory awareness (*Is It Rough? Is It Smooth? Is It Shiny?*, Hoban, 1984), and books for socialization (*Signs*, Goor & Goor, 1983; *I Read Symbols*, Hoban, 1983). Invariably, they use a straightforward and too often a rather unimaginative photographic approach. However, Tana Hoban's developmental series, including *Is It Rough? Is It Smooth? Is It Shiny?* (1984), *Round and Round and Round* (1984), *Is It Red? Is It Yellow? Is It Blue?* (1984), provide examples of intelligent use of straightforward photographs.

Although McMillan's books (e.g., *Here A Chick, There A Chick*), arbitrarily use photographs and could have been as effective with drawn or painted cuddly animals, Hoban's series for developing awareness of aesthetic properties in the world is dependent on photography. *Is It Rough? Is It Smooth? Is It Shiny?* includes large, crisp, colorful photographs in a realistic style shot from close range. Her subjects include shiny pennies in a child's

open hand, pink bubble gum stuck to a child's nose and mouth, and a delightful final image of a woman carrying a terrier on her shoulder as she walks away from the viewer, leaving the viewer to consider the similar textures of the woman's curly hair and the dog's curly fur. If this book had been painted rather than photographed, it would have been more about how textures can be made with various art materials and techniques rather than about how we can notice textures in our daily experiences of the world. Both might be effective, but they would be different books evoking different connotations.

Although there is a host of professional art photographers producing many aesthetically excellent and conceptually provocative fictional photographs, we found very few examples of children's fiction illustrated with photographs. Exhibiting and publishing professional art photographers who have and who are working in a fictional or "directorial" mode (Coleman, 1979) include Les Krims, Duane Michals, Arthur Tress, and Ralph Gibson, and each has produced fictional books and folios. Thus it is curious that there are so few fictive photographic treatments for children.

There is one example, however, that deserves special notice. By aesthetic norms, *Little Red Riding Hood* (1983), written by Charles Perrault and photographically illustrated by Sarah Moon, is by far the most successful children's book illustrated with photographs that we have come across. It is one of a new series of several traditional fairytales edited by Ann Redpath and Etienne Delessert with art direction by Rita Marshall and published by George Peterson of Creative Education. All of the books are beautifully designed with individual variations within a consistent design motif. *The Fir Tree* (Anderson, 1983) and *Little Red Riding Hood* are the only two in the series using photographs, and the latter is more effectively illustrated.

The flavor of the text is traditional—"There lived in a certain village"—but the photographs are contemporary. The contemporary setting, however, is the Old World European cobblestoned urban environment rather than a rustic woodland. *Little Red Riding Hood* is the only character who is clearly shown, and, as in Perrault's version of the story, there is no saving hunter—the wolf eats up both grandmamma and Red Riding Hood. As an old clock with roman numerals indicates on the top of each column of text, the story takes place in one day. Red Riding Hood is a fashionable young girl, meticulously dressed in the *haute couture* of Europe, with a tasteful layering of solid and plaid woolens, hooded cape, appropriate shoes, with stylishly cut hair and modest make-up that photographs well. She seems a well bred, self-composed, quietly whimsical young girl but with an innocence, however sophisticated, that is no match for the wily wolf.

The book's black and white photographs are all dark and brooding,

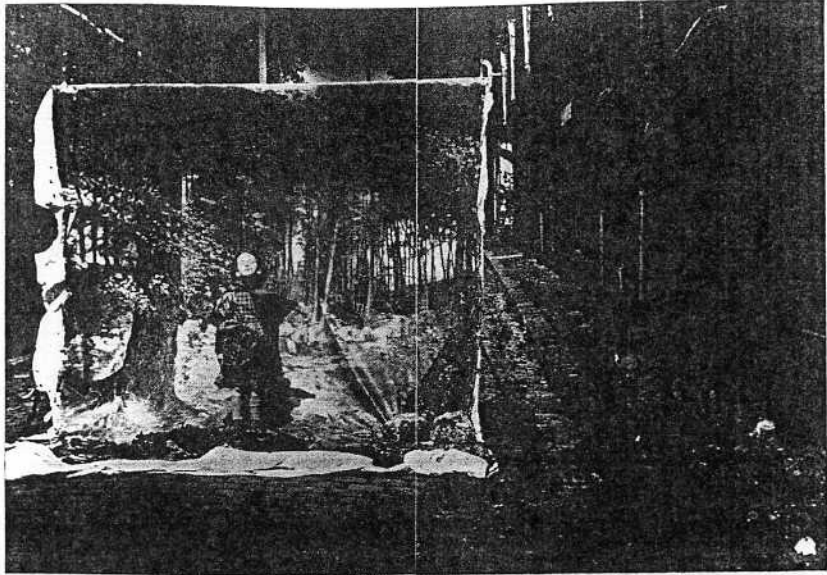
LITTLE
RED RIDING
HOOD



PERRAULT
illustrated by
SARAH MOON

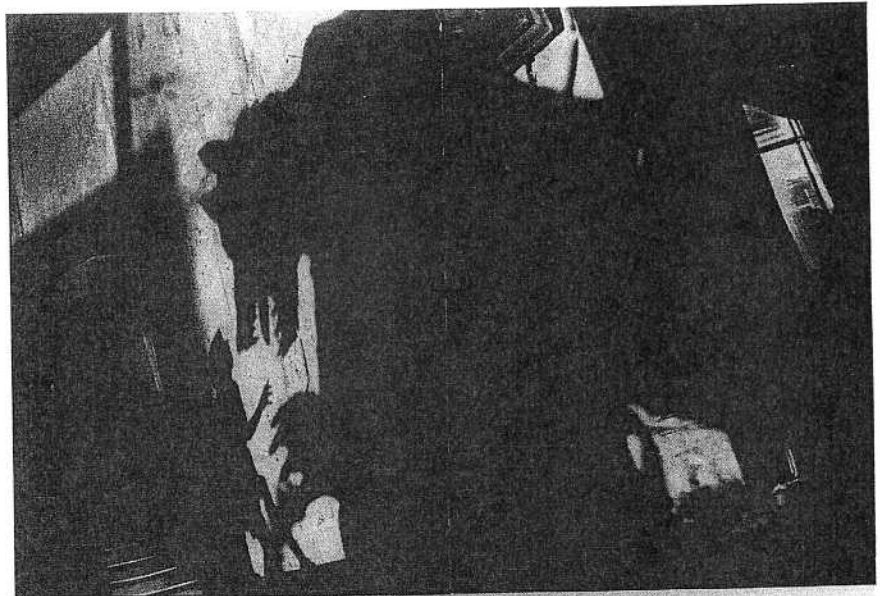
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employing dramatic, chiaroscuro effects from daylight enhanced with flash. The photographic frame is frequently askew, adding subtle and effective tension. A mysterious photograph is introduced early in the book that shows a darkened, cobblestoned street flanked with row houses, with Red



Riding Hood standing in front of a painted canvas backdrop of a woodland scene, suspended with visible c-clamps. This image alone sets a surrealistic tone for the whole book and ironically combines the conventions of cinematic narrative with the conventions of straight photography. Toward the middle of her journey, Red Riding Hood is framed through large, dark tree limbs from high above; in effect, the reader assumes the privileged and powerful vantage of the hidden and lurking wolf peering at the vulnerable girl below. From picture to picture, along her journey, Red Riding Hood alternately is positioned moving left to right, right to left, and toward a neutral direction, visually implying that she is on a lengthy and complicated walk.

When she arrives at her grandmother's house it is late afternoon or early evening. She approaches the cold dark exterior of the house with its warmly lit windows but must proceed between an ominous, vintage, black sedan parked in front of the house and a threatening German Shepherd lurking in the shadows. The vintage automobile has appeared earlier and may be read metaphorically as an ambiguous forboding symbol or literally as the means by which the wolf has beaten Red Riding Hood to the house. The inside of the house is an eerie, attic-like confused and cluttered space with deep and shadowed stairs. After unsuspectingly conversing with the wolf disguised as grandmamma, neither of whom we ever see, Red Riding Hood innocently undresses to her underclothes to get into bed and meet her fate. In the climatic photograph, captioned "... this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood and ate her all



Seeing those eyes, this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood, and ate her all up.

up," the wolf is shown as a huge and horrifying shadow towering over and grasping at the small and cowering shadow of the slight girl. The closing image is an overhead photograph of rumpled bedding with what appears to be a dark spot of blood beneath it on the shadowed floor.

This version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is quite frightening and may require discussion between adults and children as they view it—children should be brought to understand that cameras can make fictional pictures. The book is masterfully produced and ought to set aesthetic standards for future photographic illustrations of either the straightforward or manipulated variety. Moon's treatment of *Little Red Riding Hood* successfully employs the best qualities from both ends of the stylistic continuum of photography. It is straightforward but of fictional subject matter rendered with fictional tableaux. The photography, including choice of model, costuming, location and set selection, as well as standard aesthetic photographic variables such as a variety of points of view and distances, selective foci, and appropriate subject and print contrasts, are carefully and exactly employed and controlled with sensitive intelligence to achieve maximum match of mood and message. The quality of Moon's photographic endeavor is consistent with the best of contemporary, avant-garde, fashion photography. Her stylistic idiom is of that type. Indeed, several of the photographs of Red Riding Hood could be tear-sheets from recent issues of *Paris Vogue* magazine. But to this idiom Moon has added an informed use of narrative pictorial conventions and has sequenced stills for cinematic effects on the pages of a book.



Our point is not that contemporary fashion photography, art photography, nor any other genre of photography be unthinkingly provided for children. Rather, we are suggesting that the photographic medium need not and should not be limited to a straightforward aesthetic. *Little Red*

Riding Hood is a concrete example of what is possible when intelligence, talent, and publishing courage unite. If publishers would treat photographs more often with the respect and imagination they now treat other modes of illustration, the picture book field would generate fresh excitement.

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- p. 231, from *I Carve Stone* by Joan Fine. Photographs by David Anderson. New York: Crowell, 1979.
- p. 232, from *Is It Rough? Is It Smooth? Is It Shiny?* by Tana Hoban. New York: Greenwillow, 1984.
- p. 234, 235, 236 from *Little Red Riding Hood* by Charles Perrault. Photographs by Sarah Moon. Mankato, MN: Creative Education, 1983.
- p. 237, from *The Fir Tree* by Hans Christian Andersen. Photographs by Marcel Imsand and Rita Marshall. Mankato, MN: Creative Education, 1983.