My understandings of the analysis and creative processes focusing on picturebooks are informed from two distinct, yet complementary, perspectives. First, I am a Professor of Literacy Education and Children's Literature, and second, I am a Nature Photographer that writes and illustrates non-fiction nature books for children. My academic background allows me to investigate the theories and research that support the analysis, critique and appreciation of the picturebook, while my photographic background allows me to appreciate the construction of my picturebooks from an "insiders" perspective. As a writer, professor, and illustrator I am positioned to approach picturebooks in a variety of ways.

From my academic background, I understand that the compound word “picturebook” has been used to connote the unified nature of the written text and visual images of this literary form (Kiefer, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). The picturebook is a unique literary experience, where meaning is generated simultaneously from written text and visual images. Each sign system, written language and visual image, transacts and transforms the other during the reading experience, allowing readers to oscillate back and forth between these two systems during their transactions with picturebooks (Sipe, 1998).

From my photographic background, I understand how to compose an image, how to juxtapose color, tonalities and textures to create beautiful landscape images that are appealing to the eye, as well as provide the necessary visual support for my written texts. As a photographer, I never once worried about where the gutter would fall in one of my images or whether the snake’s head should be on the left or right. However, as a picturebook illustrator these are things I had to begin taking into consideration as I began submitting my images for publication.

The modes of written language and visual images are governed by distinct logics. In other words, written text is organized by the logic of time, structured into a temporal sequence that unfolds over time. However, visual image is governed by the logic of spatiality. In other words, it is organized to be viewed as a whole or simultaneously (Kress, 2003). In addition, different things can be done with images when compared to what can be done with written text. I can do things with images that I can’t do with written language and vice versa. When I want to show someone what an object or subject in nature looks like, I generally rely on a visual image to do so. When I want to explain something about that object that may not be visible, I choose to write text. For example, if someone asked me what a starfish looks like, I would rather show them one of my images than try to describe what the white pinchers along the back of a five armed echinoderm are like using written language.

It seems to me, that the process of creating picturebooks requires adopting one of three stances; writing text to go with images, creating images to go with text, or envisioning the two simultaneously. I have found with the Looking Closely Series of non-fiction picturebooks that I am publishing with Kids Can Press in Toronto, I have to consider both simultaneously in order to achieve my desired results. The Looking Closely books are considered “crop and reveal” picturebooks, where a partial section of an image is shown and readers are asked to guess what the object may be. On the subsequent page, a full spread image is revealed with a section of written text detailing more about the subject of the image.

Each book in the Looking Closely series started out by selecting a particular natural feature or theme, for example desert or rainforest. After deciding on the theme, I created a list of potential images for each theme or natural feature. I call these lists “shot lists.” My shot lists are really more like a wish list of images for each theme or natural feature I hoped to capture or have already in my stock collection given the deadlines allocated for each book. As I spent time in the field creating images, I carried my various shot lists for reference. In the field, I would use this shot list as an observation and travel guide to help locate and focus on particular images.

Some images on the shot list were easier than others to capture. In fact, some images were already in my stock portfolio, in which case I wrote text to accompany an existing image. Some images fall into your lap, and others require dedicated research, some travel, some studio set up, and a little bit of luck. For example, I wanted an image of some earthworms for the Looking Closely Inside the Garden book. You would think this would be rather easy, right? Well, let me tell you there aren’t as many earthworms in Las Vegas as you might think. So on my trips to Nova Scotia and the coast of Maine, I wandered around several of the harbors asking at tackle shops for earthworms.
I didn't realize that most coastal fishermen use minnows, crawfish and other fish as bait, and not worms. So, eventually I bought a box of earthworms and dumped them in my brother-in-law's garden and captured the image that I wanted for the book.

Another challenge was the format of the book (horizontal layout) required me to only include horizontal images, except for the back cover. This meant that about half of my images, even if they contained the subject matter I wanted to include, would not work because they were vertical images. This posed the biggest challenge in the Looking Closely Through the Forest book because most of my forest and tree images were vertical because that's the best alignment for capturing trees.

After I had captured as many possible images from my shot list for each theme, I selected my favorites and sent them to Karen Li my editor at Kids Can Press. She reviewed my images along with her photo editors and selected the images they felt would work best and sent me a list of their selections. I used this list of images as a place to begin my research and writing. It was interesting how their selections were different from my favorite images. They were looking at them as children's book editors, and I saw them from the eyes of a nature photographer.

Writing the language of the “guess what it is page” was really a collaborative effort. Because I was so familiar with every image that was selected, it was hard for me to stand back and guess what the cropped images looked like. I asked my nieces and nephews what they thought the objects might be, and then we sent the images around the offices of Kids Can Press to see what the employees there thought.

The final text for these pages was a conglomeration of all these efforts.

The text on the reveal page began as research into the subject and a search for unique language or phrases to describe each image. Trying to write for an audience of young readers (ages 3-8) requires a very different mindset than I am used to when writing for an audience of teachers and educators. Up to this point, I had been much more comfortable writing for classroom teachers through my educational publications than I had been writing for young children. I was very nervous when Kids Can Press asked me to write a writing sample to see if I could manage the written text for the books. I don't even remember what I sent in, but fortunately they saw something there worth cultivating.

For these picturebooks I am limited to the amount of text I can use; somewhere between 75 and 90 words for each image. I usually “overwrote” each section, beginning with a 100 to 200 word text, then editing it down. I wanted to find interesting phrases, like “toadstools are sometimes found in circular patterns known as fairy circles,” that provided information while at the same time using language to engage the senses as well as the intellect of my young audience. I also felt I needed to become somewhat of an expert on each of the natural features I would be writing about. The desert was the easiest since I had been living and photographing within the Sonoran or Mojave Deserts for more than 23 years. The forest and shoreline themes were familiar to me as a photographer, but not as familiar as a naturalist. I used the internet, conversations with my photography friends, books, and some university experts to help me generate and confirm my research for these various themes. The garden book, which seems like a familiar topic, required more research than I had assumed when beginning. Although, I knew what an earthworm looked like, I did not have as much knowledge of them as I needed to write the text for that particular page. It’s harder to say something profound about an ear of corn in 100 words than you might think. In the end, each image for the garden book required more research to find interesting information to write about than the other books.

Creating the images once I had discovered, or in some cases staged the subject was probably the easiest part of the creative process. Given the right light, in general mildly overcast skies are best for close-up photography, and a willing subject, millipedes that sit still for a moment, I was able to create the images I needed. For example, the earthworms spent some time in the refrigerator tightly sealed in plastic, so that they would not move as much when I went to photograph them. It’s amazing how much a snail can move when you are trying to get a close up picture of them!

It has been a rewarding experience creating this series of picturebooks for Kids Can Press. Working with my editor has been a learning and enjoyable experience. My quality of my photography is what caught the eye of the editors and publishers at Kids Can Press, while my writing for a younger audience has been a challenge. Every author and illustrator has different ways of creating and combining visual images and written text into the picturebook format. It has been interesting to reflect on my creative processes from the dual perspective of educator/researcher, and nature photographer.

References


