How do picture books use the perspective of the narrator to explore themes or social issues? Anthony Browne’s *Zoo*, although appearing to be the story of a family’s day out, uses the child narrator’s voice to examine issues relating to power and the impact of the gaze. *The House of Narcissus* uses a Venetian setting to retell a classical myth: mired in its own egocentricity, an ostentatious mansion crumbles and falls into its own reflection as a stray cat narrates its downfall. Both texts are rich visual sources for students to examine when exploring the impact of a subjective narrator’s point of view.

In Browne’s *Zoo* and Wild and Harris’s *The House of Narcissus*, text and image complement and occasionally contradict one another to explore the protagonist’s shifting perspective. In particular, *Zoo* questions the barrier between humans and animals, provocatively suggesting that it may be an artificial one and that animals may not be the Other for humans to cast their gaze upon. Patterns of light and darkness in *The House of Narcissus* relate to power, with high and low angle shots in both texts used to explore literal point of view. Figurative point of view and the ideological stance of the author are examined through key demand and offer images as well as by the alternative viewpoints presented in the text and the visuals. Both texts are concerned with the importance of the gaze, and this focus is emphasised through a variety of objective and subjective images.

Point of view is exercised in *Zoo* through the way that the animals are simultaneously perceived as the Other and as a heightened vision of the Self. Images of humans with gorilla-like features and animalistic features are essentially subversive as the narrator filters his impressions through his subconscious observation of the similarities between his family’s behaviour and that of the creatures they gaze upon. Animals such as the elephant are Others through the barrier that separates them from the humans, and through the focus in the text on the act of gazing. ‘All these boring animals’ are viewed contemptuously by the child narrator due to their failure to provide the entertainment and consumer satisfaction that he requires. The elephant’s eyes are deliberately blocked out by the bars of the cage, which are symbolic of the human restraints that have stripped the animal of its personality and reduced it to an object to be stared at. The elephant avoids the narrator’s gaze and is shown in a subjective image, where the lack of any clear demand or offer images (Kress and van Leeuwen 121) is symptomatic of the absence of its perspective. Despite the text about “stuffing its face”, the elephant is depicted in a solitary setting, surrounded by its own mess with no food in sight as the narrator’s textual point of view is undermined by the image. Ironically, the salient image in the portrait of the elephant is the roof, creating an atmosphere of enclosure and seclusion from the natural world. Whilst the reading path then moves down to the elephant, this animal is ironically positioned as small and powerless within the image. Patterns of shadows make the elephant look hemmed in, mired in the shadows, and overpowered by the lights coming down. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (33-34) emphasis on ‘the semiotic landscape’ is a reminder of the social and cultural dimensions of visual symbols, and the importance of eyes in *Zoo* reflects its concern with point of view.

In relation to perspective, the elephant is a salient example of the gaps and silences that Browne seeks to explore in *Zoo*. The discrepancies between text and image alert the reader to the narrator’s judgemental and egocentric attitude, representing the elephant in a non-naturalistic fashion as an undersized and vulnerable object. Similarly, the reader of *Zoo* is presented with the contrast between the smaller portraits of the family (reminiscent of mug shots, with the framing suggesting that this is an archetypal ‘nuclear’ family), and the black borders to the larger pictures of the animals. With a tendency to contain less vectors and thus suggesting a photograph frame, these portraits show animals who are often overpowered by their setting and lack a gaze, unable to communicate with the narrator. This thus emphasises the narrator’s point of view and his inability to empathise with the animals. Nikojaleva and Scott (117) distinguish between the literal point of view and the figurative point of view that seeks to convey an ideology, and *Zoo* explores both its narrator’s perspective and Browne’s reflections about the capitalist nature of the zoo as a spectacle.

Literal point of view can also be explored by what is absent or sidelined within an image. Whilst the house of Narcissus at first creates shadows and...
observes the people through darkness, it is cloaked in a darkness that it cannot control after the arrival of the boats. By the use of unusual oblique angles, Harris positions the boats and the people at the centre of each visual, looking down on the house. The cracks in the walls represent the increasing loss of certainty, and the ominous light shining through the window in the middle of the hall shows the exterior world of Venice and how it impacts upon the interior world of the house’s fading grandeur. The mentions of light and people show that the shadows the house originally used to intimidate and expel its residents have become its own nightmare, as the house has become saturated by its own tenacity and independence. In Zoo, low-angle shots are also used to explore the narrator’s point of view. The looming, demonic figure of the father framed by trees and juxtaposed with the textual statement ‘because I say so’ is ominous and reflects the child’s physical view of a taller individual. The clouds that form devil’s horns frame the father’s face, suggesting the narrator’s childlike challenge to his father’s authority and surveillance.

Issues relating to point of view are examined through an emphasis on the gaze in Zoo. As focalised through the narrator in a non-naturalistic style that emphasises its isolation, the orang-utan is obscured by its hair and uses its natural features to hide away from the culture of the zoo. Crouched in a corner, the narrator’s judgemental tone of ‘miserable thing’ is contradicted by the visual poignancy of its retreat from the visitors. The invisible barrier that is suggested in the opposing visuals of the audience and the zoo inmate makes the orang-utan look like a trapped prisoner, pitilessly gazed upon by an eclectic group of people whose children are portrayed as miniature versions of the adults.

The camera in the picture of the human audience represents the eye and the lens is shown as a searching eye amidst a background of monkey-like children, thus making the narrator’s criticism of the ape even more biting. Whilst the narrator’s vision is coloured by his outrage at the lack of response from the animals, his mother provides an opposing perspective that barely penetrates his essentially fixed point of view. However, it is clear by the end of the book that his view has been challenged when he dreams of being in a similar position to the animal. The final picture is the only one where he completely evades the reader’s gaze (in comparison to the many offering pictures early in the book). His body language epitomises his sense of shame and intimidation, reminiscent of the animals that shrink from the public glare.

The narrator is able to take on an intersubjective point of view when he dreams of the shadows of bars encasing him in a world that is barren, stark and hemmed in by cages. This does not delineate a shift in his conscious attitudes, but rather the ability to focalise an alternative reality that reflects his mother’s subtle but insidious opinions. Nikolajeva and Scott argue that picture books contain both an authorial point of view and the characters’ points of view, proposing that these two perspectives are often opposing. The reader of Zoo is consistently encouraged to see the parallels with animals, since the narrator’s point of view is marked by a restlessness that borders on casual savagery, and the motif of cages frames the narrative. Is the narrator metaphorically caged in by his limited perspective and his unconscious acquiescence to the values his father perpetuates, or does Browne’s authorial voice lead to his deliberate use of images to appropriate and subvert the narrator’s words?

By way of contrast, The House of Narcissus contains a narrative where the protagonist overcomes egocentricity to achieve community. Issues pertaining to the impact of the gaze are central to Harris and Wild’s text. Hampered by its traditional splendour, the house stares at its occupants and gazes upon its own reflection whilst being unwilling to reflect on the reasons behind its arrogant disdain. High-angle shots looking down on the people are emphasised through the images in the frescoes whose eyes represent the haughty scrutiny that the house extends towards the people. The omnipresent third-person narrator instantly condemns the house as ‘hard and cold and proud’, and the point of view shown in the visuals is that of the terrified populace who flee from its haunting scrutiny. Lighting is pivotal in the text as the shadowy human figures are swallowed up by the house, and the darkness indicates their lack of power to penetrate it. The people have settled within the house rather than owning it and the shadows they cast are larger than them because the house wishes to cast them out. As a protagonist, the house is singularly unsympathetic, and its perspective is represented by imposing long shots where the clear Venetian water is obscured by the decadent yet malevolent shadows of the building. The reader is told that the house ‘stared
only at itself’, and this statement is juxtaposed with the actions of people ‘laughing, quarrelling, working and living’, thus emphasising the stagnant and listless nature of the house.

Unlike Zoo, where the unreliable narrator’s account is suggested through objective images and offer images of the oppressed animals, The House of Narcissus contains highly subjective images that encourage the viewer to feel alienated from the house through the use of high-angle shots that emphasise its power. In the final visual, the perspective eventually shifts to outside the house, using the house to frame the scene rather than dominate it. The salient images of the cat and the water show a return to nature rather than the artifice of the frescoes. Vectors created by the birds in flight show an atmosphere of freedom and relief at a decision based around kindness. The cat’s gaze makes him the subject of demand images as he is depicted in the foreground as the salient image, imploring the reader to engage with him in contrast to the walls of the house in the background. Although the cat is initially silent and the text does not immediately declare his viewpoint, he is obviously positioned as an alternative point of view which will react to the house’s gradual demise. Stating that ‘there is nothing to be done’, the cat is never hostile or oppositional, but rather represents the life that the house has excluded.

The cover page, repeated in the book, changes the point of view for the first time and enables the cat to gain primacy in the story. The eyes from the frescoes in the wall still gaze down, but some eyes are averted and the angle is low as the reader’s gaze is drawn to the cat’s eyes. Images of the cat sometimes join the text on the opposite page, unlike any other element in the story: he is thus linked to the story, even whilst being initially silent. The threads of the story are drawn together with the house learning the error of its ways, repenting and making amends: it is thus about the alteration of a point of view, looking outwards from the self towards welcoming the Other in much the same way that Zoo involves different points of view being presented and initially rejected.

Zoo and The House of Narcissus are fruitful sources for an examination of point of view. The contrast between humans and animals, or between a personified house and its inhabitants, provide the composers with a means of exploring issues related to individual perspectives and differences in values and attitudes. The sadly maligned animals in Zoo are both the objects of scrutiny and a metaphor for the behaviour of the humans who appraise their gaze. The House of Narcissus examines themes related to arrogance and the importance of seeing beyond aesthetics. Both texts are concerned with how their characters view the world, and the narrator’s perspective is explored through the diverging messages presented in the visuals and the text. Suggesting opposing perspectives, the visuals hint at the suppressed underlayers and alternative visions in the text. Picture books are able to simultaneously present readers with an authorial point of view and the perspective of a deluded or naive protagonist or narrator.

Bibliography


