

Remembering the Past in Words and Pictures: How Autobiographical Stories Become Picturebooks

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Definitions of autobiography have never proved to be definitive, but they are instructive in reflecting characteristic assumptions about what may well be considered the main aspects of this literary genre. One of the best-known definitions was formulated by Philippe Lejeune in the 1970s in his famous essay “The Autobiographical Pact”: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Lejeune also stresses the existence of an identity between author and narrator on the one hand, and narrator and protagonist on the other. Through this, Lejeune reveals the commitment by theorists of autobiography to the referentiality of the autobiographical text, demonstrating the conceptual impasse they are faced with. As cognitive and memory studies have shown, autobiographical memory belongs to the realm of “higher-order consciousness”. It involves the ability to construct a socially based selfhood, to model the world in terms of past and future, and to be directly aware that every recollection is a kind of perception, and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled.¹ This description infers the ability to step back from the immediacy of a situation and reflect upon past events. Moreover, in

order to understand the specific features of autobiographical memories, the acquisition of Theory of Mind, i.e. the ability to distinguish one's own experiences from other people's experiences, is essential.

My concerns are both literary and cognitive, for the selves displayed in autobiographical texts are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing and illustrating a life story, but also in a lifelong process of identity formation in which the writing/illustrating usually occurs at a comparatively late stage.

This article focuses on four picturebooks consisting of autobiographical stories written and illustrated by the authors: *War Boy* (1989) by Michael Foreman, *Self-Portrait* (1981) by Trina Schart Hyman, *Lumberjack* (1974) by William Kurelek, and *Tibet through the Red Box* (1998) by Peter Sís. The authors are all established artists who were already well known for their picturebooks and paintings before they created these autobiographical works.

The focus and reasons for creating autobiographical picturebooks vary from author to author. Trina Schart Hyman's book is the only one covering a whole lifespan, from Hyman's birth in 1939 up to 1981, when the book was published. The three other picturebooks under discussion focus on different periods in the lives of the author-illustrators. In Foreman's *War Boy* it is the Second World War, starting in April 1941 when the first-person narrator was three years old and a bomb damaged his bedroom, and ending with the victory celebrations after the capitulation of Germany in 1945. Kurelek's *Lumberjack* describes two lengthy stays by the author in a Canadian lumberjack camp in

1946 and 1951, when he was a young man aged 19 and 24. *Tibet through the Red Box*, by Peter Sís, covers the period from 1954 to 1955 when he was five years old. His father was on a secret mission in Tibet and the boy had to celebrate his birthday and Christmas without him.

Each author had a different reason for writing and illustrating his/her autobiographical picturebook. Hyman was asked by the publisher Harper & Row to contribute to its new series of autobiographical picturebooks by distinguished people². Kurelek wanted to record for posterity a traditional line of work that he knew well, which had passed into history by the 1970s. Foreman's childhood in the British countryside in Pakefield was dominated by the Second World War, and the author could never forget this experience. However, the main reason for creating his picturebook was the death of his beloved mother, to whom he dedicated the book. It was she who saved him from the bombing attacks and helped him to survive.³ The motivation for Sís' pictorial autobiography was a letter the author received from his father in 1994, in which the latter bequeathed to him the mysterious red box on his desk. The letter inspired Sís to return from New York to Prague, his birthplace, to take delivery of the box, which contained his father's secret diaries of his travels in Tibet.

All four picturebooks involve texts by first-person narrators recounting events in which they play a central role. The author is therefore both narrator and protagonist of the story. Moreover, in autobiographical picturebooks the narrator appears both in the text and in the pictures. The physical presence of the

characters in autobiographical picturebooks is one typical feature that distinguishes this type of book from autobiographical texts without illustrations. I shall therefore begin by asking what these autobiographical picturebooks can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of self. Using interrelated pictures and text, the author-illustrator narrates his autobiography employing two different media: he writes his life story, and illustrates it. Whereas the text is based on mental images evoked by the author's description of locations, characters and moods, the pictures provide visual information, transforming the mental images into real illustrations. This enables the reader/viewer to share the author's recollections of past events and inner feelings, as well as the memorized visual images.

In this context it is interesting to note the different narrative and pictorial strategies the artists employ to emphasize the truth of their stories and pictures. Their autobiographical accounts are based on diaries, photos, newspaper reports, conversations about the past with parents, other relatives, and close friends, and sketches and letters, all of which support the authenticity of the picturebook's narrative. However, only two of the four authors under discussion, Sís and Foreman, include this material in the published work. Sís integrates passages into his picturebook from his father's diary consisting of excerpts in tiny handwriting and elaborate drawings, while Foreman uses a collage-type technique incorporating press cuttings, handwritten letters, pictures from

scrapbooks, advertising leaflets, technical drawings of airplanes and weapons, and political pamphlets. Hyman and Kurelek make no use of documentation.

Whatever the case, the reference to autobiographical memory is underlined by the complex, multi-layered structure of the text. This complexity is emphasized by different literary strategies: paratextual passages, as demonstrated by Foreman, Hyman, Kurelek and Sís, who wrote forewords and epilogues to their picturebooks; metatextual reflections on the reliability of one's own memory in Hyman's *Self-Portrait*, and a combination of frame story and three internal stories in Sís' *Tibet through the Red Box*.

Sís conceives of identity as relational, and the autobiographical text he writes is also relational, for he believes that his father's story holds the key to his own. In this respect the autobiographical narration is doubled: the story of the father is accompanied by the story of the first-person narrator assembling his own life-story. Sís creates a hybrid form, neither pure autobiography nor biography but a mixture of both, and history as well. This book defies the boundaries we seek to establish between genres, for it is an autobiographical text that offers not only the autobiography of the first-person narrator, but also the biography and autobiography of his father. The autobiographical act is duplicated because the story of the father is accompanied by the story of the first-person narrator gathering this history. To help the reader/viewer distinguish between the various diegetic levels and narrative frames, different print types are used for the different stories (block letters for the frame story, italics for the

childhood memories, and handwriting for the diary). The sophisticated structure of the narrative is enhanced by the complex illustrations. Each chapter of Sís' picturebook is given a different color scheme: his father's office and the three spaces his father has to conquer on the way to the Dalai Lama are alternately colored in red, green or blue.⁴ In the last chapter, when the first-person narrator has finished reading the diary and his father finally has an audience with the Postal (i.e. the Dalai Lama), who turns out to be a young child, everything is colored black; only the contours of people and objects stand out. This color code is determined by Tibetan folklore and Buddhism: red stands for fire, green for earth, blue for water, and black (as equivalent to white) for both air and infiniteness.⁵

The narratives are accordingly characterized by an overlapping of perspectives and voices: the narrator's perspective, the anonymous voices of the incorporated newspaper clippings, letters and leaflets, and in Sís's case, the voice of his father in the diaries.

These narratives are complemented by complex illustrations distinguished by a variety of styles. The number of illustrations varies, ranging from 26 in Kurelek's work to 77 in Foreman's picturebook, while the picturebooks by Sís and Hyman contain 41 and 53 illustrations respectively. Hyman's book includes watercolor pictures reminiscent of her illustrations for fairy tales — she has even depicted herself as Little Red Riding Hood. Kurelek's illustrations, painted in oil or mixed media on canvas, show the influence of his landscape paintings. By

contrast, Foreman and Sís alternate between colored pictures painted with watercolors, black and white drawings, and sepia illustrations that give the impression of yellowed old photos. Foreman even includes an oil painting depicting a laundry. Irrespective of their different styles and painting techniques, the illustrators create atmospheric drawings and paintings that enhance the lyrical effect of the texts. The artists employ an interesting process in drawing more or less detailed illustrations based on photos, such as Sís' black and white pictures showing the young boy with his mother at the beach, at Christmas or at his birthday party. To evoke his missing father, Sís cut his father's figure out of the illustrations, so that the viewer sees only an empty white shape with his father's silhouette.

Insert Figure 15.1 here

Illustration from Peter Sís: *Tibet Through the Red Box*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.

The perspective in these picturebooks varies from panoramic views to close-ups. The panoramic perspective conveys an impression of the locations, i.e. landscapes, buildings, streets or cities, while the close-up illustrations usually show individual figures or single items of importance to the narrator, like the red box in Peter Sís' picturebook, or the woodcutters' tools in Kurelek's book. Other illustrations center on a group of people, parts of a room or exterior

scenes, offering an intermediary perspective between panoramic view and close-up. Furthermore, the perspective alternates between high and low, giving either a bird's eye or worm's eye view of the people and their surroundings. The close-up pictures are mainly at eye level with the viewer, offering a closer look at the figures or objects.

Picturebooks differ from illustrated books in having a specific combination of text and pictures that mainly consists of both media mutually and inseparably complementing each other. This means that two aspects should be considered in analyzing these autobiographical picturebooks. Why did the artists choose to create this form of book instead of writing an autobiography or childhood memoir without illustrations? And what is the point of view mirrored in the text and the pictures?

On careful reading of the picturebooks we realize that it is impossible to separate the text from the illustrations. In most cases, the text refers to the pictures by naming the figures depicted or describing the settings or events illustrated. Sometimes the authors even call the reader's/viewer's attention to details that might otherwise be ignored. But the authors also provide information that is not shown in the illustrations. In Kurelek's *Lumberjack* for example, it is the text alone which tells us that the narrator is reading Shakespeare instead of joining in the other people's games, or that many of the camp dwellers are immigrants, especially from Ukraine⁶ and the Baltic States.

In general, the illustrations serve two functions: they convey the moods and atmosphere already evoked in the text by visualizing them, and they help the (child) viewer to get a deeper insight into the historical and social background of these autobiographical stories, which often describe individual experiences and historical events from the past.

In this sense, the "I" of the narrative functions as an auto-ethnographer; it acts as the insider who explains to the uninitiated the customs and way of life of a bygone era or unknown community. The artists provide authentic reports based on their autobiographical memory, and at the same time their detailed description is a contribution to the broader concept of cultural memory. The authors of these four picturebooks are preserving the memories of a social group like the lumberjacks, wartime experiences in the British countryside during World War II, the impressions of the first European expedition to the Himalayas and the forbidden country of Tibet or, as in Hyman's book, the difficulties faced by a woman in getting recognition as an artist.

What is even more striking is the fragmentary structure of the four picturebooks. Although the authors attempt to describe time spans ranging from as little as six months to as long as 42 years (as in Hyman's case), the texts never convey the impression of a holistic story. On the contrary, each text consists of short stories or descriptions of important events. The connection between these sections is not always clear; they leave gaps that have to be filled in by the reader. Like looking at photos in an album, the reader looks at the pictures, reads

the accompanying text, and then turns to the next picture and text. Read alone, without the illustrations, the texts of the picturebooks seem rather strange, sometimes even bizarre, because their fragmentary structure is evident. I would argue that the artists consciously choose this literary strategy — which resembles the structure of photo albums — to highlight general problems of autobiographical memory.

In studies on memory, autobiographical memory as a variant of episodic memory is defined as the capacity to recall explicitly the personal incidents that define an individual's life. In addition, autobiographical memory demands the cognitive ability to reactivate those records once they have been created, to call them up whenever necessary. The case of childhood memories is rather complicated. As the child psychologist Katherine Nelson has demonstrated, memory in early childhood is dedicated to the generation of general event-memories that help in organizing the child's knowledge of daily routines like bathing or eating. This stage is marked by infantile amnesia, i.e., usually a total blocking of early memories prior to age 3, and a significant lack of accessible memories from the years between the ages of 3 and 6. If we accept this account of the belated emergence of autobiographical memory, it explains a great deal about the fragmentary quality of the earliest memories claimed by most adults. These research findings are reflected in the narrative structure of the picturebooks by Foreman, Hyman and Sís. The first memories recaptured by these three authors deal with events when the artists were aged 3, 4 and 5

respectively. Hyman's picturebook starts with the sentence, "I was born forty-two years ago in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania"; yet the accompanying picture shows the little four-year-old girl on a walk with her mother in the countryside. Early childhood memories until the age of 6 or 7 are distinguished by a fragmentary quality, which contributes to the inability to specify the exact date and time of the memory fragments. This is obviously the reason why the authors opted for a literary strategy that refers to these problems in some way.

But what of Kurelek's book, which describes events in the author's adult life? As recent studies in memory research have shown, even adults are not able to recall every single event in their whole life. Although most adults are able to remember more details, creating a memory network of past events that have structured their lives, very few people are able to memorize everything that happened during a lifespan of several decades. When writing an autobiography or childhood memoir, many authors rely on conversations about the past and historical sources to connect up their memory fragments. Kurelek, however, chose the same literary strategy as Foreman, Hyman and Sís, insisting on the fragmentary structure of his memories.

As the storyteller is also the central figure in the story, the artist has to tackle the problem of how to present his viewpoint in the pictures. We can assume that the book shows the scenes as the narrator sees them in his visual memory, complemented by contemporary records to underline the authenticity of the work. The narrators tell their own stories in a context that surrounds them

with specific scenes and people, and separates them from the viewers. The latter disappear from view, shifting to a view of what the narrators see. A consistent first person narration in picturebooks is similar to the “subjective camera” in film: the perspective of the narrator and the reader coincide, as in Foreman’s illustration of a birthday party, spread across a double page: lots of people are sitting around a table with a birthday cake in the center. Everybody is looking towards the viewer, so we can assume that the viewer’s perspective coincides with that of the first-person narrator whose birthday is being celebrated. If all the illustrations were like this, it would mean that the reader would never see the narrator pictured. This is a technique to encourage readers to sympathize with the narrator by seeing events through his or her eyes. The viewer sees what the person who is speaking sees.

In many cases, however, the pictures do not show what the artist sees, because the viewer is sometimes looking at the narrator, adopting a double-sided perspective on him/her.⁷ The reader is looking at the first-person narrator, but not seeing what the narrator sees. In this respect there is an obvious shift between two perspectives. The picturebooks under discussion thus combine two different forms of perspective. This is highly demanding for the reader: the text is a first-person narrative, but the pictures often seem to be a supplement to a third-person narration, causing a shift from a homodiegetic narrative to a heterodiegetic pictorial representation. These differing perspectives encourage the reader to empathize with the narrator, and at the same time to take a more

objective, distanced position. They draw the reader's attention to the different time levels presented in the picturebooks: reminiscences of the past, mainly childhood memories, and the present situation of the narrator, which is additionally marked by a change of tense. Whereas the autobiographical reminiscences are written in the past tense, the final section in three of the picturebooks is in the present tense. The exception is Foreman's picturebook, where the last sentences are written in the subjunctive, alluding to the near future when the seagulls and soldiers will hopefully return like the boy's kite. This wish is accompanied by an illustration showing the narrator disguised as an American Indian whose contours seem faded like an old memory.

One might assume that this change in viewpoint is rather disturbing for the child viewer, who has to be able to switch between text and pictures and different perspectives. However, I would contend that it is the picturebook's convention of raising the reader's expectation of seeing the protagonist in the illustration that is responsible for such shifts in autobiographical picturebooks. This discrepancy between perspectives creates a way to let the reader share the first-person narrator's viewpoint, and yet to portray the narrator in the picture, emphasizing the children's empathy, which is based on identification with the characters that children can see. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the picturebooks, the characters representing the narrator are either unseen or seen partly from behind. Their backs are turned to the viewers and their faces are hidden from view. The situation changes in the course of the story.

Gradually, the respective characters start to turn; first they are seen in profile, then frontally, but in the latter case they do not usually look directly at the viewer face to face. They often look downwards or upwards, or glance sideways at something or someone not shown in the picture.

The only exception is the cover of Hyman's book, *Self-Portrait*, which depicts the author sitting at her desk working on a new project. That she is already at work on the new book is deliberately underscored at the beginning of the text, where the artist describes a phone call from her editor urging her to finish the present book after all. The picture on the book cover shows the artist with her head slightly turned toward the viewer, at eye level with him/her.

Insert Figure 15.2 here

Book Cover from Trina Schart Hyman: *Self-Portrait*. Trina Schart Hyman. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.

Hyman is clearly alluding to the artistic tradition of the self-portrait in painting. A character gazing out of the picture directly at the viewer can be interpreted as an "intrusive" visual narrator. Foreman also makes use of another, contrasting visual strategy by switching between two different perspectives of the same place or event. In most cases the illustrated situation is shown first from the narrator's perspective, and then shifts to the viewpoint of a second person who is looking directly at the narrator. Foreman often uses this discrepancy by

combining an exterior and interior view with a window or door as transition. In one illustration, for example, he depicts the first-person narrator as a little boy sitting on the windowsill of his mother's shop, watching the people on the street. The next illustration changes to show one of the passers-by on the street looking into the shop window, acknowledging the boy staring at him.

In my view, a more disturbing feature of these picturebooks is that the text often fails to make explicitly clear whether the narrator is visible in the picture or not, which leaves the reader uncertain. Kurelek and Foreman furnish just two examples of this. In Kurelek's *Lumberjack* the narrator never acknowledges his own presence in the illustrations. Although we might assume that the narrator can be seen in several pictures, readers will remain unsure about this unless they are familiar with the author's autobiographical picturebook about his childhood on the Canadian prairies, *A Prairie Boy's Winter*, in which Kurelek always depicts himself wearing blue trousers and a green jacket. Five pages in *Lumberjack* include pictures of a young man with blue trousers and a green jacket, shown partly from behind in the far distance. Readers who know *A Prairie Boy's Winter* will be able to recognize the similarity and deduce conclusively that the young man in the pictures is a self-portrait of the author.

In *War Boy*, Foreman depicts himself clearly as a four-year-old boy in several pictures. As he is most often shown with other children of the same age, it is not quite clear which child is actually the narrator himself. The artist leaves it to the reader to decide. In the case of other illustrations, the text offers certain

clues, as in the passage where Foreman describes a soldier who gives him a small-sized uniform. In the picture next to this description, a group of soldiers is seen accompanied by a little boy dressed in uniform.

The picturebooks by Hyman and Sís represent a different case. Many pictures portray only one child, and the reader might assume that these children are self-portraits of the author-illustrators. In *Tibet through the Red Box*, however, the narrator-protagonist is merely a presence in the illustrations, which are dominated by inner landscapes expressing the feelings of the first-person narrator. Only four of the pictures show the narrator as five-year-old boy, always surrounded by his family. It should be mentioned here that the narrator's memory is evidently unreliable. To give just one example: in one section he tells that he has not seen his father for several years, elsewhere he states that his father was in Tibet for 14 months, and in yet another passage he actually admits that he cannot tell exactly how long his father was abroad. This unreliability, coupled with the fairytale quality of the internal stories, might make the viewer doubt whether the illustrations are authentic self-portraits or purely imaginary.

In Hyman's picturebook she depicts herself from the start either as Little Red Riding Hood with a red cape, or as an elf with wings (only in the illustrations showing Hyman as adolescent and young woman is she depicted in ordinary clothes without any extraordinary signs and symbols). These stylized illustrations stress the close connection between the child and fantasy or magic, revealing an important aspect of Hyman's artistic development. Indeed, these

pictures serve to create a mysterious kind of aura as a constituent feature of Hyman's childhood memories. This aspect is reinforced by the concluding sentence, which is written in the past tense: "Everything that I have told you is, of course, a fairy tale." With this statement, Hyman closes her autobiographical account and then turns to the present, describing her life on a farm with her family and close friends. With a metatextual reflection on the picturebook's origin, Hyman then changes from the present to the future tense, describing her plans for the coming period. In the last picture she turns her back to the viewer again.

The visual perspectives in these autobiographical picturebooks are rather complicated and ambivalent, either reflecting the naïve perception of a child or offering an authoritative adult perspective. Due to the various patterns of interaction between word and image, these works reveal the contradiction between the respective viewpoints of the visual and verbal narrative. This contradiction is due to alternation between externally focalized narration that follows only one character's perception, and concentration on introspective aspects that emphasize inner feelings and thoughts.

A survey of autobiographical picturebooks reveals an astonishing variety of topics and themes. There is no denying the obvious influence of autobiographical memories on the development of children's literature, from children's novels to autobiographies for children or picturebooks.⁸ This article represents an initial attempt to demonstrate the many and varied aspects of

autobiographical writing in sophisticated picturebooks, works that demand a high level of aesthetic and cognitive competence from their readership, whether children or adults.

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¹ Katherine Nelson (1989, 162) stresses that autobiographical memory is an “enduring chronologically sequenced memory for significant events from one’s own life.”

² The Self-Portrait Collection includes works by the illustrators Erik Blegvad and Margot Zemach.

³ Whereas *War Boy* is an evocative account of how World War II affected Foreman’s own childhood, *War Game* (1993) was dedicated to his four uncles, who died in World War I.

⁴ The first framing chapter functions as an introduction to the father’s story set in the past; unlike the four succeeding chapters, it has no title.

⁵ The strong connection to Buddhism is additionally emphasized by five mandalas, each depicted at the beginning of a new chapter. A big wheel is in focus, with the red box in the middle. Figures and creatures that play an important part in the story appear between the spokes. Thus the mandalas, whose main color corresponds to the color scheme of the chapter they precede, can be interpreted as visual prologues to the story.

⁶ Kurelek had a close relationship with the Ukrainian language and culture, inherited from his father who emigrated from Ukraine to Canada. Kurelek also did the illustrations for the English translation of the Ukrainian children’s classic *Lys Mykita* (Fox Mykita, 1978), written by Ivan Franko in 1890. The excellent

translation and remarkable illustrations have earned *Fox Mykita* the status of a Canadian classic as well.

⁷ In his seminal study on picture books with first person-narrators, Nodelman refers to the cognitive and aesthetic problems arising from the shifting perspectives in such picture books.

⁸ The influence of autobiographical narration on the development and narrative structure of children's books has been shown in the studies by Coe (1982), Kümmerling-Meibauer (2004) and Kümmerling-Meibauer (2007).