

“THAT WIND IS AS WARM AS HONEY TOAST”

The language of food in contemporary Australian picture books

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Abstract

Children’s books are created with the specific intention not only of entertaining but also of enculturating their audiences, and as such they are a rich resource for understanding how a society fashions itself for the young. Focusing on a corpus of 170 contemporary Australian picture books published 2000–2013, this paper unpicks the ways in which the meanings and values of food and food practices are communicated through an interplay of textual elements—words and pictures on the page—and extratextual elements—in particular, sensory memory and sensory ideation. Food can be understood as a language used by book creators to communicate aspects of characterisation and the social and cultural contexts of the narratives, even though most references are incidental. I argue that while the pedagogical effect of incidental food references in picture books is largely unintentional, recurring representations signal assumed norms. Examples drawn from the corpus show that these texts work pedagogically to express ideas of gender, ethnicity and class, as well as food choice: what foods are good to eat and what foods are good to think about.

Keywords

Picture books, children’s literature, food pedagogy, food choice, sensory memory.

Introduction

This paper draws on semiotic analysis to explore representations of food and our relationships to food found in contemporary Australian picture books for the young. The analysis focusses on how food choice is depicted on the page, and the ways in which textual and visual language draws on the senses to convey the meaning and value of food.

Children’s literature is different from other fields of textuality in that for the most part it is created with the specific intention not only of entertaining but also of enculturating its audiences, those “forming their self-images and future expectations” (Weitzman et al, 1972: 1146). As such it can be understood to have a socialising imperative, presenting stories to children “in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others” (Nodelman, 2005: 131). Children’s book writers and illustrators present versions of the world tending “at some level (whether or not they are aware of this) to encourage readers to subscribe to their view of what children/childhood and society should be like” (Reynolds, 2005: 3). They necessarily use conventional codes of representation in order to make sense to their audiences and can be understood to be “grounded in some version of consensus reality” (Stephens, 1992: 158) even when it is not the conscious intention of the book creator/s to promote a particular world view. Picture books therefore offer a rich resource for understanding how a society fashions itself for the young. Ellen Spitz notes,

Even when they are not intended to do so, picture books provide children with some of their earliest takes on morality, taste, and basic cultural knowledge, including messages about gender, race, and class. They supply a stock of images for children’s mental museums. (1999: 14)

This raises the question: What are the stock images about food and food practices provided in picture books? To answer, I closely studied 219 picture books published in Australia between 2000 and 2013, by authors and illustrators who identify as Australian, with the aim of capturing what young children are likely to be exposed to when they read a recently published picture book.

Two thirds of printed children’s books sold in Australia are Australian in origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005: 16), and it would therefore be reasonable to assume that the majority of picture books consumed by Australian children are by Australian book creators. The picture books selected for the initial study were those most likely to be in broad circulation through trade stores and libraries, and readily available to children between the ages of two and eight years old: bestsellers and those that have been acknowledged to be of high cultural value as shortlisted or award-winning books. Covering literary awards, publishing industry awards, popularity awards voted by child readers (children’s choice awards), and bestseller lists, the study thus included books endorsed by the industry and professional readers, books endorsed by child readers and books endorsed by (usually adult) book-buyers. The perceived cultural capital in books regarded as exceptional by expert readers informs reviewing, standing orders lists and curricula. For example, “Award winners” is a listing category for book distributors who supply libraries (Hateley, 2012: 191), and the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia has been publishing an annual teacher’s guide on how to use The Children’s Book Council of Australia shortlisted books in the classroom since 2009 (‘CBCA Guides’). The age range for readership was chosen to capture pre-literate and emerging readers, roughly corresponding to toddlers, preschool-aged children, and those up to mid-primary school years. This age range is broadly accepted by publishers as the audience for picture books for young children.

Over 77 per cent of the initial 219 books studied refer to food in some way—a little over three out of four books—demonstrating that food is relatively pervasive in picture book worlds. The 49 titles that did not contain any food references were set aside. The remaining 170 books constitute the corpus on which this paper is based.

To begin, I explore the notion of children’s picture books as pedagogical texts, looking at educative effect and intent. I then tease out the idea of the incidental as a powerful tool to communicate normative values and conventions, and how this informs the way in which we can think about food pedagogy in picture books. Examples of the visual and textual language of food in the books are presented, illustrating the role of the senses in textual mediation. I contend that child and adult readers draw on their real-world experiences of food to make meaning of the pictures and text in the books, but also that the ways in which food is represented has the capacity to shape an understanding of the real world. In this way

a meaning loop of affect and value is created with transitions from the real world into the text and transitions out of the text to inform meaning. This is in line with Michelle Anstey and Geoff Bull’s assertion that children’s texts “are not only sites where imagination and response are situated, but also places of cultural production and reproduction” (2000: 206).

Pedagogical effect versus intent

Children’s books constitute both formal and informal modes of pedagogy. Picture books are seen by educators to be a valuable medium of literacy development and are prevalent in child-care centres, pre-schools, primary schools and family day care homes across Australia. At the same time, parents are encouraged to read books with their children from the time they are babies, and a ritual of book reading is common in many households. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the majority of children in Australia under the age of eight are exposed to picture books on at least a weekly basis, in the setting of an educational or care institution, or the domestic sphere, or both.

It is widely understood that books for young children, at some level, teach readers about their world (Stephens, 1996; Bullen, 2009; Meek, 2001; Nodelman, 2008; Yu, 2012). They can be seen to have the core elements that Anna Hickey-Moody et al identify as being at the conceptual heart of pedagogy: intent, substance and process (2010: 232-233). The *intent* of picture books is to enculturate, entertain and communicate values. Like the visual representations, texts and artefacts of popular culture, picture books “frame children’s understanding of the world and of themselves, of narrative, heroes and heroines, gender and race relations, cultural symbols, values and social power” (Luke, 1996:167). The *substance* is the content of textual and visual narrative conveyed via the page and packaged in book form. The *process* is the reading event, which is particular to the genre. Unlike any other type of literature, picture books for young children are created specifically for a dual audience: the pre-literate child who can ‘read’ the pictures, and the literate adult (or older child) who can recite the text.

Despite these pedagogical elements, the picture books in the corpus under study do not fall neatly into the category of intentionally pedagogical texts. This is largely due to a division that exists in book industries in many countries, including Australia, between ‘educational’

and ‘trade’ publishing, which often sees book creators rejecting the ‘educational’ label. All the books in the corpus that informs this paper are trade titles. Educational publishers produce books specifically as learning tools for schools and tertiary education institutions, tailored to the curriculum, and often sell their titles as class sets. Trade publishers produce books that are found in bookshops and libraries, and are sold to the general public and interested institutions. While many trade books are found in school libraries and teachers’ collections, educational titles are less commonly found in bookshops. In Australia, standard publishing contracts offer lower royalties to writers for educational titles, and these books are rarely nominated for book awards. Book creators, as professionals working in the industry, are well aware of these sector differences and widely regard the label ‘educational’ as denoting a particular type of publication produced within particular parameters.

Educational publishers are often more prescriptive than trade publishers about the language used, the subject matter, and what should be portrayed on the page. As award-winning Australian illustrator Freya Blackwood says, “You get censored a lot more. Every child has to wear a hat and there’s got to be a combination of different skin colours and someone in a wheelchair. As a creative person that’s not fun, to be told what you have to do” (interview with illustrator, 5 Nov 2013, Bathurst). When Blackwood was working on her first title for the trade market after having worked in the educational sector, she asked her publisher whether it was okay to have an illustration of children riding motorbikes on a farm without helmets: “I was told, ‘This isn’t an educational book, we’re not lecturing children, we’re just creating entertainment’” (ibid). This distinction aligns educational texts with stories that have a clear intent to teach, and trade texts with stories that have a clear intent to entertain. I know from my decades of working as an editor in the book industry that if a manuscript is too overtly pedagogical, a trade publisher is likely to reject it.

Writer Ann Whitford is succinct on this point in her book aimed at budding children’s writers: “We’re in the business of writing engaging stories, not teaching lessons. Leave that to educators” (Whitford, 2009: 14). This view is shared by other book creators. Award-winning writer and illustrator Leigh Hobbs (Australian Children’s Laureate 2016–2017) has a background in education but says, “I don’t see my role as primarily a teacher in my books ... I hope the kids see them as entertaining” (interview with author, 1 July 2016, by telephone). The best-selling Australian writer and illustrator Graeme Base expresses a

similar position in an interview in which he twice states “I’m not an educator” but goes on to say, “I know there is educational value in my books but I do not set out to teach anyone anything; only to share things I find interesting/amusing/beautiful/important” (Beales and Zeegers, 2013: 16). Like Hobbs, his *intent* is not to teach, but he recognises the educative *effect* of his work.

The notion that any text for children is ‘just’ entertainment, to return to the publisher’s comment to Blackwood, is arguable. While trade picture books may not be intentionally designed for the education market, I would argue that as culturally produced media designed for children learning about their world, they are pedagogical, and can be understood as a form of public pedagogy in line with Henry Giroux’s foundational view that “culture *can* and *does* operate in pedagogical ways” (Hickey-Moody et al, 2010: 228). I should highlight that the pedagogy of picture books does not follow a transmission model of education; indeed, there is a dual audience of literate readers (usually adults) and pre-literate readers (children) who learn from picture books in distinct ways. Furthermore, as Sue Saltmarsh points out:

Reading to/with children can thus be understood as part of a dynamic, shared, and profoundly ideological process – of storytelling, of guiding children through visual and verbal cues, of inviting and answering questions, of collaboratively constructing and interrogating meanings – thus bringing the dual navigation of text by adult and child into the complex processes associated with navigating subjectivities and social relations.
(2007: 99)

This resonates with the strand of thought about pedagogy that privileges the notion of relationality, highlighting “the intersection of the subject and object of pedagogy – the relational meanings that are generated via active, sensate, embodied interactions” (Burdick and Sandlin, 2015: 147). These interactions are fundamental to the shared reading event, taking into account not only the collaborative processes outlined by Saltmarsh, but also interactions with the book itself, an object that can be manipulated by adults and children in different ways, and interactions between the readers, often marked by physical intimacy in the home environment.

From the perspective of the relational view of pedagogy, Jake Burdick and Jennifer Sandlin suggest that creators of works considered in this way “evinced a high degree of intentionality” (2015: 147). However, I would argue that despite the role that parents, teachers, other adults and older siblings play as mediators between children and picture books, “serving as editor and improviser” (Spitz, 1999: 17), picture books also have the capacity to *unintentionally* promote a range of cultural assumptions about class, race and gender – and also about food – by presenting values and ideas as norms. For example, by far the majority of characters in the corpus are fair-skinned, have two parents, live in comfortable suburban homes, and have possessions and life-styles that could non-controversially categorise them as middle-class Anglo-Australians. This is the physical and social environment that is normalised in the books and is perhaps unsurprising given that Australian book creators operate within an industry that is largely a product of a white, middle-class culture, with readers generally from white, middle-class populations (Bradford, 2001: 166, 2005: 86). I agree with Victoria Flanagan who suggests that in Australian picture books, “Whiteness largely functions as an invisible category of identity, as it is by remaining invisible that it instantiates itself as normative” (2013: 14). Of the 170 books in the corpus only seventeen feature non-Anglo characters, with eight of those featuring Indigenous characters.

This power of the invisible to instantiate itself as normative is particularly relevant when we turn our attention to the gendered nature of written passages about, and pictures of, food. For example, in looking at depictions of cooking in the corpus, the gendered identity of characters was more balanced in quantitative terms than I had expected. However, the crude generalisation that a woman’s place is in the kitchen is supported by close analysis of the texts which shows that mother figures are strongly aligned to cooking everyday meals for the family at home. Men, on the other hand are shown cooking special or holiday meals outdoors over barbeques and campfires, cooking in fantastical scenarios, or cooking as a paid profession. These fictional representations support Marjorie DeVault’s assertions, made almost thirty years ago, that images of family life usually “preserve fundamental elements of social tradition” and are “resistant to radical change” (1991: 16).

The power of incidental food scenes

Incidental depictions are of particular interest as they are a key to understanding what may otherwise go unnoticed. Of the 170 books, I studied with food references, less than a handful were ostensibly *about* food, with only just over ten per cent depicting food as the focal point of the scene or narrative. The vast majority of titles (89 per cent) contained incidental food references only, most of them in the illustrations. Incidental depictions are those where food and relationships to food are denoted in words and/or pictures to provide context or background but do not play a major role in the storyline. For example, the mention of a favourite food in a list profiling a character, a reference to a food item in a simile or metaphor describing a sound, a kitchen scene that shows a female figure preparing food. Freya Blackwood and another prominent Australian writer/illustrator, Bob Graham, both expressed surprise when I pointed out to them the high frequency of food references in their books. They were somewhat unaware of the ways in which they had used food in their work until we started talking about it together (Blackwood interview with illustrator, 5 Nov 2013, Bathurst; Graham email to author, 9 June 2014). While incidental representations of food may seem insignificant to the writer and illustrator, and even an adult reader, we cannot assume they are insignificant to a pre-literate child. Various studies have shown that children are better than adults in noticing details in picture books (Sanders, 2013: 79). In this way, I would argue that the communication of ideas about food and food practices in these texts can be understood as *incidental* food learning.

By focussing attention on the incidental food depictions in picture books we can begin to recognise dominant values and beliefs about food norms, and our relationships to food, and gender roles and cultural identity, often entwined with food. For example, in the corpus, sugar-rich foods are standard fare in food events involving characters of non-marked ethnicity (white Australians) as well as anthropomorphised animals and other fantastical characters such as fairies. However, such foods are rarely present in stories featuring non-Anglo characters, which reference savoury foods aligned with wholesomeness and almost always include representations of growing, gathering and preparing food. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between non-Anglo-Australian maternal figures and home-cooked meals, and a clear link between Anglo-Australian mothers and sugar-rich snacks.

The repetition of incidental depictions of certain foods and food practices in certain contexts across the books consolidates the incidental as a norm, particularly if we consider the cumulative effect of reading multiple books over time, and re-reading the same book, a practice most young children request. Drawing attention to the process of learning in early childhood, Anstey and Bull posit that “characters and contexts found in books provide templates that children use to interpret and explain their identities and the world around them” (2000: 190). I would suggest that in relation to food, the pedagogical power of templates found in books does not arise from the page alone, however many times a book is read and re-read. I argue that this incidental food pedagogy relies on the interplay between textual and extra-textual elements that come together in the moment of reading to shape meaning.

Meaning making and sensory ideation

Meaning making in texts is a highly contingent process subject to a range of social, historical and cultural factors. Food-related depictions in picture books may not always be directly linked to real world uses and assumptions, however I would contend that the capacity for a textual and visual food-based vocabulary to communicate meaning relies on shared cultural codes between book creators and their audiences. These codes may be explicit, such as the name of a particular food item. For example, most Australians understand the label ‘lamington’ as code to signify a chocolate covered square of sponge cake with coconut sprinkles. Codes may also be embedded in cultural and social practices, such as the convention of having a cake with candles to celebrate a birthday; or be visceral, such as a sense memory of a specific taste or smell.

It is important to acknowledge that sight and sound are the primary sensory experiences of a reading event; at its most basic level, a picture book is looked at and the story read aloud and listened to. In picture books for young children the images tend to take up more space than the text; much can be communicated by an image in a way that young children (including pre-literate children) can understand. In most cases the storyline would be unintelligible to a young audience without the pictures and, in many cases, without an adult mediator. It is the senses of taste and smell, however, that are most often called on in textual and visual food-related references to help a reader understand intended meanings of

particular story aspects such as characterisation and setting. For example, In *Don't Let a Spoonbill in the Kitchen* (Oliver, 2013), the first double page spread has limited text—the seven words of the title—and a lush image that bleeds off the page edges showing three spoonbills around a kitchen table, one with a white chef's hat, all splattered with pink goop and shiny red balls. One bird has its beak in a bowl of smooth pink paste, the bowl tipping precariously and pink matter slipping over the edge. On the table is a spilt bottle of milk, fluted cupcake papers, a broken raw egg, small mounds of flour, a few cupcakes on their side, a scattering of red balls, a tipped over shaker of sprinkles and lots of blobs of pink. The pink mess even extends to the fridge door in the background. The humour and playfulness of this scene relies to a large degree on the viewer understanding that the red balls are glacé cherries and that the pink gloop that dominates the page represents sweet icing for the cupcakes and is not just some random, brightly coloured, slimy matter. In this way, an illustration of a sweet treat on a page draws on the reader's sense memory of taste, and perhaps smell and touch, to communicate the value of the item. The flat image on the page, of course, has no taste or smell or texture relating to pink icing; necessarily, it is the *idea* of taste, smell and texture that is employed by writers and illustrators to create an affective dimension. Carolyn Korsmeyer and David Sutton refer to this as “synaesthetic exchange among the senses,” explaining that: “Simply reading a description of a meal can make your mouth water; a cleverly-painted image of food can prompt a thought of its taste” (Korsmeyer and Sutton, 2011: 465).

I would argue that this call on sense memories, embedded in social and cultural contexts, is central to the ways in which food references in picture books communicate meaning and value, supporting the claim by Laura Marks that: “The educability of the proximal (indeed all) senses indicates that they can be means of communication, and thus of knowledge and aesthetics” (2008: 126). Pink-iced cupcakes, for example, may be associated with parties and special occasions, and the sense memory of sweetness may be inextricably linked with pleasurable feelings of being with family in a celebratory environment. This is brought to the fore in the use of food metaphors and similes. For example, in *The Very Hungry Bear*, Nick Bland (2012) uses food imagery linked directly with taste. To explain to the reader a polar bear's appetite for fish he writes: “Now a fish to a bear is like a chocolate éclair, it's incredibly hard to resist.”

¹ There is no illustration of an éclair on the page, with the writer relying in part on a reader’s prior knowledge of the dessert to understand the simile. Many young readers would not be cognisant of an éclair’s shape and texture by name alone, although the reference to chocolate is likely to provide an indicator as to the taste, and they could ask an older reader. There are other elements on the page that coalesce to communicate the value of the food item: the fun of the rhyme, the large smile on the bear’s face, and the story so far which shows that the bear clearly likes fish, so chocolate éclairs must be similarly desirable.

Taste, however, is not the only sense that is referred to when sweet foods are used as similes. In Bob Graham’s *Dimity Dumpty* (2006), the title character’s flute playing, widely admired by her circus peers, is described with a hint of synaesthesia: “The music slips under doorways, through skylights and windows ... as surely and pleasantly as the smell of hot chocolate.” In another sound-related image, Herman hears “wonderful” singing on his way home from work in Gus Gordon’s *Herman and Rosie*. The smile on his face in the illustration is augmented by the text: “It made him feel like he had eaten honey straight from the jar” (Gordon, 2012). In these examples, the pleasurable affect implied by the sensory food reference is made explicit through statement: the taste of a chocolate éclair is “hard to resist,” the smell of hot chocolate is “pleasant,” eating honey straight from the jar is “wonderful.”

Sometimes the value of the food referenced is less straight forward. For example, Santa’s “round bulging belly” in *An Aussie Night Before Christmas* “shook when he moved like a plate full of jelly” (Morrison and Niland, 2005). Santa, an iconic character associated with the excitement and treats of Christmas, is described with reference to a sweet food commonly associated with celebration and children’s parties in Australia. In this case, it is the textural properties of jelly that is being conjured in the simile, rather than the taste, although I would suggest that the simile would not have the same effect if a savoury jelly was specifically referenced. A child more familiar with aspic than sweet jelly would still be able to picture the wobbly belly in their mind, but the simile would lose some of its resonance. Personality can also be given shape and form with a food reference: the loveable and harmless title character of *Fearless* is a bulldog described as being “as soft as custard” (Thompson and Davis, 2009). This is quite a sophisticated image relying on the reader understanding that the

simile is not meant to imply the character is literally soft, but has a kind heart, and temperamentally is as sweet, or as innocent, as custard, rendering his name ironic.

In *Where does Thursday go?* Splodge’s attempt to answer the title’s question leads him to attribute physical substance to a period of time by describing Thursday as “big and round, like my birthday cake” (Brian and King, 2001). It is an arbitrary pairing of time with shape, yet the sensory association with the sweet, iconic marker of birthday celebrations conveys delight and pleasure. The notion that foods have abstract associations can also be seen in *Bear and Chook by the Sea*. The story opens with Bear and Chook fast asleep “when a breeze came sniffing and licking.” Bear wakes up and declares, “that wind is as warm as honey toast ... That’s a holiday breeze” (Shanahan and Quay, 2009). It is another synaesthetic image, invoking taste as well as texture to describe air temperature. It draws on the centrality of food in young children’s lives and their likely familiarity with honey toast. The image not only conjures the temperature of the air, but grants that temperature allure through the association with both sweet food and holidays. This link between warm honey toast and something desirable is returned to later in the story in a more concrete way. Bear tries to surf a wave and is tossed and tumbled to shore, leaving him distressed. When he and Chook return home, Chook makes Bear warm honey toast; it is an act of friendship and comfort. The illustration shows Bear draped in a towel, his head turned towards Chook who offers him a large plate of golden toast. The characters are backlit by a warm yellow glow of light coming through the trees. The honey toast will surely make Bear feel better. This scene produces and reproduces the convention of comfort foods being sweet.

While the notion of sweet foods being desirable, alluring, celebratory and comforting may not be considered exceptional, in the picture books studied, sugary treats are *always* framed this way, and are strongly aligned with the normalised white, middle-class characters that dominate the Australian picture book world. The frequency of these depictions in the corpus indicates that readers are more likely to see characters consume sweet foods than any other type of food, and in quite a few titles these are the only foods referenced. Sweet food is not only indicative of “yummy-ness” because of its taste, it is also, I would contend, a signification of “good-ness.” Sweet food is good for social connection, appearing regularly in snack and afternoon tea scenes with family and friends; good to look at, in terms of the visual appeal of the line, shape, colour and design of foods such as cupcakes on the page;

good for intergenerational connection, with repeated depictions of maternal figures offering sweet foods to children; and good to think about, with characters dreaming of, conjuring and imagining sugary treats, as will be explored in the next section. The variety of ways in which sweet foods are positioned as desirable or “good” reinforces the normalisation of sweet foods as the food of choice, at least for white characters. This normalisation and framing of value of sugar-rich foods may be seen as problematic by advocates of orthodox ‘healthy’ eating agendas who recommend that Australians adjust their eating patterns in a number of ways, including curtailing the intake of high-sugar foods, in order to help reduce a range of diet-related illnesses including type 2 diabetes and obesity (NHMRC, 2013: 1).

Whether a reader identifies with a character or not—whether the character is positioned as hero or anti-hero—the framing of a character in terms of their relationships with food presents potential ways of constructing a sense of self. Perry Nodelman observes that, “Whether their producers are aware of it or not, texts always operate in various deliberate and non-deliberate ways to give readers ideas about themselves and their needs and desires” (2008: 90). The notion that book creators may not be aware of how their work teaches ideas about identity highlights the capacity of picture books to be *unintentionally* pedagogical. This is brought to the fore when considering how food tastes and distastes are presented on the page.

Cultural constructions of taste

Food tastes and distastes are multidimensional: they have a cultural dimension, with one’s culture understood to be the major determinant of food choice (Rozin, 1997); a physical dimension, with different food types eliciting certain sensations and responses in the body; a moral dimension, with preferences being converted into values such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Rozin, 1999); and they have a class dimension with an individual’s socio-economic status and related educational status shaping the development of preferences, including food preferences (Bourdieu, 1984). This complex of aspects makes a list of likes and dislikes a common device in fictive stories for introducing a character to a reader or viewer. Such a list has the potential to communicate concisely much about the character’s identity: their ethnicity, their individuality, their morality and their social class. This device relies to a large degree on the readers and writers sharing the same cultural codes. In the context of picture

books, these preferences must be meaningful, or at least understandable, to children as well as adults, and perhaps this is why food often appears on these lists. Food, after all, is central to daily routines, and food-related practices constitute one of the key ways in which adults communicate a wide range of social, cultural and behavioural norms. It is notable that in the corpus under study, expressed food preferences are largely the domain of characters of non-marked ethnicity, or anthropomorphised animals.

In *Herman and Rosie*, we are introduced to Herman thus: “He liked pot plants, playing the oboe, wild boysenberry yoghurt, the smell of hotdogs in the winter and watching films about the ocean” (Gordon, 2012). On the opposite page we are told Rosie “liked pancakes, listening to old jazz records, the summertime subway breeze, toffees that stuck to her teeth, singing on the fire escape ... and watching films about the ocean” (ellipsis in original). These lists tell a sophisticated reader much about the idiosyncratic life experiences and aspirations of the characters, not just their preferences. The characters’ ‘likes’ are necessarily framed as desirable. In terms of food, both Herman and Rosie like items rich in sugar—sweet-flavoured yoghurt and toffee—with Herman also fond of the “smell” of hotdogs.

Many readers would be able to relate to this type of food preference even when, in this case, these tastes belong to an anthropomorphised adult crocodile and an adult doe. Having characters express a preference for sweet foods is one of the more direct ways in which these foods are valued as pleasurable. In Aaron Blabey’s *Sunday Chutney* (2008), the title character tells the reader about herself through the course of the book. Crumpets are on the list of things Sunday likes, along with breakfast and drum solos, marine biology and worthy causes. There is an image of a smiling Sunday, eyes closed, pressing food into her mouth, and a jar of honey in front of two towering stacks of crumpets. Fragments of food seem to be floating in the air around her head, as if in her eating frenzy she can’t fit all the delicious crumbs in her mouth.

Similarly, a character’s dislikes can load an adverse value onto an item. Sunday’s list of things she doesn’t like includes creamed corn (as well as sand in her swimmers, long dinner engagements, the first lunchtime at a new school and her lazy eye). An image shows Sunday, with a furrowed brow, pointing to a plate she is holding, a lumpy yellow mass sliding off the edge. Bits of corn explode from her wide open mouth in a violent expulsion

from the body as if the food was dangerous to consume. This is not just dislike, but disgust, which is understood by sociologists as the most powerful reaction people have to food (Rozin, 1997: 32), and as opposed to distaste, is usually applied to things considered non-food. Certainly Sunday’s physical reaction to the creamed corn as shown in the illustration indicates she finds the foodstuff is inedible.

In *Millie* (Marsden and Rippin, 2002), the title character’s food tastes are not explicitly listed but implied by her actions. The story opens with a dinner scene and Millie shows her distaste for vegetables by surreptitiously feeding them to the dog under the table, fooling her parents into thinking she’s eaten them herself. This food choice is juxtaposed later in the story with Millie climbing the kitchen shelves to reach the cookie jar that has, one assumes, purposefully been placed out of reach.

The book creators of both *Millie* and *Sunday Chutney* may well intend to be innocently playful, perhaps relying on the reader’s understanding that the real world doesn’t necessarily work in the same way as the picture book world; readers can enter into these partly anarchic, inverted worlds knowing they can emerge safely, enjoying the carnivalesque moment without confusing it with reality. While it may be that some children dislike vegetables cooked and presented certain ways, the framing of vegetables as objectionable would seem to be a somewhat out-dated viewpoint in the light of campaigns for ‘healthy’ eating aimed at young children in Australia promoting the eating of vegetables (such as Crunch&Sip). It is true, of course, that Sunday’s expressed food aversion, like Millie’s, exists in the fictional world, one purposefully different to the real world, however, I would argue that these title characters are positioned as models for ways of being and potentially influence a reader’s own preferences. Jane Goldman and Lara Descartes point to social learning theory to explain how the symbolic world depicted in picture books “may affect children’s perceptions about foods through normalising the foods that are depicted and through modelling attitudes and emotions associated with various food choices” (2015: 204).

The association of food choice with food value is enhanced when the foods are correlated with a sense of wellbeing and identity, as happens in several titles. At one stage in *Herman and Rosie* both characters lose their jobs and their *joie de vivre*. In response, each character

turns to food to console themselves. Herman munches on pretzels, though this doesn't lift him out of his despondency, and Rosie makes way more pancakes than she could possibly eat, though notably, “This didn't make her feel any better” (Gordon, 2012). Although pancakes are one of the foods Rosie likes, the intimation here is that she is somehow not herself. Weeks pass before Herman and Rosie independently wake one morning with a sense that all is okay again. There is no obvious reason for this abrupt change in mood and rather than name the changed affect, the shift in disposition is explained as a renewed appetite for their preferred foods: “Then one morning something was different. Rosie woke suddenly—she needed toffee that stuck to her teeth! Herman woke suddenly—he had a craving for wild boysenberry yoghurt!” (ibid). A restored desire to engage in the world is signified by a craving for desired, sweet foods. The characters aren't shown consuming these foods, rather they are shown in separate images to each be sitting up in bed with a somewhat shocked look on their faces. The characters' appetite for life has returned; through the act of thinking about their desired foods they have regained their sense of self.

Herman and Rosie remind us that how we think about food shapes our relationships to what we eat. Before something is considered good to eat, it must be good to think about (Mintz, 1985: 8). While the very act of reading a picture book (or any book) invites the reader to ‘think’ about what is represented on the page, a particularly potent way of communicating how to think about food is offered to readers through the representations of characters imagining and dreaming of food. Some texts quite explicitly apply judgements of good or bad to ways in which food is imagined. For example, to return to *Sunday Chutney* (Blabey), the title character promotes her ability to conjure a scene that includes pink-iced cupcakes as a mark of her imaginative powers. In the top half of the illustration we see Sunday sitting at the head of a long, bare table on her own, smiling with eyes closed. The text reads, “I enjoy my own company ...” with the ellipsis drawing the reader to the bottom half of the page. Here, Sunday, with eyes open, is sitting in a plush pink chair with company. On the end of the table is a three-tiered cake stand scattered with iced cupcakes with cherries on top. Next to the cupcakes sits the text “and I have an excellent imagination.” While pre-literate readers may not understand the intertextual reference to the top-hatted figure and rabbit seated at the table, they would certainly understand that the cupcakes have added an element of appeal to the scene, and the notion that conjuring sweet foods is evidence of having an excellent imagination.

The suggestion that if a character is going to imagine food, they will imagine sweet food is repeated in other titles. In *Lizzie Nonsense*, set in the nineteenth century on a remote bush lot, the young title character fantasises about food as an escape from her harsh reality: “‘Tonight,’ says Lizzie, ‘we will eat peaches, and cream, and little sweet cakes.’ ‘Such nonsense!’ says her mama. ‘We are having turnips as usual.’” (Ormerod, 2004). Other examples are the children in *An Aussie Night Before Christmas* (Morrison and Niland, 2005) who are snuggled up in bed, “While dreams of pavlova danced ‘round in our heads”; envisaged cakes and jellies accompanying tea with the angels in *What the Sky Knows* (Bourke and Danalis, 2005); and the imagined transformation of food waste into a sumptuous feast featuring layered cakes, iced cupcakes, fresh fruit and cheese in *A Rat in a Stripy Sock* (Watts and Francis, 2010). All these texts rely on the readers sharing the book creators’ understanding that sugar-rich treats evoke pleasure, and that either the ingestion of sweet foods or the context in which such foods are eaten are enjoyable experiences.

In Chris McKimmie’s *Two Peas in a Pod* (2010), the idea that it is good to be able to think about sweet foods is heightened by a devaluing of thinking about vegetables. Here the story concerns food as metaphor rather than edible product, suggesting how deeply embedded these values can be. *Two Peas in a Pod* is a story about friendship and the loss felt by the narrator, Marvin, when his best friend Violet moves away. The first double-page spread introduces the relationship between the children as being as close as “two peas in a pod.” In the third spread Violet and Marvin are lying on the grass in the park looking up at the clouds and naming what they can see. This is introduced as something they do every time they go to the park. Violet says, “I can see cottonwool castles and marshmallow kingdoms” and asks Marvin what he can see. He responds, “All I can see are cauliflowers.” The hint of judgement in Marvin’s narration with the use of “All I can see” (my emphasis) implies that cauliflowers are not as good as cottonwool castles and marshmallow kingdoms to envisage in the clouds, and are indicative of an imaginative deficit.

About half way through the narrative Violet moves to another city and Marvin experiences a deep sense of loss. Months later his mother buys him a plane ticket to go and visit Violet, and they re-establish their connection by once again happily watching the clouds. Violet asks, “can you still only see cauliflowers in the clouds?” to which Marvin replies, “No ... I can see sailing ships, woolly elephants, marshmallow dinosaurs, ice-cream pillows and ...”

He is cut off by Violet, who responds, “OK ... OK” in acknowledgement, and, one can assume, approval. The illustration on this spread, and on the pages where the characters first look at the clouds, adopts an aerial point of view so that the reader is looking down on the characters. Perspective is bent so that the reader also sees loose-lined clouds along the top of the page shaped as uneven blobs. There is no visual hint of the items named by the children in these shapes, confirming that their conceptions reveal subjective thinking rather than objective physical shapes.

The cloud game figures as a symbol of the close connection between the characters, a mark of their friendship. It is a symbol of constancy amidst change, and yet there is change within the game as Marvin’s responses come in line with Violet’s. Everything is okay now that the two of them are able to play their familiar games and now that Marvin is seeing the same sort of things in the clouds as Violet. The scene implies that it is better to have a sweet-filled imagination than one populated by brassicas. Furthermore, *Two Peas in a Pod* suggests that how a character *thinks* about food has the potential to shape relationships by contributing to how that character is regarded by others. It presents an example of how picture books teach ways of imagining the self and ways of valuing food.

Conclusion

Food can be understood as a language used by book creators to communicate cultural values about food choice: which foods are good to eat, and which foods are good to think about. Central to the conveyance of these values is an appeal to the senses, particularly taste and smell, to inform meaning-making. The examples referred to in this paper show that the visual and textual language of food, even when incidental, not only presents ways to think about our relationships with food, but also works pedagogically to express ideas of gender, ethnicity and class. Picture books, therefore, offer an insight into embedded conventions and imagined worlds, with recurring incidental representations signalling assumed norms.

Pat Caplan et al suggest in their discussion of the social and cultural contexts of food choice that one of the tasks of the social sciences is “to reveal patterns and meanings which are often hidden, and to articulate the manner in which they may influence everyday behaviour surrounding food” (1998: 172). This paper shares the intent of revealing patterns and

meanings that may be concealed. However, rather than exposing how picture books may influence everyday behaviour, I aim to contribute to an understanding of what we are feeding the imagination of readers. This is an area of investigation rich with possibilities

Endnotes

¹ Standard 32-page picture books don't use page numbers, and thus quoted text is unpaginated.

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