

Picture Book Analysis of *Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis

Dee Wotring

LIS 617

September 25, 2012

Introduction

Children's author and illustrator, Antoinette Portis published her first work, *Not a Box*, in 2006. The following year, *Not a Box* was named a Theodor Seuss Geisel Honor Book by the American Library Association (ALA). *Not a Box* is a story of a bunny with a box. An unseen person, perhaps a parent, asks questions about the bunny and the box. To each question, the bunny responds "it is not a box" as the subsequent illustrations portray what the box is being imaginatively transformed into. Described by Kirkus Reviews, *Not a Box* "depicts a bunny with big, looping ears demonstrating to a rather thick, unseen questioner ("Are you still standing around in that box?") that what might look like an ordinary carton is actually a race car, a mountain, a burning building, a spaceship or anything else the imagination might dream up" (Not a Box by Antionette Portis, 2006).

Artwork and illustrations in literature for children is extremely important. Children's books, such as *Not a Box*, are written with the intent that an adult reads the text as children listen and observe the pictures (Horning, 1997, p. 85). The following analysis gives detail to how the picture book design elements are utilized in *Not a Box*.

## Determination of *Not a Box* as a Picture Book

In order to analyze the picture book design elements utilized by Portis in *Not a Box*, it is imperative to begin by distinguishing *Not a Box* as a picture book.

Uri Shulevitz stated that “in a true picture book, words cannot stand on their own; without pictures, the meaning of the story will be unclear. The pictures provide information not contained in the words” (What is a Picture Book?, 1996, p. 239). Additionally, ALA defines a picture book as “distinguished from other books with illustrations, is one that essentially provides the child with a visual experience. A picture book has a collective unity of story-line, theme or concept, developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised” (Caldecott Medal Terms and Criteria).

Upon examining *Not a Box*, it is clear that Portis’ illustrations “provide the specific details” of the bunny’s idea of what the box is that the text does not portray (Shulevitz, 1996, p. 239). The text simply asks about the bunny and the box. “Why are you sitting in a box?” “What are you doing on top of that box?” Additionally, the text simply gives the bunny’s response “it’s not a box.” The text does not in any way inform the reader of the bunny’s thoughts or actions regarding the utilization of the box. Only the illustrations give the reader that information. Portis transforms the simplistic rectangle representative of the box into a variety of things in which the bunny interacts. The bunny zooms off in a race car, conquers the highest mountain, and becomes a robot, for example.

Upon examination of the content and based on the fact that the illustrations provide information that the text does not, it is evident that *Not a Box* is not an illustrated book or simply a story book with pictures. Therefore, *Not a Box* is, by definition given by Shulevitz and the American Library Association, a picture book.

## Examination and Analysis of Picture Book Design Elements

In order to purchase and utilize children's literature, it is essential that librarians in particular be able to evaluate them. Because picture books rely so heavily on illustration, an understanding of how the illustrative design elements work together to create effective imagery is highly important. Design elements for picture book illustrations include color, line, shape, size, composition, and artistic style.

### Color

Despite the limited coloration, color is the biggest design element utilized by Portis in *Not a Box*. According to Mary M. Erbach, "picture book artists use color to bring focus to the elements in a story, adding emphasis to a character, suggesting a mood, and contributing to the aesthetics of a visual experience" (Illustration as Art - Color, 2007, p. 33). Portis' use of color demonstrates this principle very well. Through the use of only five colors (red, yellow, brown, white, and black), Portis gives emotion to her characters as well as contributes to the overall visual experience received from reading. This is achieved by bringing attention to the elements of the story told strictly through the illustrations and the color of the pages themselves.

Portis uses colored pages in a pattern. Brown pages are used when the unseen character asks a question. Text on these pages is always in white. Brown "suggests stability and denotes masculine qualities" (Qsx Software Group, 2002-2012). The brown pages represent the unseen character asking practical questions as stable, probably signifying the lack of creativity. The contrast of white text on color also suggests a contrast which draws the attention of the reader to read the text without being overpowering (Bang, 2000, p. 80).

Next, Portis uses white pages to display the illustration of the bunny interacting with the box. The bunny and box are drawn in simplistic black lines. Black is “associated with power, elegance, formality, death, evil, and mystery” and “denotes strength and authority”. Black also gives “the feeling of perspective and depth” and is “considered to be very formal, elegant, and prestigious” (Qsx Software Group, 2002-2012). White means “safety, purity, and cleanliness” and is “associated with light, goodness, innocence, and purity” (Qsx Software Group, 2002-2012). The choice of white background for the bunny’s activity signifies the bunny’s innocence and goodness that is often associated with very young children. The contrasting color of white background opposite brown also signifies change for the reader that draws the attention to the illustration.

The following page is red with white text. This page reflects the bunny’s verbal response to the unseen character’s question. Red is defined as the “color of fire and blood” and is “associated with energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination, as well as passion, desire, and love.” Red is also “a very emotionally intense color.” (Qsx Software Group, 2002-2012). Here, Portis is using the red to represent the change in the bunny’s emotion. The bunny is determined and passionate about the box not being a box.

The last page in the color series is yellow. On these pages, Portis illustrates what the bunny is imagining the box to be. Portis draws the bunny and box in black and uses red to draw the remainder of the illustration. Yellow is defined as the “color of sunshine” and is “associated with joy, happiness, intellect, and energy.” Yellow is also “an attention getter” and is used to “evoke pleasant, cheerful feelings” (Qsx Software Group, 2002-2012). Portis uses yellow to express the bunny’s joy and happy feelings along with red to symbolize the energy associated with climbing a mountain or flying a hot air balloon as well as the emotional charge of the bunny.

## Line and Shape

Most of the illustrations in *Not a Box* are simplistic line illustrations. Whereas Portis used color to focus on the mood and character expression, she uses line to bring about different effects (Horning, 1997, p. 96). The biggest use of line Portis employs is to express the action.

Drawn simply, Portis gives the bunny a round head with round eyes and an oblong oval nose, long loopy ears, and a somewhat rounded rectangular body. This use of line and shape exemplifies what Horning stated regarding curved lines and objects representing things created in nature compared to straight lines representing more man-made items, such as the very straight lined rectangular box (Horning, 1997, p. 96). While the flat lines and points of the box do not suggest it is “huggable,” it does give a sense of “stability” (Bang, 2000, p. 8). As the illustration transforms into the imagined use of the box, more detail is added in red, yet detail remains simplistic. This reflects Bang’s description of the use of shape. Bang stated “we see shapes in context, and our reactions to them depend in large part on that context” (Bang, 2000, p. 8).

By combining the contrasting color of red to her basic black illustrations, Portis gives just enough imagery to represent the imagined use of the box. While the box does not change its size, the box does shift its position. Depending on its imagined use, the box changes from being horizontal to vertical. For example, the box is horizontal when it is transformed into a race car. It is vertical when it is a mountain. These examples follow Horning’s depiction of line usage. According to Horning, horizontal lines give a sense of orderly action that moves from left to right whereas vertical lines make a picture look still, giving it a photographic effect of a captured moment in time (Horning, 1997, p. 96). The illustration of the bunny in the race car exemplifies the action of moving from left to right as the bunny’s ears are no longer upright by almost waving to the left as the car’s front is off the right side of the page. Likewise,

the illustration of the bunny standing on top of a mountain gives the representation of a photo, the captured moment in time when the bunny conquers the climb to the top.

### Composition and Style

Throughout *Not a Box*, Portis applies simplicity. Overly graphic detail would not have worked well for the theme of the story itself. A cardboard box is a simple object. Yet, with the patterned colored pagination, Portis makes effective use of her style and composition in relaying her story. In addition to the use of color within the composition, the placement of the illustrations on each page plays a key role in communication. For example, the bunny sitting in the box on page two is slightly off-center and slightly to the lower right. Bang postulates that while the greatest point of attention is the center of the page, by moving the image off center creates a sense of movement (Bang, 2000, pp. 62-64). This is evident with the page turn and the bunny is driving off in a race car. Again, the race car is also drawn with the front end off the page. This use of composition implies time and travel movement.

Not only does the location of the bunny in the box on page 2 communicate the movement, Bang also points out that “space isolates a figure, makes that figure alone, free, and vulnerable” (Bang, 2000, p. 84). On each white page, the bunny and the box are alone. This is how the unseen character “sees” the bunny and the box. This composition is carried out through the entire book.

Portis places the bunny and the box slightly off-center in each illustration. Portis does so to communicate the action. This use of space in composition enables movement, and “gives movement and life to a picture” (Bang, 2000, p. 90). This makes the story more readable and invites the reader to become a part of the story.

## Conclusion

Portis does a superb job of combining the design elements in *Not a Box* to create an award winning children's picture book. Although a simplistically illustrated and written account of an imaginative bunny and a "humble cardboard box," Portis' use of style and technique "remind everyone that creativity doesn't require complicated setups" (*Not a Box* by Antionette Portis, 2006). In so doing, Portis exemplifies what Erbach states in that "the visual power of an illustration lies in the combination of its lines, colors, and shapes arranged to produce a dynamic composition" (*Illustration as Art - Technique*, 2007, p. 37)

## Personal response and evaluation

After reading *Not a Box*, I thought it was a cute story. The text and illustrations work together to tell the story of the imaginative young bunny and his box. This alone would be relatable to the young reader. The text leads the reader as the illustrations express the thoughts and actions of the bunny. As I began to examine the content beyond the text, I realized that Portis perceptively used the simplicity of style to mirror the simplicity of the cardboard box while taking her readers much farther. The carefully selected color choices and use were not distracting but added much to the story without overwhelming the reader. Alternating dark and light (brown-white, red-yellow) was not coincidental. Brown and white are both earth tones while red and yellow are primary colors often combined. The red and yellow combination worked well to express the illustrations that generated in the bunny's imaginative play with the box.

## Bibliography

- Not a Box by Antionette Portis. (2006, December 1). *Kirkus Reviews*. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://titlewave.com/search?SID=fe24b2996bc317d69a1c0660ad414f22>
- Not a Box by Antionette Portis. (2006, November 27). *Publishers Weekly*. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from <http://titlewave.com/search?SID=fe24b2996bc317d69a1c0660ad414f22>
- American Library Association/Association for Library Service to Children. (n.d.). *Caldecott Medal Terms and Criteria*. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from ALSC/ALA: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecottterms/caldecottterms>
- Bang, M. (2000). *Picture This: How Pictures Work*. Boston: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown and Co.
- Erbach, M. M. (2007, March). Illustration as Art - Color. *Book Links*, 33-36.
- Erbach, M. M. (2007, September). Illustration as Art - Technique. *Book Links*, 37-40.
- Horning, K. T. (1997). *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books* (Revised ed.). New York: Harper Collins.
- QSX Software Group. (2002-2012). *Color Meaning*. Retrieved September 25, 2012, from Color Wheel Pro: <http://www.color-wheel-pro.com/color-meaning.html>
- Shulevitz, U. (1996). What is a Picture Book? In S. G. Egoff, & S. G. Egoff (Ed.), *Only Connect; Readings on Children's Literature, 3rd Ed.* (3rd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.