The English Years 7 – 10 syllabus says that visual literacy is ‘The ability to decode, interpret, create, question, challenge and evaluate texts that communicate with visual images as well as, or rather than, words.’ (p. 71) In a world that seems to be increasingly infused with the visual, it is imperative that visual texts constitute a portion of our pedagogical program.

Contemporary picture books are complex texts as they amalgamate both illustrative and written voices. There has been a tendency to stereotype picture books as belonging solely to the world of children. However, such a notion neglects the inherent complexity of interplay between written and illustrative as well as the ideologies perpetuated by both illustrator and author. Some theorists are starting to view the picture book in a completely new way, dubbing the medium as a supergenre due to this relationship (Lewis in Anstey & Bull 2000:4). This is compounded by the gaps or fragments that occur within texts. As readers we construct readings or interpretations by making connections between these fragments. Thus all texts can be viewed as polysemic.

A chief agenda I have when teaching picture books is to infuse the importance of reading not only into this generation of students, but also to advantage and model reading to the next generation. The rewards are prolific. McCormick (2007:46-47) states:

‘Some home factors correlated with high achievement include:

1. preschool experiences with books
2. parents’ interest in reading themselves, thus providing a model for children
3. high-quality parental verbal interactions with the child
4. provision of space and opportunity for the child to read

Some home factors correlated with lower achievement also have been shown:

1. fewer books in the home
2. children less frequently read to by parents
3. unstructured lifestyles regarding home activities such as bedtime, television viewing and others.’

Thus it can be seen that developing a reading culture at home has links with higher achievement at school as well as hopefully fostering a love of reading within children. As children become familiar with books, develop relationships with others through reading, observe their parents reading etc., then they may start to perceive reading as a worthwhile endeavor and a love of literacy embedded within their lives.

In this unit I have chosen to focus on a selection of Gary Crew’s picture books: Tracks (1992), Gino the Genius (2000), Bright Star (1996) and First Light (1993) although there are many more. Crew is an Australian author who has written novels, short stories and picture books, mainly for teenage and children audiences. He has worked collaboratively with numerous illustrators and currently is lecturing at the University of Sunshine Coast in creative writing.

**Tracks (1992)**

Pre-reading: Whole class discussion/investigative questions: What impact have we had on the environment? What can the environment teach us? What have you discovered whilst being in the environment? Examine Jeanie Baker’s picture books such as Window or Where the Forest Meets the Sea as a way in.

Some elements of Tracks:

- This was the first picture book Crew had published
- It was also one of Gregory Rogers early picture book illustrative efforts
- The sentence length, simple vocabulary, clearly identifiable message / theme all point to an audience of children that are pre-literate
- It was a collaborative process for author and illustrator
- It contains a sub-theme about humankind’s impact on the environment, and also what humankind can learn or appreciate from nature. The later is foregrounded whilst the former is more subtle (see Rogers’ illustrations)
- There is a sense of wonder and irony in the resolution as the most beautiful track is caused by a slug, ‘Ugh! Ugly slimy slug!’
- Crew says the following in interview:

> ‘It is a simplistic, pre-literate interpretation of tracks which we [Crew and Rogers] expand by nuance or interpretation, e.g. man tracks [are shown through the presence of] pollution; and cut down trees become logs in the treehouse. Most people don’t read the visual layers of meaning, [for example] the most beautiful track was made by the ugliest animal, the slug,…those connections are not made unless we point them out, but I don’t think that’s their fault, it’s a prejudice towards that level of book – [they see] nice pictures and animals, not broader interpretations such as the value that we shouldn’t judge by physical beauty’ (Crew in Bull and Anstey 2000)
• Examine the effectiveness of the introduction, e.g., ‘Night. Joel is hunting.’ Discuss the brevity of expression, establishment of significant narrative characteristics such as the who, what and when. However, the tension between the text’s gaps and the role of the reader’s imagination should be discussed: Where does this text take place? Who is Joel? Is Joel the dog, the boy or somebody else? Why and what is Joel hunting? etc. These types of questions could be countered with a discussion on the importance of the imagination during the reading process. Students could spend 30 seconds imagining Joel. How old is he? What does he like? Dislike? Habits? Personality traits? What makes his dialogue, the way he moves, the way he sleeps etc unique to him? etc. A whole class discussion should ensue regarding the differing constructions of the persona Joel and the role of the imagination during reading.

**Gino the Genius (2000)**

Pre-reading: Discussion/
Investigative considerations:
What benefits has science and technology given us? Make a list. If need be, research. Students should catalogue their favourite advances constructing a table of positives, negatives and interesting points. What would they like to see invented in the future? What negative things have science and technology created? Is there a limit to what we can create? Debate: That science is a poor attempt at playing God.

Some teaching strategies:

• Besides the title, cover up the written text on all pages. Ask students to infer (from the illustrations alone) what is happening in the text. Probe with questions such as: how do you know that? What other interpretations could be here? Etc. Have students write down their impressions of the text.

• Read the text and have students compare their initial thoughts to Crew’s text. Discuss the disparities and commonalities between inferences and the actual narrative.

• Explore some written techniques: Exaggeration of the worth of Gino’s inventions. This is progressive e.g. Twice as good, ten times better...to a million times better.

• Explore the Mediterranean caricatures and links to the proper nouns e.g. Gino, Gina and Garibaldi. Further exploration could centre on the alliteration and consonance with such names.

• Explore the repetition used by Gina, use of light bulbs as symbols throughout the illustrative text and use of clichés when things ‘break down’.

• Explore the theme of inventiveness and the limitations thereof. One could also explore a sub-theme created by the illustrator (James Cattell) as he draws upon humanistic enlightenment ideals through the history on invention, culminating in Gino’s amalgamated constructions. Juxtapose these scenes to the ones where Crew focuses on Gina’s dialogue, where she consecutively requests her brother to make her: ‘a tiny brown seed’, ‘a shiny green leaf’, ‘a bright yellow daisy’ etc.

• Lead into an exploration of visual techniques such as colour, line, texture etc. in order to analyse an illustration from one of Crew’s texts thus far:

**An Illustrative Grammar**

Anstey and Bull describe the ways in which illustrators utilise certain visual aspects to position the reader or viewer. The following ‘grammatical’ breakdown of elements are useful for reading the illustrations and understanding how certain elements can seek to create specific moods or feelings within the viewer. The following is a summation from their book, Reading the Visual (2000:180-186):

**COLOUR:** Colour can be used to symbolise or create feelings or atmosphere. Consider the differences of effects between shades of blue to red for example. There are also colour values such as the lightness or darkness (intensity or luminosity). Colours which don’t reflect much light (colours close to black) can be considered to be sombre, whereas ones that reflect a considerable amount of white light are vibrant and thus lively (yellows, reds etc.). Medium also affects the intensity. e.g. watercolours. Furthermore the placement of colours close to each other on the colour wheel tend to create a more harmonious mood whereas diametrically opposed colours create a more disjointed or lively feeling.

**TEXTURE:** Texture can connect senses together i.e. sight and touch. This may invoke feelings within the viewer as they may
empathise or remember a previous encounter with a similar looking texture.

LINE: Use of line can also create moods or feelings within the viewer. Lines may be used to direct the eye of the viewer, guiding it to places of importance. Implied lines also exist through the illustrator’s clever arrangement of objects close together in a line. The following table summarises common interpretations of lines:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Line/Interpretation</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vertical</td>
<td>Creates feelings of seclusion or an absence of movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizontal</td>
<td>Creates tranquil feelings and a lack of conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doorways</td>
<td>Creates feelings of protection and confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Angles</td>
<td>Creates feelings of falsity or unnaturalness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagonals</td>
<td>Creates feelings of unbalance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jagged</td>
<td>Creates angry feelings and devastation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curved</td>
<td>Creates indefinite or unpredictable feelings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SHAPE AND FORM: Shape is the visual outline of the object (the signifier which can be compared to either past signifiers or a signified). Whereas form deals with the boundaries of an object and its proximity to other objects. Depending on the shape and form of an object, various feelings such as isolation or love can be created.

BALANCE: Balance is the implantation of colour, colour value, texture, line, shape and form and how these are realised on the page. Some elements may be given prominence over others which can in turn be interpreted in a variety of ways. Furthermore, balance can be used to refer to the symmetrical arrangement of objects on the page. Depending on the balance of elements on the page feelings or a mood of chaos, harmony or unity, stillness, disorientation etc. can be created.

VECTORALITY: Within the competitive composition of elements contained in a given illustration, the viewer’s attention may be drawn purposefully (using any of the aforementioned elements) to certain focal points. This technique is called vectorality. According to any given sequence, some objects or feelings may be heightened whilst others may be more peripheral. In Western culture, objects placed on the left-hand side are treated as given or known, whereas those placed on the right are new information.

**Bright Star (1996)**

Some teaching strategies / elements:

- Give students the written text of the picture book only. They should create a 32 page thumbnail storyboard of illustrations for a potential product. Emphasise that whilst their sketches will be rough, each page should amount to giving a good overview of the book for feedback for the author and editor.

- Explore Crew’s use of faction (a portmanteau of ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’). Crew has interweaved the fictional life of Alicia with the historical astronomer John Tebutt.

- Have students consider the ‘Star Man’ as prologue. Juxtapose the encyclopedic writing style with the rest of the narrative. What distinguishes these text types? Prediction exercise: what impact do you think this will have on the narrative? Reconsider the title and front cover illustration. What connections can be made?

- Explore the positioning of the reader, i.e. to view everything through the persona’s eyes.

- Examine the representation of gender: what stereotypes are constructed? If so, are women trapped within these stereotypes? Are feminine and masculine values presented equally or differently? What is the prevailing ideology of the contextual society in which the action takes place? Whose experience is valued?

- Explore the prevailing theme of emancipation – on what levels does this occur?

- Trace the following symbols in the text: night, morning, cows, swallows and comets. How effective are they?

- Have students explore some other examples of faction. Some examples are:

  - (Holocaust) Vander Zee, R. & Innocenti, R. *Erika’s Story*.

Students could browse through picture books at a school or local library to see if they can locate any other factional books? How have other authors and illustrators utilised this genre?
First Light (1993)
Pre-reading: write about a time when you were under obligation to do something that you did not want to do OR write about a positive or negative outdoors experience with one of your parents.

Some elements / teaching strategies:

- Explore the theme of resolving the relationship between father and son and also the father allowing the son the liberty to choose his own interests. Explore the role of the unknown terror in drawing father and son together.
- Explore the sub-theme of the environment. Gouldthorpe says:
  ‘...I saw it on another level which was bigger, much more global scale than father and son, in that we ignore what's going on around us at our own peril and that was why I invented the animals and things in the pictures...I saw it as an environmental issue as well as the way we as a human race, we ignore the signs from nature and eventually it comes back and gets us.’

  (Gouldthorpe in Bull & Anstey, 2000)

- Examine some key symbols: time (dawn, night), setting (the sea) and the use of birds. Have students examine illustrations which pertain to these symbols. Juxtapose the earlier pages to the later pages in terms of the atmosphere created through colour, layout, form etc. as the relationship progresses through change, so do the illustrative elements.

- Explore and expose various methods of interpretation: aesthetic, functional and social. Initially have students respond to the text from an aesthetic perspective whereby the emphasis is on the ‘...affective viewpoint of personal response: firstly in the creative act of the illustrator and secondly in the response of the viewer...’ (Anstey and Bull 2000:187). Thus from this perspective one examines the illustrations as a work of art. Similarly, the written text should be considered in this light. Some questions which may assist: What are your first impressions of the text and/or illustrations? What feelings do they evoke? Do they remind you of other works? etc.

- However if we take the functional perspective that ‘...the primary purpose of illustrations in picture books is to assist in the telling of stories.’ (Anstey and Bull 2000:188) then we can examine both texts in light of how the illustrative grammar used enhances the story. Some questions: What techniques are emphasised by the illustrator and author? What effects do these techniques create on meaning? etc.

- The final perspective that should be given credence is the social. As texts are created within and from certain ideologies they may reflect these in the text. Alternatively, all texts may inherit ideological perspectives from society. Some questions:

  What ideologies does the text privilege? Disenfranchise? What are the key issues presented? Are there any sub-themes? etc.

Assessment:
It is one thing to explore a range of picture books but quite another to actually compose one. What follows is a basic outline of the composition process:

1. Students choose what they want to write about (consider message or theme primarily; then characters, plot, setting etc.)
2. Students compose an initial draft. After several people have read it and given feedback students should redraft their story. They should ask themselves: Would I want to read this? i.e. Is this interesting? Am I using language appropriate for my audience? Am I using interesting language? (verbs, figurative language, etc) Is my narrative from a consistent point of view? Have I left gaps for the illustrator? Have I edited any unnecessary bits out?
3. Students plan their layout through storyboard sketches. Or alternatively, they could have a peer illustrate their text. They need to decide on an appropriate medium or a combination of various mediums for illustrations.
4. Students combine illustrations and text in a final draft.
5. If you teach in a K-12 school, have students read their text to a live audience and have them try to generate some discussion.
6. Scholastic books (http://www.scholastic.com.au/common/about/manuscript.asp) have good manuscript guidelines for the especially good ones! I have also shown students Clancy the Courageous Cow by Lachie Hume as a point of inspiration to demonstrate that young students can get their picture books published.

References: