

The illustrators of Munsch

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Résumé: *Dans son analyse des ouvrages de Robert Munsch, Perry Nodelman insiste tout particulièrement sur les différences entre le contenu verbal et le contenu iconique. C'est bien dans ces différences que se perçoivent les moyens grâce auxquels les illustrateurs enrichissent et approfondissent la portée des textes de l'auteur.*

If reviews are any evidence, most adult readers of picture books are unaware of the possibility that the pictures in them might be having an effect on their responses to the texts. While reviewers usually have a lot to say about the language and meanings of the verbal texts of picture books, they tend to limit their discussion of the illustrations to vaguely impressionistic phrases about how “charming” or “appropriate” they are.

The picture books with texts by Robert Munsch are a particularly revealing example. Not only do reviewers rarely comment on the illustrations in these books, but just about everybody almost always refers to them only as books “by Munsch,” a label which discounts the contributions of his illustrator-collaborators.¹

Munsch’s reputation as an oral storyteller reinforces this attitude. Mary Rubio speaks, quite rightly, I believe, of “the rhythms of oral storytelling which pace Munsch’s tales.” But as I suggest in my book *Words about pictures*, it’s generally true that the stories in picture books require both words and pictures—that the texts are designed to be accompanied by illustrations, and are incomplete without them. Munsch’s stories break this rule: they can convey meaning and provide pleasure as purely oral performances, without any pictorial amplification at all. Why then, do the books which offer printed versions of them even contain illustrations?

The most obvious answer is the one implied by reviewers’ neglect of the illustrations: the illustrations aren’t important. They are there, we might guess, simply to satisfy conventional expectations: expectations which lead most adults to believe that books for young children are picture books and nothing but picture books.² In order to sell to this market, then, the Munsch texts must have accompanying pictures; and while the pictures themselves are colourful, they are essentially superfluous.

But according to the semiotic theory I outline in *Words about pictures*, it

would be impossible for them to be superfluous: once there, pictures must affect our responses to and understanding of the texts they accompany. Whether we are conscious of it or not, illustrations *always* convey information, not just about what things look like, but how we should understand and what we should feel about the things depicted. The exact same words found in any of these books “by Munsch,” printed without the pictures, would not add up to the same story: they would have a different focus, imply a different point of view, convey a different mood.

Nevertheless, the fact that pictures always influence our understanding of the texts they illustrate doesn't mean that their effect is always positive. Inept illustrations can also make verbal texts reveal less or different information than they might have with more communicative illustrations.³ Indeed, I believe that to be the case, to varying degrees, for just about all of the Munsch texts illustrated by someone other than his most frequent collaborator Michael Martchenko. Without downplaying the value and significance of Munsch's genius for storytelling, I want to argue here that at least part of the success and popularity of the picture books “by Munsch” can and should be attributed to Martchenko.

For all the ways in which *Millicent and the wind*, *Giant*, *A promise is a promise*, *Love you forever*, *Good families don't*, *Get me another one!* and *Purple, green and yellow* are different from each other, these books *not* illustrated by Martchenko all have one thing in common. They all seem significantly different from the ones that *are* illustrated by Martchenko.

It's possible that the difference is not just a matter of differing styles of illustration; there might be an actual difference in content. Munsch himself says that *Millicent* is “a quiet-them-down nap-time story, so it's much more laid back than the kind I do now in front of an audience, where the idea is to whoop them up. There's a difference in tone and a difference in purpose” (Kondo 29). Munsch adds that his publishers waited five years before they found an illustrator they considered suitable for this different sort of story. Perhaps the editors of all the other non-Martchenko books have chosen different illustrators, or the illustrators different styles, in order to complement inherently different kinds of texts.

In order to determine that, I must establish what typically Munschean texts—meaning, specifically, those illustrated by Martchenko—might be. This is fairly easy to do; Munsch's artistry depends notoriously on his inventive use of repetition and variation: what Raymond E. Jones calls “the folkloristic repetition of phrases or episodes that injects life into his ... books” (CCL 53, 56). Not surprisingly, then, his work as a whole consists of variations of the same few elements—so much so that Jones also suggests, with some justice, that “too often Munsch has seemed as if he stamped out stories in the same way that bakers use a cookie cutter to stamp out gingerbread men” (57).

While Munsch's stories are fantasies, most of them are firmly grounded in reality. They are almost always about fantastically exaggerated bouts of anarchy

breaking out in an otherwise normal world—most often, the normal world of contemporary children. And most of them are variations on one of three central patterns:

1) Intrusion. There is a momentary and often unexplained suspension of normal reality. What would be a perfectly ordinary aspect of the world as we usually know it suddenly appears somewhere it does not belong, in a way that upsets the otherwise normal life of one normal child. Versions of this story occur in *Jonathan cleaned up*, *Murmel murmel murmel*, and *The boy in the drawer*. In all these stories, the child protagonist must take charge of the situation and figure out a way to suppress the anarchic intruder.

2) Anarchic parents. In *David's father* and *50 below zero*, the odd intrusion into normalcy is the behaviour of a weird parent, specifically a father. These two stories are contrapuntal variations on each other: in *Fifty below zero* the child must, as usual, solve the problem created by the father's oddity, while in *David's father*, much more unusually for Munsch, the father's oddity solves the child's problems.

3) Anarchic children. The usual intrusion of anarchic abnormality is caused by the child protagonists themselves, usually through their indulgence in undisciplined excess. In *Thomas's snowsuit*, *Pigs*, *Something good*, *Show and tell*, *I have to go!*, *Mortimer*, *Moira's birthday*, *Angela's airplane*, and *The fire station*, the only actual fantasy is in the exaggerated nature of the children's behaviour and its consequences. The child protagonists of most of these books must themselves find ways to solve the problem and restore the world to order, usually after adults fail to do so.

Despite their apparent differences, the non-Martchenko books all have some connection to one or more of these basic patterns. *The dark*, *Mud puddle*, *Millicent and the wind* and *Good families don't* are intrusion stories, in which darkness, mud, and two different forms of wind become unhinged from their usual functions. *Love you forever*, *Giant*, and *A promise is a promise* also involve intruders in places they don't belong: a mother sneaking into her adult child's bedroom while he sleeps, a giant intruding in heaven, and a Qallipilluq, a figure from traditional Inuit myth, intruding in a contemporary home.

To my mind, furthermore, *Love you forever* also represents category two, the weird parent; but I know that not everyone would agree with me, and I'll say more about that later. Another weird parent, a father who uses his daughter as fishbait, also appears in *Get me another one!* This story also involves the undisciplined, anarchic behaviour of a child, as do *A promise is a promise* and *Purple, green and yellow*.

Nevertheless, all of these stories are still significantly different from the ones illustrated by Martchenko—all more or less experimental variations from the basic successful pattern. The variations might well justify differences in visual style.

Most obviously, the source of the anarchy in both *Giant* and *A promise is a*

promise is a figure which is not merely out of place, but inherently fantastic. Unlike darkness or wind, Qallupilluit and giants like McKeon do not actually exist—at least not according to usual conceptions of reality. Convincing illustrations of creatures so fantastic would have to be persuasively concrete and three-dimensional: as indeed Vladyana Krykorka's for *A promise* and especially Gilles Tibo's for *Giant* are. Being merely real, meanwhile, the intrusive boys and babies and pigs and pizzas and such of more typical Munsch stories need look merely exactly as tangible as everything else in the pictures in order to confirm the oddity of their uncharacteristic behaviour—as is indeed the case in Martchenko's illustrations of them.

Furthermore, both the giant and the Qallupilluit are figures from traditional bodies of folklore: the giant from the European tradition, the Qallupilluit from Inuit tradition. Their presence makes these stories into literary folk tales: stories invented by Munsch in the first case and by Munsch and Michael Kusugak in the second, but modelled on stories already existing in the folk tradition about encounters between fantastic beings like these and ordinary people. Indeed, a reader who didn't know these stories were new inventions might well imagine them to be merely new versions of traditional tales—not Munsch-engendered stories at all.⁴

The boy whom Shelley finds in her sock drawer in *The boy in the drawer*, and the baby Robin discovers in her sandbox in *Murmel murmel murmel* merely appear, irrationally, all of sudden, with no foreshadowing and no previously established context; but, as in traditional folk tales, the anarchic events of *A promise* and *Giant* emerge from logical reasons clearly enunciated in the stories themselves. McKeon's violence is a response to St. Patrick's attempts to rid Ireland of snakes, and the Qallupilluit are unleashed when Allashua breaks the promise she made her mother.

As a result of this logic, these stories have a more obvious relationship to fables—stories told as parables with messages for readers about their own future behaviour—than does most of Munsch's work. As a fable, *Giant* enunciates a theme common in much children's literature, the importance of accepting differences: "Saints are for hanging up church bells and giants are for tearing them down. That's just the way it is." Even more conventionally, *A promise is a promise* follows the most common children's story pattern of all—the central defining fable of children's literature: a child disobeys parental authority, gets into trouble because of it, and needs an adult to extricate her from the difficulty.

While more typical Munsch stories share the first two elements of this pattern, it's astonishing how rarely his children do actually need assistance from adults. Julie and David in *David's father* and Ben in *Show and tell* are rare examples of children extricated from trouble by parents. Even in these two books, furthermore, the texts give little indication that child readers are to learn any sort of respect for adults or distrust of their own initiatives. While Ben's decision to bring his baby sister to show-and-tell leads to an anarchic situation at school that

only his mother can solve, that situation is exactly as pleasurable as the anarchy other Munsch children extricate themselves from. By and large, if a typical Munsch story has any moral at all, it is that independence is worth all the trouble it causes, and that in any case there is a lot of fun to be had in not doing what your parents tell you. Appropriate illustrations would have to focus on the fun of anarchy—as Martchenko’s, in fact do.

But the more conventional nature of *Giant* and *A promise is a promise* means that they might well require a visual style unlike Martchenko’s. In fact, the work of Tibo and Krykorka is more like the important tradition of fairy tale illustration begun by figures like Arthur Rackham and Kay Nielsen and still carried on by many illustrators of folk tales and their literary offspring.⁵ As I suggested earlier, the pictures by Tibo and Krykorka are more representational than Martchenko’s—more interested in showing things as they appear than in making us see the comedy in them. The pictures are richly detailed in terms of costume and setting. Their vibrant colours and complex textures assert that their purpose is not just to convey narrative information, but also to provide viewers with a purely sensuous aesthetic pleasure. They seem more weighty than Martchenko’s cartoon images, more artistic—more “important.”

The same is true of Suzanne Duranceau’s images for *Millicent and the wind*. They are richly detailed in their depiction of clothing and setting, light and shadow: in the berry patch Millicent stands in (figure 1), we can see, not just every leaf, but the veins of every leaf. Duranceau’s depictions of landscapes are not just highly representational but exceedingly atmospheric, romantic images of the sort that conventionally signify



Figure 1.

a deep emotional response to and respect for the natural world.

Again, this seems appropriate. While *Millicent and the wind* is a version of the typical Munsch intrusion story, the text itself is significantly different from the other versions of that story, in ways that ground it in reality and focus on its emotional content. When the baby suddenly and irrationally appears in the

sandbox in *Murmel murmel murmel*, we must either be seriously unsettled by this lack of logic, or else just laugh at it. Martchenko's cheerfully comic images comfort us by telling us we can afford just to laugh. But the wind enters Millicent's world only after the events of the story establish how much she needs it: when she is alone without friends, or when she is being laughed at by others. This makes its appearance seem reasonable: meaningful, and therefore, not unsettling at all. It is even possible to see it as actually real, to believe that Millicent is merely imagining words being spoken in the natural sounds of an actual wind. Realistic images whose only odd feature is a disconcertingly artificial-looking wind (about which I'll say more later) support this reading.

Furthermore, the wind's arrival is emotionally pleasing, even comforting: it represents a satisfying fulfilment of Millicent's need for companionship. Quite differently, the anarchic intrusions in *Boy in the drawer* and *Murmel murmel murmel* are not the answer to a problem, but the problem itself: how do you cope with an intrusion so illogical, so ungrounded in previous physical causes, so totally unrelated to one's previous emotional state of mind that one cannot possibly figure out any logical way of dealing with it? If illustrations as emotionally evocative as Duranceau's accompanied these stories, they'd seem



Figure 2

dark and unsettling indeed, opening deep chasms of chaos and unreason; Martchenko's lively comedy suppresses that sort of response.

In other words, *Millicent* is like *Giant* and *A promise is a promise* in being more conventional than more typical Munsch stories—less unsettlingly anarchic, more clearly oriented towards communicating comforting and reasonable messages to readers. It's appropriate that the illustrations by Krykorka, Tibo, and Duranceau are both less anarchic and more serious than

Martchenko's—and more like the pictures conventionally used for serious, important children's literature.

Yet despite these differences, these texts, if considered on their own without the accompanying pictures, are really not all that much unlike the texts illustrated by Martchenko. If *Giant* is a literary fairy tale, so is *The paperbag princess*. Both stories involve aggressively violent fantasy creatures who begin by causing devastation but are finally defeated by the non-violent actions of a young girl. If one seems merely comic and other far more serious, it is in great part because the illustrations help to convey these ideas to us.

Tibo's images for *Giant* are hauntingly beautiful, a pleasure to look at even without reference to the narrative information they convey. They make admirable use of the luminosity, complex textures and persuasively three-dimensional modelling made possible by air-brushing. The figures have depth and solidity, so much so that, as in figure 2, they often seem surprisingly still.

The effect is like that of stop-action photography: one moment of an action captured, so that figures in motion look like statues.

Martchenko's images for *Paperbag princess* are more serviceable. It's hard to imagine them hanging on the walls of a gallery; they are interesting exactly and almost exclusively because of the energy of the actions they depict.

They convey energy not by stopping it but by using every conventional trick in the cartoonist's book to convey it: conventions like the use of action lines to imply symbolically that a figure is moving, and clever uses of pictorial dynamics. In figure 3,



Figure 3

figure 3, for instance, the small lines representing blades of grass form a line that converges with the lines representing the path of the dragon's flight, to form an arrow that focuses our attention on the no-longer visible dragon: by not showing the dragon but using these tricks of the cartoonist's trade, Martchenko cleverly implies just how quickly the beast has moved.

In *Millicent and the wind*, Duranceau uses similar lines to represent the wind. But this is the only use of a cartooning convention in pictures which otherwise try to be representational. In figure 1 and throughout the book, the convincing reality of the rest of the image makes the lines seem exceedingly artificial, clearly symbolic in a way the rest of the image is not; and the lines draw our attention to the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane in a way that interferes with the reality of the three-dimensional world it otherwise implies. It's not surprising, then, that Millicent herself seems so fixed in this picture; the motionless quality of the stopped-time photography convention is reinforced by the contradictory attempt to convey movement in the action lines of the wind.

The lines convey not only movement, but the mere fact that the wind is there at all. Since wind can actually be detected by the eye only when it makes other objects move, its depiction as a set of action lines represents an attempt to solve a difficult problem. Interestingly, a number of the other books not illustrated by Martchenko also attempt to depict what cannot actually or easily be seen; and, in my opinion, at least, they fail to do it successfully. Indeed, it's this failure that most clearly distinguishes the illustrations of *The dark*, *The mud puddle*, *Love you forever*, *Good families don't*, *Get me another one!* and *Purple, green and yellow* from Martchenko's.

Yet, unlike the work of Tibo or Krykorka or Duranceau, the most obvious quality of these illustrations is their similarity to Martchenko's work in other Munsch books. Sami Suomalainen's pictures for *The dark* and *The mud puddle*, done before Martchenko's, are even more frenetic than his, and just as comic; they have a somewhat amateurish quality, a klutzy charm quite different from the assured confidence that emerges from Martchenko's work even or especially at its most anarchic. And while the other four illustrators have styles different from Martchenko and from each other, all acknowledge Martchenko's clever solutions to the problem of illustrating Munsch by aping his techniques.⁶ All four choose a lively cartoon style as the best way to convey Munsch's comic exuberance. All four frequently use conventions and techniques of pictorial dynamics to focus on movement and depict it. All four sometimes use Martchenko's trick of focusing closely in on active figures depicted inside constrained spaces that make the action seem even more intense. All four also depict anarchy in scenes in which numerous objects are strewn randomly around the picture plane.

These similarities are justified by the fact that these six stories are classic Munsch tales of anarchic intrusion, far more like the Martchenko-illustrated tales than the stories I discussed earlier. Yet despite the similarities in the stories and in their illustrational styles, none of these three illustrators match what Martchenko achieves. I have to wonder if the problem isn't at least partially in the stories themselves—if they don't in fact all contain elements that could never be depicted successfully.

Good families don't involves an illustration problem similar to *Millicent*:

how do you depict a wind? Having chosen a naturalistic three-dimensional style, Duranceau was at least wise enough to know she could not get away with something like Alan Daniel's solution; her action lines may not work, but they work much better than would a literal depiction of the visible personified being which is implied by the text, a wind that talks and, since it is capable of "running among the trees," apparently has feet. Daniel's more cartoon-like style—and the comic tone of the text itself—would seem to allow him to get away with depicting the fart of the text as a visible monster with human eyebrows and teeth and fingernails. But in fact, his doing so allows viewers to lose sight of the fact that it *is* indeed only and exactly a fart: gas expelled from an anus.

In fact, these pictures divest the story of its dangerousness. While the text itself tells us that the fart is purple, green and yellow, it never suggests that it isn't an actual fart, a natural occurrence gone scarily and delightfully awry: but in the context of these pictures, "fart" is now just a somewhat strange name for a monster, yet one more of the apparently endless series of comically grotesque picture book creatures that descend from Sendak's *Wild things*. Not only does that make this book all too much like a legion of other picture book stories, it seriously dissipates the text's satire on the dehumanizing gentility of "good families" and what they don't like to admit to doing. It may not be accidental that Munsch's text compounds the problem by finally allowing Carmen's mother to turn the fart into a satisfyingly harmless stuffed toy. It seems that good children can have farts, as the story's ending insists, only as long as the farts are no longer actual smelly human gas.

Something similarly weakening seems to happen in *The dark* and *The mud puddle*, the two books illustrated by Suomalainen, although I suspect with less complicity on Munsch's part. Certainly, the scary weirdness of "a small dark" emerging from its home inside a cookie jar and growing huge on the shadows it devours is weakened when the dark is not all that dark at all, but merely a pleasant turquoise, and when it looks more like a jolly porpoise than a devouring void. Suomalainen's mud puddle is equally unthreatening in a way that undermines the darker implications of the text.

It seems likely that Suomalainen's and Daniel's failure here is less in their solution to a problem than in their assumption there might be a solution at all. How *could* one accurately depict the scarily amorphous dark or the vulgar and gaseous fart evoked by Munsch's texts? I tend to believe that these texts are essentially unillustratable—or at least, that the style which might accurately illustrate them would be too abstract or too symbolic to fit comfortably within the conventions of children's picture books.

If *Purple, green and yellow* is equally unillustratable, it is for the exactly opposite reason: not that it takes the familiar and makes it disappointingly strange, but that it takes the strange and makes it disappointingly familiar. Bridgid, rendered invisible after following a doctor's advice about how to rid her skin of the indelible marker she'd coloured herself with, solves her problem by

colouring herself again, but this time with a special marker “the same colour she was.” In response, her mother says, “You’re just a picture. Everyone will know there is something wrong.” H  l  ne Desputeaux’s picture of Bridgid undermines that statement by being, in fact, just a picture—a picture exactly like all the earlier pictures of Bridgid throughout the book.

But then, how could it be different? For no matter what style an illustrator uses, the pictures in a book will always be pictures. It’s a literal truth that not only are the marks on the page depicting the colours on Bridgid’s fingernails actually marks—marks representing marks—but so, too, are the fingernails—marks representing fingernails. To draw a picture of a character which makes it clear that the character now is meant to look like a picture rather than just actually being one is a dizzying proposition. Desputeaux merely compounds the problem by choosing a style so thoroughly and perkily non-representational as to be nothing but picture-like throughout.⁷

The problem in *Love you forever* is quite different: a question not of unillustratable content, but of perhaps unillustratable difficulties of tone. As I’ve suggested, this story shares enough of the absurdity of other weird-parent stories like *50 below zero*; a mother with a fetish for holding grown men on her lap and rocking them is exactly as strange as a frozen sleepwalking father. Indeed, this story would be nothing but humorous if it ended differently. But when the mother grows old and the son treats her as she once treated him, the comedy turns emotional—I would say, sentimental—and that creates a problem. How do you depict the earlier events so that they don’t seem so absurd that the touching ending is a jarring surprise? How can you possibly show a mother sneaking into her teenage son’s bedroom to cuddle him as he sleeps without eliciting laughter—or even worse, evoking horrific images of a monstrously exaggerated devouring mother out of the worst nightmares of Freud.

My answer is, you can’t; it’s impossible. This is not to say that Sheila McGraw doesn’t do a surprisingly good job of balancing comedy and sentiment. In the first half of the book, she tends to alternate them. Calm, organized images, mostly in muted pastel shades, of the mother holding the sleeping child, alternate with more boisterous images, in more brilliant colours, of the child wreaking anarchic havoc. Furthermore, these images of the child awake use all the Martchenko techniques I listed earlier; and the other images use not just a more muted palette, but also, a variety of unusual points of view—from below and from high above—that place the reposeful figures firmly and comfortingly in the context of their setting, and allow enough distance from them to create a sense of stability.

In the latter half of the book, the boisterous images disappear. Pastels predominate, the distance from the figures increases, and so do the proportion of views from on high, so that the delicate emotions deflect the absurdity and swallow up the comedy.

Nevertheless, when an image shows a woman on her knees heading towards

an adolescent male's bed, or with a fully grown man cradled in her arms, the fact that it is in delicate purples does not make it all that much less absurd. I know that many people—especially, in my experience, adult female parents—claim to find this book not funny at all, but deeply satisfying, emotionally profound.⁸ I can only say that it must take a determined act of will to ignore the absurd elements in this story and in these pictures—to not allow oneself to think about what act a mother sneaking into her teenage son's bedroom at night might find him doing, or to not acknowledge noticing that McGraw has carefully placed the boy's arms and, presumably, hands, *outside* the covers.

The last of the Munsch texts illustrated by somebody other than Martchenko, *Get me another one!* also implies difficulties of tone. It not only describes what might be viewed as a fairly horrific act of child abuse, but it insists we notice the abusive nature of the act by calling it wrong and punishing it. Shawn Steffler's flatly un-modelled and rather luridly colourful pictures simply ignore these darker implications, and work hard to pretend that the story they accompany is nothing but jolly fun. It's hard to imagine illustrations that would accurately capture this perverse tale's strange mixture of the exaggeratedly comic and the all-too-real; Steffler's pictures don't even try.

As I thought about the difficulties these texts create for illustrators, I began to wonder if the stories illustrated by Martchenko ever raised similar difficulties. By and large, they don't. As I've shown, the non-Martchenko books all represent deviations from Munsch's usual sort of storytelling, variations that make the stories less assured, less clear in tone and purpose, and much less easy to illustrate.



Figure 4

But despite that, the stories in books illustrated by Martchenko do contain problems—problems I hadn't noticed simply because Martchenko's illustrations solved them. In *Thomas' snowsuit*, for instance, it's hard to imagine what Thomas and his teacher might look like *during* "an enormous fight" which

results in them wearing each other's clothes. Martchenko doesn't even try to show us; he cleverly chooses to depict only the results, and allows us to imagine the impossible causes that might have had such intriguing effects.

But that's solving the problem of the unillustratable by not illustrating it; how about actual depictions of things that can't be seen? Well, probably because of their origin in oral performance, Munsch's stories are often about noise, about shouting and singing and babies howling (and for that matter, farting). Martchenko's pictures must often depict what visual images simply can't show: what things sound like. In figure 4, from *Mortimer*, Martchenko uses the cartoonist's technique of symbolic representation to solve this problem. Mortimer's exuberant song is visible as brightly coloured musical notes floating above his head in magnificent profusion.



Figure 5

This works here, I believe, because, unlike Duranceau's symbolic wind, it fits the cartoon style of the images as a whole. In fact, the noise is represented, not just by the musical notes, but also, by other cartoon devices: some typical Martchenko flying objects—slippers, carpets, toys) and by the impossibly contorted shape of Mortimer's bed, which seems to be being twisted by the immense vibrations.

In figure 5, from *Moira's Birthday*, there is no visual representation of a baker's yell; but the yell is clearly evoked by its effects on others. We see eggs flying in the air, cherries popping out of a can, icing squishing, batter jumping; the noise has been loud enough both to startle humans and cause intense vibrations in objects.

In other words, noises are implied by the movements they cause in objects; but in fact, this is, like all picture book illustrations, a still picture: nothing actually moves. So in order to imply noise, Martchenko must also imply movement. He does so here by depicting objects in positions in which our contextual knowledge tells us they could not possibly be at rest: eggs floating in

the air space above a bowl *must* be moving, probably downwards, and tilted boxes are clearly in the process of falling over.

Figure 6, from *Show and tell*, is an especially clever visual representation of the actually unillustratable. Here, movement and noise are represented by at least five different types of visual symbolism from the cartoonist's repertoire.



Figure 6

1) As in the image of the baker just discussed, objects (the baby's soother, the teacher's hemline and hair) are depicted in positions that would logically require them to be moving.

2) What Schwarcz calls "continuous narrative"—the use of a series of images of the same object, sometimes, as here, superimposed on each other—suggests the rapid movement as the teacher rocks the baby.

3) The use of a convention borrowed from photography: a blur represents action too fast for a camera to capture.

4) As the images of the baby move from left to right (the conventional direction in which time passes in illustrations), the circle representing its mouth grows larger, and the colour intensifies from grey to black. These visual intensifications represent intensified noise.

5) The little dots above the baby's head are symbolic visual representations of its noise, and the lines emanating like rays from the baby imply the movement of the noise outwards.

In the midst of all this is the fixed face of the teacher, and the gloriously demented self-confidence of her impossible smile, so that the picture effectively represents the contrast in the text between the teacher's conviction that "I know how to take care of babies" and the narrator's quiet statement that "she didn't rock quite right."

Indeed, this picture sums up the essence of Martchenko's contribution to

these picture books. Munsch's words here are, as his published texts almost always are, straightforward, matter of fact in tone, and so reticent as to report information only in the most general terms. By themselves, then, the words "she didn't rock quite right" leave us free not only to imagine what the teacher might have been doing wrong, but to choose from a vast range of possible responses to her act, from fear to sympathy. But the picture is breathtakingly clear about what the teacher does wrong—very exact, and also, very funny: it tells us we should laugh at this teacher and feel superior to her arrogance, rather than, perhaps, feeling sorry for her.

In other words, Martchenko conveys by visual means the focus and mood and tone which might perhaps be implied by a good oral storyteller but which are not actually found in the words of the text. And as I've suggested above, he does it by making use of a vast repertoire of picture book conventions. We must, of course, know these conventions before we can understand and appreciate their use in pictures; but the pictures can convey rich and subtle meanings to those who have learned to read them.

The consistent success of Martchenko's illustrations in revealing the moods and meanings of Munsch stories depends on a quality they share with those stories: their similarity to each other. Like Munsch's verbal tales (and most specifically like the specific Munsch tales he has actually illustrated), Martchenko's pictures are themselves variations on a formula—a formula that can successfully be repeated so often simply because, (1) it works, and (2) it is flexible enough to allow for almost infinite variations.



Figure 7



Figure 8

In what follows, I outline the principles of Martchenko's formula as they are revealed in two characteristic images, figure 7 from *Thomas' snowsuit* and figure 8 from *Moira's birthday*.

1) *Use a cartoon style—a style whose most obvious message is always that we are supposed to understand the events we see as being funny—and a pallet of bright, fairly saturated colours that will reinforce a light, happy mood.* This incidentally, may be one reason why the text of *Giant*, accompanied by Tibo's darker, heavier images, is subject to attacks for its depictions of violence⁹, whereas Martchenko's more violent images in book after book are not. Martchenko's style tells us to laugh at what we see, to not worry about its effects or implications—as Munsch intends; whereas Tibo's pictures invite us to take things more seriously—something which Munsch may or may not intend in *Giant*.

2) *Keep the figures simple.* Imply people and objects with the smallest number of lines possible: keep their eyes lines or dots, except when they pop hugely in frequent moments of shock or surprise. Avoid crosshatching and other means of creating complexities of texture; indeed, rarely use lines at all for anything but the exterior outlines of figures. Colour them in with solid blocks of one shade, with just enough darker shading to imply a minimal amount of three-dimensionality.

This focus on simply drawn caricatures with just a hint of substance exactly mirrors the world of Munsch's texts. His characters each have only one or two traits—no more than is needed to account for their behaviour in the most minimal of ways. This causes us to focus less on their motivations than on the behaviour itself. Not surprisingly, the behaviour we focus on in these circumstances tends to be frenetic physical activity; Munsch's world has much in common with slapstick comedy. Martchenko confirms this for us by the energy of his work.

3) *Depict physical activity with as much energy as possible.* Exaggerate gestures to imply either action in progress or the results of a just completed action. The more exaggerated, the better. The more things that seem to be in motion, the better. In figure 8, for instance, every object depicted is in motion, even the picture hanging on the wall. Even in the deliberately still moment of figure 7, puffs of smoke move around the figures stubbornly fixed in a war of wills; and the exaggerated tension in the principal's pointing finger and Thomas's arms akimbo imply energy repressed but ready to burst out.

4) *To reinforce the focus on physical activity, depict characters from enough distance so they are seen full figure, or at least from the knees up, but close enough to us as viewers so that their gestures fill the picture.* This also confirms that our interest should be centred on the physical movements of limbs and torsos, rather than on emotions or motivations, as is usually implied by close-ups of faces, or on the characters' relationship to settings, as might be implied if they were depicted making the same gestures but surrounded by detailed settings in more distant shots.

5) *Keep the point of view more or less fixed throughout.* Don't move in or out, or up or down, in a way that might imply changes of emphasis in terms of our relationships to characters from one picture to the next. Not only does all this confirm the focus on physical actions, their causes and effects, as our main interest; it keeps that focus steady in a way that helps us to read the stories with the attitude they require. Thus, for instance, we never have to think about the pain so often caused by the actions depicted (as in figure 8), because we almost never see a character's face closely enough to bring the convention of thinking about their feelings into play.

6) *Alternate between two ways of depicting action.* First, show actions being planned or their results being contemplated in pictures which show figures without backgrounds (as in figure 7). Such pictures allow total concentration on the simple emotions implied—usually anger or exhaustion.

7) *Second, show action itself in pictures with backgrounds—and with the backgrounds depicted as being very close to the picture plane.* In figure 8, notice how the picture above and behind the female figure at top left seems to be directly behind her head; apparently, there is a wall very close behind her and the rest of the action.

This accomplishes a number of things. The close background, depicted with just about the same degree of saturation as the foreground, gives each of the objects depicted, whether central figure or background object, equal weight, and so prevents us from settling on any one particular object to focus on.¹⁰ Pictorial dynamics would dictate then that our eye then move from object to object in an unsettled way—a perfect way of conveying the anarchy being depicted. Furthermore, our closeness to the figures in front and their closeness to the walls behind imply that all this anarchic action occurs in a very tight space; and the constriction makes the action itself seem even more frenetic.

This lack of depth also has another effect. It forces all actions to move from right to left or left to right, instead of inwards towards the depth implied by techniques of perspective drawing or outward toward the viewer. Martchenko's characters always seem to be moving towards the sides of the pictures. In doing so, they reinforce the focus on left-to-right movement which is one of the main conventions by which illustrations imply movement and the passage of time.¹¹ Furthermore, time conventionally moves in pictures from left to right; as in figure 8, Martchenko often moves characters from right to left, a trick illustrators often use to imply constraint and create tension.

All of this reinforces both the intensity of the action and the focus on the cause-and-effect movement of narrative. Martchenko's pictures make it clear that these are stories about how events lead to other events, that they are not centrally concerned with the morality or the meanings of those events.

8) *Organize the anarchy.* For instance, frequently fill the picture plane with many objects of similar size and shape, in order to create a visual effect similar to the effect of rhythm in music. In figure 8, for instance, note the complex variety of rhythms established. There are at least ten crescent-shaped mouths formed of a black circle with a border of white teeth on top and bottom; indeed, many of the faces in this pictures are similar enough in size and in the shapes of their features to read like variations on each other. In addition, the held-out arms of mother, on the left, are echoed in the raised legs of father on the right; there are similarly-sized green areas representing the mother's dress, two of the children's shirts, and one of the gifts; the red and green, and red and yellow, of the gifts, lower left, is echoed by the red and green of the roses, upper left, and the red, green and yellow of the father's socks, upper right; and the pop-eyed child with orange hair on the extreme left is a variation of the pop-eyed mothers with orange hair, just above her. Even in the more simple picture, figure 7, the round heads and tummies, wisps of hair, slanted eyebrows, narrowed eyes and bent elbows of the figures of Thomas and the principal are rhythmic echoes of each other.

These rhythmic variations do what musical rhythms do: organize time. In doing so here, they add a sense of balance to the frenzy depicted—a balance missing in the merely frenetic work of, for instance, Suomalainen and Daniel.

9) *Carefully choose moments to depict, both to establish focus and create rhythm in a series of pictures for the same text.* Because pictures don't actually move, illustrators can choose one moment only of stopped action out of all the events the text accompanying it describes; and the ones they choose focus our attention on the events in a highly specific way. In figure 8, for instance, Martchenko characteristically chooses the moment in which the children run over Moira's parents rather than the less active movement when they open the door, which the text also reports.

Figure 7 represents a different use of chosen moments. As with every other picture in *Thomas' snowsuit*, it represents the moments between actions: we always see Thomas about to resist the snowsuit or the results of his resistance to it. As I suggested earlier, this solves a problem of depicting impossible and therefore unillustratable events. And as we move from picture to picture, all representing calm moments between the frenzied actions described by the text, Martchenko establishes a rhythm that cleverly counterpoints the text and affects our response to its meanings.

Furthermore, this rhythm is amplified by repeated patterns within the pictures, most of which show Thomas standing beside one adult, the two figures with bodies faced toward us even if their faces look towards each other or elsewhere. But there is a varying factor: the figure of Thomas appears to the left of an adult figure whenever he is in difficulty, but in his moments of triumph, he stands to the right of the adult. These arrangements may or may not have

specific significance in themselves;¹² but they certainly affect response in terms of creating expectations and then breaking them in ways that become meaningful and noteworthy simply as variations.

In *Moira's birthday*, similarly, figure 8 follows four previous pictures (five if we include the image of Moira by herself on the title page) and precedes five following ones, all of which contain at least one figure with arms flung into the air. Indeed, only two pictures in *Moira's birthday* don't show arms raised. Not surprisingly, this book seems far more frenetic than does *Thomas's snowsuit*, which more subtly implies activity rather than exulting in it; it might not be surprising, then, to discover that in *Thomas's snowsuit*, almost every picture shows figures with arms pointing downwards.

10) *Always use these same techniques. Never vary from them.* The qualities I've listed above recur in all of Martchenko's illustrations for Munsch, and help to create a consistent world—one where we know what to expect and how to respond to it. The world is further unified by its occasional self-referentiality. In *The boy in the drawer*, Shelley reads *The paperbag princess*, and a pig in *Pigs* eats a copy of *I have to go!* Most spectacularly, the teacher in *Show and tell* (figure 9) is confronted not just by Ben's "strange things," but also by Mortimer in his pyjamas, David with his father, Thomas in his snowsuit, Millicent and her pigs, the princess Elizabeth in her paper bag and with her dragon, Jonathan's jam-eating friend from city hall, and David's grandmother.

David's grandmother appears here as she does in *David's father*—merely a giant hairy leg emerging from a polka dot skirt. The text accompanying the original

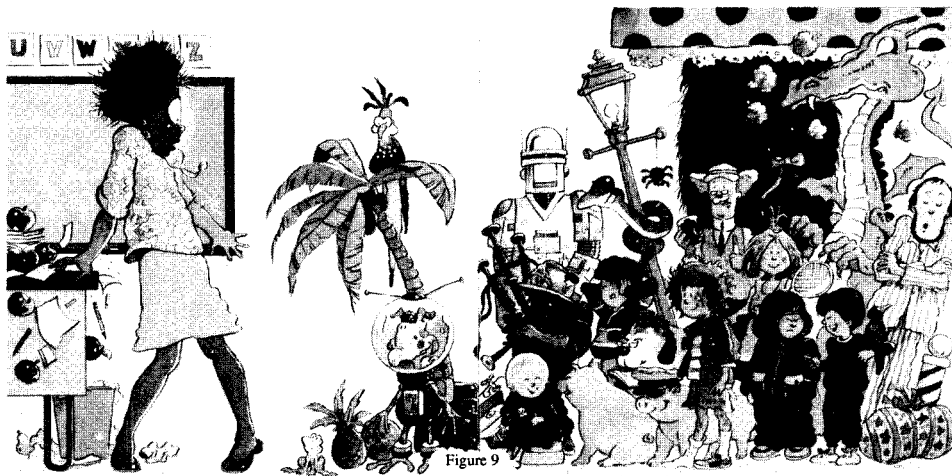


illustration doesn't mention the size or the hair or the skirt, merely saying, "Wait till you see my grandmother." This illustration has the same relationship to its text as does the picture in *Show and tell* of the teacher rocking the bawling infant, and represents one final contribution Martchenko makes to Munsch's texts:

11) *Offer visual information that makes a text's general statement into a very specific scene, and so turns the text into a dead-pan joke of understatement.* This happens specifically in final pictures, which show us, for instance, Jason sleeping in the kitchen along with his father at the end of *50 below zero*, or Megan, who “never let out any more animals. At least not any more pigs” about to pick the lock on an elephant cage at the end of *Pigs*. These pictures offer a visual equivalent to one final characteristic element of the Munsch formula: the little hint at the end of a story of even more intense chaos to come.

Intense chaos: that is the chief characteristic of both Munsch's texts and Martchenko's pictures. But it is balanced in both cases by careful artistry, a controlling sense of organization which safely allows the pleasure of chaos while being anything but chaotic. Some of Munsch's other illustrators (Suomalainen, Daniel) convey only the chaos; others (Tibo, Duranceau) downplay it so much as to seem overweighty and somewhat joyless. Perhaps they do so in attempts to illustrate uncharacteristic Munsch texts that are equally without balance—about that I am not absolutely sure. But two things I am sure about. In his stories illustrated by Martchenko, Munsch is at his most assured best; and in his illustrations for those stories, Martchenko makes an equally assured, equally masterful, and equally important contribution to the final effect.

NOTES

- 1 In “Rhymes and pictures for toddlers,” Carol Anne Wien focuses on the illustrations in three of the four books she reviews, but doesn't even mention the pictures in the fourth, Munsch and Martchenko's *Mortimer*; nor does Sheldon Richmond mention McGraw's illustrations for *Love you forever* in his review of it (“Children and the thought of death”), or Mary Rubio mention Martchenko's illustrations for *Pigs* in her review of it; and Joan Weller speaks merely of Martchenko's “colourful, lively illustrations” (95) in her review of *50 below zero*. In “Munsch: Chaotic Comedy,” Ray Jones' comments on illustrations are limited to the assertion that Tibo's work for *Giant* is “whimsical” (104) and the suggestion that a difference in skin tones in Martchenko's pictures for *Something good* implies that the children are adopted; in “Munsch Ado,” Jones labels Kryorka's work for *A promise is a promise* as “less cartoon-like than Martchenko's” and suggests that Martchenko's drawings for *Moir's birthday* “vigorously complement the prose,” but doesn't say how. In a rare perceptive comment on illustration, Marjorie Gann says, correctly, I think, that Daniel's pictures for *Good families don't*, “though witty and faithful to the text, are almost too overblown and abandoned; there is no let-up to the chaos. The genius of Michael Martchenko, Munsch's usual illustrator, is the *tension* between vertical and diagonal, stillness and movement, poker faces (usually on the children) and caricatured emotions” (65). Later in this article, I present my own analysis of how this tension operates.
- 2 The usual justification for this is that children have “visual imaginations,” or perhaps, require the visual information they easily understand in order to figure out the meanings of words. As I suggest in *Words about pictures* (1-39), neither of these is necessarily true; the convention is, finally, merely a convention, but one so firmly entrenched that publishers defy it at their peril.
- 3 Anyone who doubts that need consider only how the same events, and sometimes even the exact same words, come to imply different moods and meanings when accompanied by differing pictures in the variety of different picture book versions of widely known fairy tales like “Snow White” or “Little Red Riding Hood.”

- 4 It could, of course, be argued that the more typical Munsch tales are also grounded in the folktale tradition. But while that's true, his stories of anarchic intrusion evoke quite a different kind of folk tale: less widely known stories like the Grimms' "The golden goose," in which everyone who touches the goose gets stuck to it, for no apparent reason.
- 5 I refer to artists like Trina Schart Hyman, Errol Le Cain, Lazlo Gal, and Robin Muller. Incidentally, I don't mean to imply that no one has ever done energetic cartoon illustrations of folk tales; but cartoon renditions by artists like those by Jack Kent or Quentin Blake are relatively uncommon.
- 6 A cynic might assume that the editors at Firefly and Doubleday who worked on *Love you forever* and *Good families don't* made every attempt to ape the successful Annick formula by providing these Munsch tales with Martchenko-like illustrations.
- 7 It's possible the irony here may be intentional. The mother's statement implies a metafictional impulse on Munsch's part, a joke which draws our attention to the fact that the characters we see in *all* the pictures are in fact only pictures—that their existence is merely fictional, a sort of clever lie we have pretended to believe. This would make Desputeaux's pictures thoroughly appropriate, and suggest that both author and illustrator are addressing a highly sophisticated audience which might both understand and appreciate this internal deconstruction of a fictional world. It would be nice to believe they had this much faith in the subtlety and sophistication of child readers and viewers; somehow, though, I doubt it.
- 8 Indeed, Sheldon Richmond, comparing *Love you forever* to other picture books describing death, suggests that "feelings of return and rebirth are displayed in the grown-up son repeating the mother's ritual with his own new baby girl These are feelings the other stories talk about rather than reveal in their realistic approach" (81).
- 9 For a discussion of concerns about the violence of *Giant*, see the interesting article by Dave Jenkinson in this issue.
- 10 For a discussion of visual weight, see *Words about pictures* 125-157.
- 11 For a discussion of visual conventions used to depict the passage of time, see *Words about pictures* 158-192.
- 12 If they do, it might relate to what Mercedes Gaffron calls a "glance curve;" see *Words about pictures* 135. Our relationship to Thomas would change in relation to his differing positions on the glance curve in different pictures.

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Illustrations:

- Figure 1.** *Millicent and the wind*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Suzanne Duranceau. Annick Press, 1984.
- Figure 2.** *Giant or Waiting for the Thursday boat*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Annick Press, 1989.
- Figure 3.** *The paper bag princess*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1980.
- Figure 4.** *Mortimer*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1985.
- Figures 5 and 8.** *Moira's birthday*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Micheal Martchenko. Annick Press, 1987.
- Figures 6 and 9.** *Show and tell*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1991.
- Figure 7.** *Thomas' snowsuit*. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1985.

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