

Abstract

“When Comic Realism is Neither: Representationalism and Exaggeration in Illustrated Novels for Children”

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While many others have considered the role of illustration in fiction, I’d like to investigate the relationship between them based on how each represents reality. There is a parallel between how fictional narrative offers both representationalism and exaggeration and how illustration handles it. While it’s easy to think of illustration being offered on a continuum from photorealism to folk art (degrees of realism), or on a continuum from surrealism to cartoon (degrees of exaggeration), we don’t often discuss the written narrative in the same ways. I am interested in the use of illustration as part of the depiction of realism, but I am particularly focused on the nature of the written narrative as representational by degree or being exaggerated by degree. It becomes more complicated when we consider both by those sets of degrees in relation to each other. In other words, when the writing is exaggerated but the illustrations are folk art, what is being communicated to the reader? If the writing offers a sort of “folk art” reality but the illustrations are highly representational, what is the rhetorical effect?

I will examine different forms of what is categorized as “realism” for children in this paper to distinguish the forms and effects of representationalism and exaggeration in picture and writing. I will use representative examples, including books such as *One Crazy Summer*, *Junie B. Jones*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* along with *Little House on the Prairie*, *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, and *Bridge to Terabithia*. There are important implications for how readers are asked to respond to multiculturalism, historical fiction, contemporary realism, and even nonfiction with pity, sympathy, or empathy.