

ChLAQ Forum

The Books that Print Bred: The Materiality of Picture Books

Joseph T. Thomas, Jr., Charles Hatfield, and Michael Heyman

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In his seminal essay “Projective/Verse,” Charles Olson rails against “that verse which print bred” (386). Though Olson offers an alternative to this cold, impersonal, and musically dead verse, his alternative—projective verse—does not forget the written word, just as it does not forget sound, for projective verse is, Olson insists, rooted in “the breathing of a man who writes” (386). No doubt picture books have their roots in print, Comenius’s lovely *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658) providing a model for the intersection of image and word that has yet to be completely shaken. This group of essays concerns the books that print bred, from the earliest and most elastic and enduring picture book form, the alphabet book, to what Charles Hatfield calls the “dense, encyclopedic texts” Alike has been producing over the last forty years. In this trio of papers, we examine the materiality of these texts, and how that materiality dictates form.

The group begins with Joseph Thomas’s experimental essay, which explores the didactic roots of the alphabet book, from the earliest forms of alphabet poetry to the “postmodern” alphabets of the twentieth century. Thomas investigates the various ways children’s and experimental authors use the alphabet as a procedure for creating both narrative and non-narrative texts, and how many of these texts remind us of the alphabet’s materiality, the didactic impulse bubbling up even in the most avant-garde of alphabetic texts.

Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. is a poet and scholar. He lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches children’s literature, contemporary poetry, and other courses at California State University, Northridge. **Charles Hatfield** is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Northridge, where he teaches courses in children’s literature, image/text studies, and comics. His book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* will be published by the University Press of Mississippi in summer 2005. He currently serves as Chair of the annual International Comic Arts Festival and on the editorial board of *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. **Michael Heyman** is an associate professor of English at Berklee College of Music, where he teaches nonsense and children’s literature, among other things. He has published in the ChLAQ and *The Five Owls* and is the head editor of *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense*, forthcoming from Penguin (India).

Next, in “Narrative vs. Non-narrative Demands, or, Comic Art and Fragmentation in Alikì’s *How a Book is Made*,” Charles Hatfield deals more broadly with issues of narrative, image, and text. Hatfield reads Alikì’s *How a Book is Made*, an elaborately designed primer on book-making. Eschewing conventional narrative, Alikì’s text, like those of many alphabet books, constantly reminds readers that they are holding a made object, one employing multiple type-faces—hand-lettered and typeset—even as it incorporates semiotic codes from a variety of print domains.

The last paper is Michael Heyman’s “The Performative Letter, from Medieval to Modern,” which historicizes performative and constative conceptions of the alphabet, arguing that, historically, these models developed alongside one another. Heyman reads nineteenth-century poet Edward Lear as subverting both of these models well before the postmodern alphabets discussed in Karen Coats’s award-winning essay “P is for Patriarchy.”

Work Cited

Olson, Charles. “Projective Verse.” *The New American Poetry*. Ed. Donald Allen. New York: Grove, 1960. 386–97.