

Photographs as Illustrations

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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

