When we examine a picture book critically, we need to consider two threads of analysis at the same time. How does the author create an interesting story? And how do the illustrations serve that story and engage the reader/viewer? We rely on the traditional literary elements of character, plot, setting, theme, and style, but we look at them through the lens of words and images. In addition, we want to keep in mind our audience and our sense of what is appealing and appropriate for children at various ages and stages. Is this picture book designed for the youngest child to listen to? Or for an older child to enjoy the sophisticated art or complicated structure or mature content? In the classic text, *Children and Books*, Zena Sutherland (2004), a highly respected critic of children's literature, suggested that well-written and well-conceived picture books and their illustrations should also build an appreciation of beauty and aesthetics, open up interpretation and imagination, and encourage the child to actively participate in the story. As you read, study, and examine picture books, consider the following elements: characters, plot, setting, theme, style, illustrations, and cultural markers. Compare what you read and see in the books with these criteria. You will soon see that picture books are far more than "cute" (my pet peeve word), and that the best ones are works of art in every sense of the word.

**Characters**

The characters in picture books may be teddy bears, talking cars, or tiny tots, but they should be convincing and credible with personalities that emerge as interesting and distinctive. (That's why so many of them are effective as
The setting of a picture book is often established more through the visuals than through the text. Where does the story take place? Look at the pictures for clues to the time and place. Often the setting is a generalized modern community and is not critical to the story. But sometimes the time or place is an integral element for the story's action or the character's development. For example, in Margaret Wise Brown's famous bedtime book, *Goodnight Moon* (HarperCollins, 1947) the passage of time is the whole construct for the story as the reader says good night to each object in the room. Here the setting is so crucial, it's almost a character in the story. Clement Hurd's images of the cluttered room with the green walls, red carpet, and round rug create a self-contained world for the child to enter. And the room darkens as time passes and the reader says good night to Brown's litany of objects: red balloon, cow jumping over the moon, kittens, mitten, and bowl full of mush. How does the author indicate the time? Does the story transcend the setting and have universal implications? These are questions to ask about how the setting works in a picture book.
Theme

The theme of a picture book is a sticky area for many of us in the field of children's literature. Your average adult wants a children's book to have a strong message or lesson to impart to children, but experts and scholars see this as didacticism. We want to share stories that have meaning to children, but we want that meaning to emerge naturally out of the characters and actions, and not be imposed as a sermon or moral. In fact, kids are generally rather resistant to sermonizing and enjoy stories for their own sakes. Deeper meanings are gleaned subtly, implicitly, through understanding how the world works, how people behave, and how stories reveal those truths. What is the theme of Goodnight Moon, for example? Does the story have a theme? Is it an opportunity for a child to find comfort in the familiar before night comes? Why has this story lasted for over 50 years? In our critical analysis of picture books we look for thematic value, for meaningfulness, for satisfying closure, and we're leery of messages that moralize or overpower the story itself.

Style

The element of style reveals itself in both the language of the author and the artistry of the illustrator in the world of picture books. It's how you recognize a book is by Brian Pinkney, for example, as opposed to Brian Selznick (for either writing or illustrating). How does the author use language? Create a mood? Tell the story? Are repetitive patterns used? Is there dialogue? If so, is it suited to the characters in the story?

In A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature (2006), Rebecca Lukens recommends looking at an author's use of "devices of style" such as imagery, hyperbole, understatement, symbolism, puns and wordplay, figurative language (personification, simile, metaphors, etc.), and features of sound (such as onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm). And in From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books, Kathleen Horning reminds us that it's "how an author says something as opposed to what he or she says" (1997, p. 195). She invites us to consider whether the "pages seem to turn in the right places" or "does the text flow naturally when you read it aloud?" (p. 99). How does the author (and the illustrator) use all the other literary elements (character, plot, setting, and theme) to create a story in a voice that is his or her own? Look for the attributes that characterize a unique storytelling stamp—that's style.

Illustrations

Be sure to look as closely at the illustrations as you do at the writing. How the illustrations create or complement the story is also an essential part of the evaluation of a picture book, of course. Children's literature expert, Zena Sutherland (2004) believed that the illustrations in a picture book should have storytelling qualities, a style of art that is appropriate to the story, and reflect warmth and vitality either through rich and harmonious color or appropriate
use of monochrome. The illustrations help create the mood of the story, as well as the pacing and tension from page to page. How do the illustrations relate to the words of the story? Horning (1997) asks, “Do they complement, extend or highlight the text?” “Do they provide crucial details that are not present in the text, but add something to the story?” (pp. 106-107). Even the placement of the words and pictures on the page, the design and layout of the book as a whole, affects the story's impact and the entire reading experience.

This is where it is also helpful to know a bit about the art of book illustration itself; to recognize different styles of art (realistic or abstract) and to understand the different artistic media or techniques (painterly or graphic) that illustrators use to create the pictures of a picture book. Even the language of art comes in handy when we discuss picture book illustrations, so we can refer to the visual elements appropriately including: line, shape, color, texture, and composition. Consider Mo Willems’s strong use of line in his picture books, for example, and contrast that with Peter Sis’s work. You begin to see how the individual artist’s style can have a strong and distinctive impact on the creation of a single picture book.

**Cultural Markers**

It is also important to consider how words and pictures are used to depict culture in children’s picture books, as we seek out the very best to share with young readers. In “Making Informed Choices” (1992), children’s literature scholar and teacher, Rudine Sims Bishop, provides guidelines for the close examination of cultural authenticity in children’s literature. She also reminds us to include a careful consideration of the traditional literary elements in our analysis of each book. Is it a good story? Cultural accuracy may be rather mechanical if the book’s plot does not interest children. For other examples, Reese and Caldwell-Wood (1997) and Slapin and Seale (1998) share their perspectives in relation to Native American children’s books. In combination, these authors and scholars offer helpful criteria to guide the novice critic in the careful consideration of multicultural literature for young people.

When considering cultural authenticity in picture books, be sure to pay close attention to the illustrations, as well as the words or text. Look for accuracy and variety in the depiction or description of some of these cultural markers, including: varied skin tones, facial features, body types, hairstyles/hair textures, clothing, homes, language patterns, dialects, and names and forms of address. Do the illustrations avoid stereotypes or rely on only traditional, rather than modern representations, as if people of color live “long ago” or “far away”? Is there variety even within the culture depicted? Bishop (1992, p. 51) challenges us to “Put yourself in the place of the child reader. Is there anything in the book that would embarrass or offend you if it were written about you or the group you identify with? Would you be willing to share this book with a group of mixed-race children? An all-black or all-white group?”
Sample Review

Let's put all these evaluation criteria into action and consider one review and how it uses these criteria. Here's a sample review of a picture book:


Illustrated as a book within a book that brings readers into every page, Wolves follows a hapless rabbit as he researches the topic of wolves. After checking a book out at the library, the rabbit walks right into the book, and as the pages turn, into more and more trouble. Readers will delight in the rabbit's wide-eyed surprise as he realizes what they already knew—that the rabbit has managed to walk right out onto the wolf's nose, and is about to be dinner. The multimedia illustrations provide visually appealing pages with many different elements, checkout cards from the "West Bucks Public Burrowing Library" and postcards sent to "G. Rabbit" in "Nibbleswick, Great Burrow." Abundant white space provides a more dramatic background for the detailed charcoal drawings of the wolf. For those fearing dead bunny trauma for young readers, an alternate ending is presented wherein the wolf is a vegetarian and the predator and prey share a jam sandwich instead.

By Tammy Korns, for Librarians' Choices. Used with permission.

Notice how this review summarizes the plot of the story, so you have a good sense of what the book is about, but also describes the role of illustration, so you have a feeling for what the book looks like and how the pictures work to help tell the story. The reviewer provides a brief treatment of the key characters in the book ("hapless rabbit" and the wolf) and the dual settings of the library and the wolf story. The theme of this "cautionary tale" is apparent in the "wide-eyed surprise" the rabbit experiences, but includes an alternative image of collaboration, too (sharing a jam sandwich). There's a nod to the author's style and how she clues the reader into knowing more than the rabbit character. The review addresses several aspects of how the illustrations help create the story from the description of the "book within a book" to how the "multimedia illustrations provide visually appealing pages with many different elements, checkout cards from the 'West Bucks Public Burrowing Library' and postcards sent to 'G. Rabbit' in 'Nibbleswick, Great Burrow.'" Finally, this brief review still manages to address the variable of child appeal from the pull of the book within a book layout to the visual appeal of the multiple media to the two endings for child readers. All of this in less than 200 words, with a balanced discussion of all the major literary criteria, and an inviting approach to describing, discussing, and analyzing this distinctive picture book.

***END REQUIRED READING HERE***

Enjoying Children's Book Art

For a fascinating look at the process one illustrator, Petra Mathers, used to create one picture book, Kisses from Rosa, visit Project Eclipse (http://eclipse.