

Every Picture Tells a Story: The Art of Narrative in Wordless Books

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Visual Storytelling

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a book as “a written document,” but the 20th century produced a robust tradition of books without any writing at all. Such wordless books rely on visual cues to tell their stories, drawing on traditions of wordless story-telling such as pantomime, medieval stained glass windows, African American “story quilts,” cartoons, and silent films, to name a few.

A 20th-Century Phenomenon

In the early 20th century, “woodcut novelists” like Lynd Ward began exploring narrative elements in their art, leading to a mini-explosion of wordless books for adults and contributing to the eventual development of the modern graphic novel. Although scattered examples of wordless children’s stories existed before 1970, the last three decades have seen an increase in the production of picture-stories for children, which are more easily re-purposed for a global audience than are books that require expensive translation.

Not Just For Children

This display presents a selection of narratives told entirely in pictures. While the tradition of illustrated children’s books lends itself more easily to wordless picture-stories, several notable “picture novels” contain mature themes and were clearly aimed at adult audiences.

Books on Display:

Mitsumasa Anno. *Anno’s Journey* (1978).

A framing story – a man journeys across the countryside – showcases many mini-dramas within the narrative: a duel, a courtship and wedding, a family packing up and moving house. The footnote that begins on the page shown here ends, after some complications, 3 pages later.

Jeannie Baker. *Home*. (2004).

In this story a window functions as a story frame to show the passing of time as the neighborhood seen in glimpses beyond it undergoes a renewal.

Molly Bang. *The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher*. (1980).

This Caldecott Honor Book is a variation on popular visual “puzzle” books. Here, the reader is challenged to pick out the “Grey Lady,” almost invisible against the grey background.

Quentin Blake. *Clown*. (1996).
Clowns traditionally perform in gestures and actions rather than words, making a clown the perfect protagonist in Blake’s charming tale.

Raymond Briggs. *The Snowman*. (1986).

This fantasy of a snowman who comes to life is perhaps the most popular wordless book of all. Briggs uses comic-strip visual images resembling animation stills to suggest the progression of the story’s action – a technique also used by several other books in this display.

Ruth Carroll. *What Whiskers Did*. (1932).

The earliest 20th-century example of a wordless children’s book in the UW collection, *What Whiskers Did* is contemporaneous to the work of Ward and Patri, displayed in the adjoining case.

Tomie de Paola. *Flicks*. (1979).

The title and the audience members who appear in silhouette at bottom of the pages pay tribute to the old art of silent film.

Tomie de Paola. *Sing, Pierrot, Sing: A Picture Book in Mime*. (1983).

Again, de Paola takes a traditional silent art – pantomime – and turns it into “silent” book.

Eric Drooker. *Blood Song: A Silent Ballad*. (2002).

Drooker is one of the few contemporary graphic novelists to tell book-length stories entirely in pictures.

Tom Feelings. *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*. (1995).

Feelings, a prolific children’s book illustrator, considered *The Middle Passage* to be his crowning achievement. Although it is often classified as children’s literature, the book’s scenes of violence, cruelty, rape, and suicide were clearly not meant for the usual picture book audience.

John Goodall. *Puss in Boots* (1990).
One storytelling technique employed in wordless books is to rely on the reader's familiarity with a popular tale. Goodall's *Puss in Boots* is a good example of the technique.

John Goodall. *The Adventures of Paddy Pork* (1968).
Here the antique illustrations match the old-fashioned feel of the story. In many of Goodall's wordless books, full-page pictures alternate with half-pages that are turned over as the action unfolds.

Shirley Hughes. *Up and Up* (1986).
In Hughes' humorous wish-fulfillment fantasy, the depiction of action sequences in many small panes is a technique borrowed from comic strips.

Ezra Jack Keats. *Clementina's Cactus*. (1999).
The colorful illustrations appeal to young readers, while a very simple story makes words superfluous.

Frans Masereel. *Passionate Journey: a Novel in 165 Woodcuts* (1948 edition; first published 1919). [English edition of *Mein Stundenbuch*].
Flemish artist Masereel completed 20 wordless novels in the 1910s and 1920s and strongly influenced the American woodcut artist Lynd Ward. His picture-novels include *Die Passion eines Menschen*, *Die Sonne*, *Die Idee*, and *Geschichte ohne Worte*. *Passionate Journey (Mein Stundenbuch)* is generally considered to be his greatest work.

Mercer Mayer. *Frog Goes to Dinner*. (1985).
Mayer's popular series of stories featuring a nameless boy and his pet frog employs comic vaudeville elements and slapstick humor to advance the action.

Guillermo Mordillo. *Crazy Cowboy*. (1976).
Humorous stories lend themselves particularly well to visual storytelling. Mordillo employs elements from tall-tales and cartoons to tell this slapstick yarn.

Jan Ormerod. *Sunshine*. (1981).
Ormerod uses familiar morning routines to help children make sense of the story. Here, a succession of smaller images indicates progression of the action in small successive steps.

Giacomo Patri. *White Collar: A Novel in Linocuts*. (1975 edition; first published in 1940).
This picture-novel portraying the struggles of a middle-class family during the Great Depression includes images of class struggle, unionization, and abortion. Patri self-published the novel in 1940 after he was unsuccessful in interesting a commercial publisher in his work.

Eric Rohmann. *Time Flies*. (1994).
Rohmann plays with time and space as a bird appears to be transported to prehistoric times and back again as it flies through a dinosaur skeleton. It's up to the reader to determine whether these events really happen or whether the story is a flight of imagination.

Peter Spier. *Noah's Ark*. (1977).
Spier assumes his readers are familiar with the Noah story, and here fleshes out the daily details of caring for animals upon the Ark.

Brinton Turkle. *Deep in the Forest*. (1976).
This book can be read as a straightforward story of a bear cub who wanders into a cabin, but to understand its subtle humor the reader must be familiar with the tale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

Gabrielle Vincent. *A Day, a Dog*. (1999).
Vincent's spare line drawings, evocative and unusual in the heavily-illustrated children's book market, set this wordless tale apart.

Tatjana Von Hauptmann. *Hurra, Eberhard Wutz Ist Wieder Dal*. (1979).
This German title points out the international appeal of wordless stories. On this page, a story-within-a-story unfolds as Eberhard's relatives gather to watch a silent film of his travels.

Lynd Ward. *Gods' Man: a Novel in Woodcuts*. (1968 ed; first published 1929).
Heavily influenced by the German woodcut artist Frans Masereel and his depictions of human struggle, Ward produced 6 "woodcut novels" between 1929 and 1937, and is sometimes referred to as the "grandfather of the graphic novel." *Gods' Man*, completed when Ward was only 25, is the first and best-known of these works.

Holden Wetherbee. *The Wonder Ring: A Fantasy in Silhouette*. (1978).
Here silhouettes, popular in Victorian times, are used to tell an old-fashioned story.

David Wiesner. *Free Fall*. (1988).
Wiesner's dreamscape incorporates visual elements displayed on the first pages of the book into the action of the young boy's dream – a variation on the visual games common in wordless books.



More Interesting Examples:

Susan Bonners. *Just in Passing*. (1989).

Peter Collington. *A Small Miracle*. (2002).

Fernando Krahn. *Sleep Tight, Alex Pumpnickel* (1982).

Tatjana Von Hauptmann. *A Day in the Life of Petronella Pig*. (1982).

Lynd Ward. *Wild pilgrimage: a Novel in Woodcuts*. (1932).

Peter Wezel. *The Good Bird*. (1964).

Ed Young. *Up a Tree: A Wordless Picture Book*. (1983).

To find more wordless books, search the UW Libraries' catalog (catalog.lib.washington.edu) for the Genre/Form "Stories Without Words"



For Further Information:

"Wordless Books: Promise and Possibilities, a Genre Comes of Age," by Sarah Dowhower, in *Yearbook of the American Reading Forum*, vol. 17 (1997).

"Turning the Visual into the Verbal: Children Reading Wordless Books," by Judith Graham, in *What's in the Picture?*, ed. Janet Evans. (1998).

Words about Pictures: the Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books, by Perry Nodelman. (1988).

Wordless/Almost Wordless Picture Books, by Virginia E. Richey and Katharyn E. Puckett. (1992).

Storyteller Without Words: the Wood Engravings of Lynd Ward, with text by Lynd Ward. (1974).

– Kathleen Collins, June 2006