

Pressing Matters: Radical Change Picture Books and the Agentive Continuum of Interactivity

Throughout the beginnings of the twenty-first century, “innovation” in picture books implies the presence of characteristics such as interactivity, metafictional devices, and hypertextuality. While the disciplines of psychology, early childhood education, and library sciences quickly acknowledged these new forms of picture books, the field of children’s literature rarely provides these books with critical attention. Many educational scholars and critics see interactivity in picture books as engaging opportunities for children to express individuality and agency while developing social and cognitive skills. Eliza T. Dresang’s *Radical Change Theory* claims that picture books featuring innovative characteristics shift prior societal assumptions that deny children the space for agency. This essay—which centers on *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems (2003) and *Press Here* by Hervé Tullet (2010)—examines narrative and aesthetic forms to map an agentive continuum ranging from supporting child independence and agency, to devaluing and undermining the child at the command of the adult.

Close reading these book’s aesthetic and narrative choices, including their use of minimalist illustrations and direct address, demonstrates how interactive picture books often maintain an adult’s power over children instead of disrupting it, thereby reinforcing oppressive ideologies. It is extremely easy to praise innovation and change without fully examining what remains the same. The purpose of this essay is not only to illustrate the difficulty of creating a book that radically alters both literary and societal assumptions about children and their abilities but also to offer a nuanced understanding of how literature can create spaces for children’s empowerment.