

# Illustrations, Fiction, and the Autobiographical: A Writerly Reading of That Scatterbrain Booky

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• Andrea Schwenke Wylie •

*Résumé* : Cet article puise d'un travail signé d'Eileen Conway et publié dans un numéro précédent de la *Canadian Children's Literature* concernant l'effet des images paraissant dans le roman de Bernice Thurman Hunter, *That Scatterbrain Booky*. Il examine le rôle de ces images dans l'effet réciproque entre le côté fictif et le côté autobiographique, selon le sens du « texte scriptible » de Roland Barthes, et démontre que ces images créent un métalypse qui fait remarquer les points communs entre la protagoniste-narratrice et l'auteure ainsi qu'entre les événements fictifs et historiques.

*Summary*: This paper takes up ideas explored by Eileen Conway in a past issue of *Canadian Children's Literature* regarding the effect of the illustrations in Bernice Thurman Hunter's *That Scatterbrain Booky* and examines the interplay between fiction and autobiography in terms of Roland Barthes's idea of writerly reading. It argues that the pictures contribute to the metalapses in the text that both destabilize it and enable a writerly reading of it by drawing attention to the overlaps between character-narrator and author, between fictional events and historical events or artifacts, and thus to the story's connections to the "real world." The concept of a writerly reading is used to try to untangle the relationships between form, content, and meaning.

For the concept of a writerly text to have greater currency, it needs a more practical application. The concept itself is useful in establishing theoretical positions, but if it can only be applied to (rare) anarchic texts and if the ideal writerly text cannot even be written, then what use is it? It is nevertheless possible to apply Roland Barthes's idea of writerly reading to texts that are not anarchic at first glance. Narratives such as

Bernice Thurman Hunter's *That Scatterbrain Booky* (1981) appear to be readerly, but once one begins to examine them closely, their seams are found bulging with enough questions to keep pluralists in ecstasy.

Not all that much has been said about writerly texts. A number of scholars, including Kaja Silverman, Jonathan Culler, Mary Bittner Wiseman, and Michael Moriarty, illustrate and discuss Barthes's idea, but because the writerly text itself is a rarity, discussions of the writerly text or of writerly reading tend to be limited to a description of the theoretical ground for the distinction between the readerly and the writerly. One reason that the idea of the writerly has not been put to use other than as a concept of which to be aware is presumably that it is impractical: the writerly is based on anarchic play and is basically at odds with the aim of narrative and criticism, both of which play within a set of rules or conventions that seek to organize and make sense of a series of events. While short bursts of chaos are manageable and perhaps even thrilling, extended stretches of continuous chaos are exhausting and disorienting, rendering the wild abandon of utter plurality meaningless rather than meaningful.

Barthes differentiates between two kinds of texts as well as between two kinds of reading processes, both of which are accorded the same names. A text may be readerly or writerly, and each may be read in a readerly or a writerly fashion. A readerly text is a "classic narrative," one that adheres to Aristotle's poetics of plot and is therefore considered a completed "product"; a writerly text, on the other hand, consists of a series of narrative segments which need to be brought together or made sense of by the reader in a "production." The reader of a readerly text is a "consumer," whereas the reader of a writerly text is a "producer." In other words, the readerly text is considered a finite or closed object that contains meaning waiting to be consumed, while the writerly text is infinite or open and requires the participation of the reader to produce meaning. The completely open-ended nature of the writerly text, which is thoroughly plural and does not value one meaning above others, presents a practical problem because it is ultimately unreadable.

Texts can, however, be read in a writerly fashion. In effect, Barthes argues for a model of writerly reading in which all texts are approached as plural, multilayered objects like onions, or, in other words, as productions rather than as products. Barthes's analogy of the text as an onion rather than as a fruit with a kernel illustrates the difference between readerly and writerly texts:

if up until now we have looked at the text as a species of fruit with a kernel (an apricot, for example), the flesh being the form and the pit being the content, it would be better to see it as an onion, a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own surfaces. (*Literary Style* 10)

This analogy highlights the reader's role as either the consumer or the producer of a text. The consumer-reader is conditioned to approach texts as though they were ripe, kernelled fruit awaiting consumption. If the text is like an onion, consisting of layer upon layer of meaning, will the reader approach it in the same way? What is evident in the analogy of consuming an apricot versus an onion is that one's expectations of and approach to a text are critical issues. While *readerly engagement* refers to the reader's "classic" involvement in the text, where the character-narrator is clearly a character and not a "real" person, *writerly engagement* refers to the reader's involvement in the production of meaning that exceeds the narrative proper — for example, constructing the links between the words and the photographs in *That Scatterbrain Booky*. Writerly engagement in *That Scatterbrain Booky* is the result of metalepsis, the crossing of planes between the fiction and the "real world," suggesting that the character-narrator overlaps with a "real" person to a degree that is not likely to be entirely quantifiable.

*That Scatterbrain Booky* is not likely an intentionally writerly text. However, the effect of metalepsis draws readers into the story and opens up a diversity of possibilities that make a writerly reading possible. As readers become hooked into Booky's story, they are faced with textual items that are extra to the narrative — the photographs, for instance — which strongly suggests the possibility that the story is not just Beatrice Thompson's but also Bernice Thurman Hunter's. Knowing that the first photograph is from the author's own collection immediately leads readers to question the story's autobiographical content. How can a "real" family photograph represent fictional characters? On the whole, the placing of photographs in Booky's narrative has a destabilizing effect. Rather than reinforcing the "reality" of the narrative, the photographs open a widening chasm between the written interpretation of a past that belongs to a fictional character, Booky, and an odd collection of photographed pieces that belong to a particular historical era.

Thus, the illustrations in *That Scatterbrain Booky* do not merely illustrate the writing; they are a reminder that the stories being recounted have their roots in a world outside the text. The photographs are particularly vexing because of their placement in a fictional narrative. While they seem to support the realism of the fiction and its autobiographical nature, they ultimately deconstruct any possible linear correlation between words and pictures. Rather than serve as the proof of the matter, the photographs provoke the questioning of both the words and illustrations, effectively increasing readers' awareness of dissociation by their incongruity or their lack of captions. While a first impression of *That Scatterbrain Booky* suggests that it is a simple, straightforward, and accessible narrative, further investigation indicates that this valid first impression is not complete. A closer look reveals the complicating factors that lurk just beneath the surface, and this revelation makes readers aware of the writerly text's shakier

foundation. Because of the use of metalepsis in *That Scatterbrain Booky*, it is not so easy to dismiss it as “just a story”; there is too much evidence that it is connected to the real world on some level, and this evidence is in the form of both private and public photographs. Barthes’s concept of the “readerly” and the “writerly” serves to untangle the novel’s relationships between form (autobiographical fiction) and content (Booky’s story and the illustrations) as well as between content (kernel or layers?) and meaning — relationships that are unavoidably “personal” in immediate-engaging, first-person narration.<sup>1</sup>

### Writerly Illustrations: *That Scatterbrain Booky*

The first questions that arise in an assessment of *That Scatterbrain Booky* as a writerly text are as follows: How carefully thought through was the assembling of material for this novel? Are the photographs, newspaper clippings, and advertisements original components of the narrative or extras? On some level, the intention on the publisher’s part was presumably to provide additional material and information to verify the historical setting of the novel and to thereby satisfy readers’ curiosity. The actual effect, however, is to highlight curiosity rather than satisfy it. Why do it this way — why this information and why these pictures? More information just allows for more questions if the information provided is not clearly geared at answering specific questions. The “information” provided by the illustrations in *That Scatterbrain Booky* does not anticipate particular questions, and, as a result of adding it to a narrative that consists primarily of an accumulation of incidents (as is life without predestination) rather than tightly plotted events (where Fate or the Author is clearly in control) and that is therefore already arguably fragmented, both the foundation and the structure of the text are shaky.

Its shaky foundation is precisely what makes *That Scatterbrain Booky* so engaging. Sound structure and solid foundations are the hallmarks of the classic — or readerly — text. The writerly text, by contrast, makes instability the virtue of plurality. Writerly engagement is premised on two key factors: first, the segmentation of the text, which is indicated by the lack of narrative “glue” holding the parts together (as opposed to the invisible, or well-glued, seams called for by the readerly text); and second, the plurality of possible meanings of the text, factors that can easily fall prey to negative criticism. Texts are often praised for their seamless presentation and therefore a text full of evident seams could easily be criticized as being poorly constructed. Although reality is neither seamless nor singular, the long-standing premise of the classic/readerly text is that it contains one core meaning. Even though reading practices have changed, the assumption remains — especially with regard to children’s and young adult books — that books contain messages and/or lessons for the erudition of protago-

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# That Scatterbrain BOOKY



Bernice Thurman Hunter

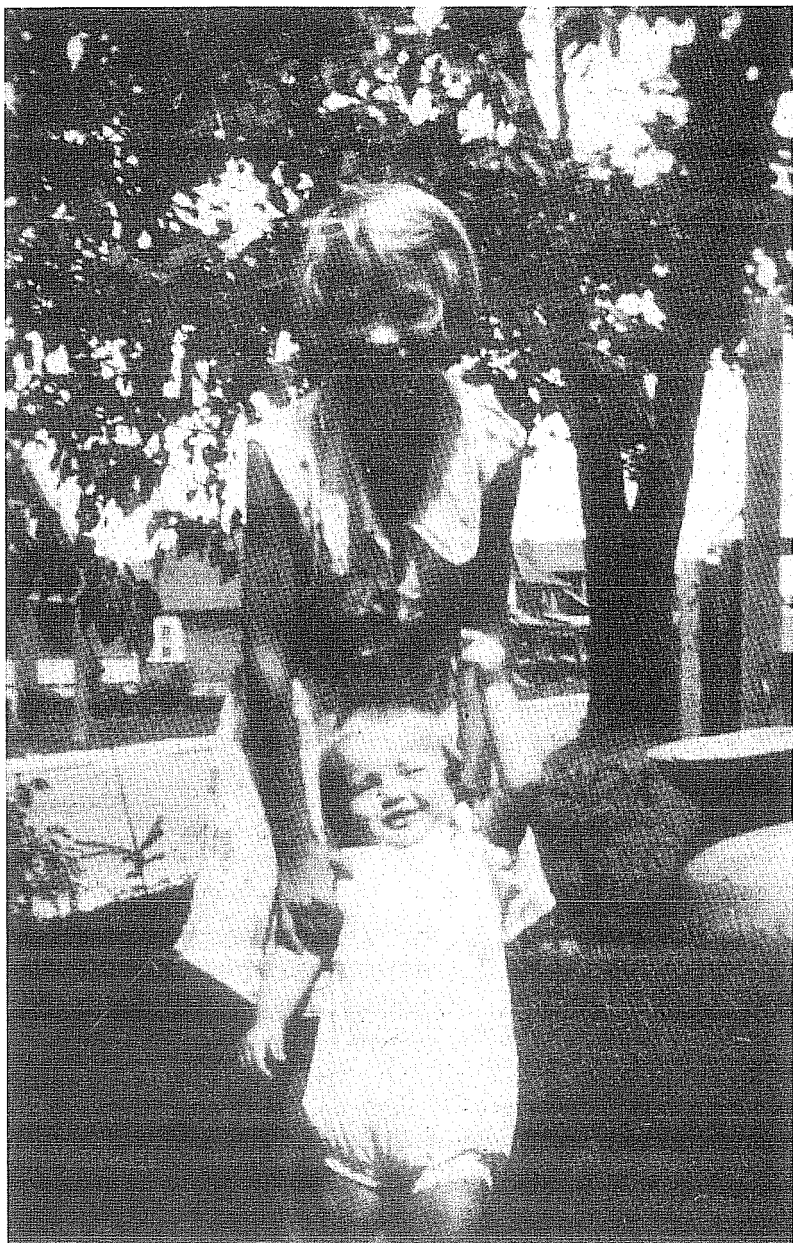
*Image 1*

Our expectations are then quickly put to the test, as all three novels also have photographs facing the first page of each opening chapter. These photographs are all from the author's own collection and are of her and other family members. They work similarly to the cover photos, showing Beatrice/Bernice at three stages of her life, but they lead readers to question the relation between the book's cover and its content. Each of the three stages is presented in a separate book. My discussion concerns the first book in the trilogy, which has the most illustrations and which is representative of how illustrations function throughout the trilogy. These illustrations are from three sources: the author's family, the Eaton's Archives, and the City of Toronto Archives. Each of these sources contributes differently

Only the photographic covers of the three novels match our usual expectations of illustrative form and content. Separately and together, they show the heroine at three stages of her life; each is carefully composed to illustrate not only significant physical features, such as size, and circumstances, such as poverty, but also some significant manifestation of the heroine's state of maturity and/or her prevailing mood in the novel in question. (45)

Regarding the covers, Conway comments:

the "primacy of meaning," a debate in which words and illustrations vie how any attempt to resolve this disjunction forces the reader to determine and the melange of captionless material used to illustrate it by examining (45). Conway demonstrates the disjunction between the written narrative produced commercial images, many of which are photographic in origin" captionless, autonomous, random family snapshots, and, in contrast, mass-illustrations as "an arresting and disturbing mixture of private, personal, between the text and the illustrations in Hunter's books. She describes the *children's Literature* in 1990, Eileen Conway discusses the problematic relation Illustrations in the *Booky Trilogy*," an article published in *Canadian Children of As Ever, Booky* (1985). In "Public Images, Private Images: Photographic one that is acknowledged is the photograph by Gordon Wyatt on the cover *Booky* novels have photographs on the cover (see image 1)<sup>3</sup>, but the only a writerly text is the use of photographs throughout the narrative. All three As stated earlier, the most obvious marker of *That Scatterbrain Booky* as whether they might be contributions rather than detriments to the text?<sup>2</sup> can recognize and try to understand these weaknesses and determine failure to achieve a literary ideal (alas, this narrative has no plot!), readers system" (Barthes, *S/Z* 4). Rather than bemoaning the text's weaknesses as a discuss what the text has to offer without being stopped "by some singular the flow of ideas and energy between "reality" and "fiction," readers can date and by viewing them as a positive feature, one that helps to explain it is not. By exploring the cracks in the four walls of its structure and foundation and readers. By engaging with the narrative in a writerly (rather than



*Image 2*

ent disjunctions and metalepses in a writerly reading.

### Family Photographs

First of all, it is worth noting that while the author willingly supplied the pictures, she was not consulted about their selection or placement.<sup>4</sup> As stated earlier, knowing that the first photograph is from the author's own collection immediately raises the question about the story's autobiographical content. How can a "real" family photograph represent fictional characters? This photograph, which faces the first page of chapter one, is presumably meant to represent the fictional characters Willa, Arthur, and Beatrice/Booky. They are standing in a garden, and Willa, the eldest, has an arm draped around the shoulder of each of her siblings. There is no clear evidence here of the poverty that is suggested in the cover photo by the worn state of the paint on the stairs "Booky" sits on. The image corresponds to the character descriptions conveyed by the narrative. However, because the photograph is not captioned, there is nothing to prevent the obvious equation invited by the juxtaposition of photograph and written narrative: author equals narrator-protagonist. This equation is complicated by the fact that the "real" family photographs have been inserted into a "fictional" text without any obvious effort to make them match the story precisely.

A strange incongruity of the photographs is that they often do not coincide with what the story details. For example, Booky feels that her new brother, Billy, will "always be special" (34) to her because he is born on her birthday. On the second-to-last page of chapter six, "A special birthday present," there is a photograph of "Booky" and "Billy" (see Image 2). Narration and image are not truly in conjunction, however. In Booky's narrative, Christmas is "just around the corner" (39) and Billy is just over a month old. However, the photograph is taken in the summer (July 1933, to be exact) and "Billy" must be between seven and nine months old. Thus, the photograph suggests that all the children appear to be based on "real life" models and, in depicting Booky caring for her baby brother the following summer, confirms that Billy will remain special to her. Nevertheless, because the girl in this particular photograph looks quite a bit older than the girl in the earlier photograph, it presents another disjunction between the story and the pictures. The effect of this photo, then, is to make readers reassess the temporal relation of the two family photos, to project ahead of the narrative by more than half a year, and to reassert the link between character-narrator and author and between fiction and autobiography. The photos encourage an autobiographical reading but leave readers puzzling about how to correlate this reading with the written narrative. Although historical artifacts or documentation may be limited, the narrative is malleable enough to accommodate them if the author wishes to do so. However, there is no effort made to fill the gap between words and pictures.



The extra-textual information that this was a publishing and not an authorial decision prompts readers to ascertain the power of the book as a product in the production of meaning, a power that the author often has as little control over as readers' reactions once the book is in circulation.

Although it is not particularly difficult to make sense of the relation between words and pictures, the pictures do not really round out the written narrative by providing answers. The final family photograph in *That Scatterbrain Booky*, which faces the last page of the written text, works well to substantiate the Thompsons' successes at the close of the book, but it also raises a number of questions. It shows Booky's mother and father (in best dress?) standing side by side in someone's yard (their own?) with "Billy" (about two years old) perched on a small tricycle. Booky tells us:

Dad was never out of work again. The humiliations of the pogeys and the bread lines, the Star Boxes and the food hampers were all behind him now. . . . And Mum finally got her washing-machine. . . . And she kept her vow about the Annex too. It never saw her again for dust! (179)

The result of this juxtaposition of words and image here again raises the following questions: How closely is the narrative related to the people in the family snapshots? Is Booky's narrative autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography? Is there a difference? The author's note at the end of the first printing of *That Scatterbrain Booky* provides information but does not answer these questions:

Bernice says that the idea for *That Scatterbrain Booky* was triggered when she was thinking about the day her brother was born — an event she recalls in vivid detail. Afterwards, many memories came back to her, and she would jot down notes about the "old times" when talking to friends and relatives. Many of the experiences in *Booky* didn't happen exactly as they're portrayed in the story, Bernice says, but they were included because they so clearly give the flavour of growing up in a large city during "the hungry Thirties." (n.pag.)

This passage maintains the ambiguous relationship between Bernice and Beatrice, but it also makes clear that the author and narrator are related by interweaving their stories and the historical fiction of family life in Toronto during the Great Depression. The ambiguous nature of this relation is typical of fictions based on autobiographical experiences, and its ambiguity will be perceived to varying degrees according to readers' personal knowledge, perceptions, and memories of the related events. The strong appeal of this story is its plausibility. As much as a scholarly reading of the text inclines to stressing the uncertainties of the relationship between author and narrator, child readers incline to its certainty, judging by their comments in reviews and letters to the author — the pictures emphasize both the conjunction and disjunction between reality and fiction.

## Eaton's Archives

The pictures from Eaton's Archives provide documentation of historical artifacts and events that help substantiate the historical setting on the one hand and serve to underscore the material desires and frustrations of the Thompson family on the other.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, the pictures serve to illustrate all the things Booky and her family do not or cannot have. The result of such illustrations, then, is to destabilize the overall text. The illustration from an advertisement of a sewing machine from the Eaton's Archives on page 36 demonstrates this effect. At this point in the story, Booky is desperate to tell her (comparatively richer) friend Audrey about the birth of her brother the previous night, but

[Audrey] just kept changing the subject to the lamb's wool coat her father was having made for her mother for Christmas. She was all excited about it because he said there would be enough fur left over to trim a coat for her. And maybe a muffler too! (36)

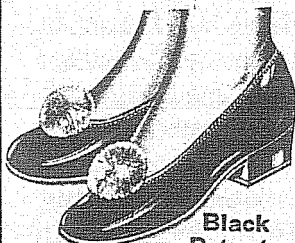
Booky is unperturbed, since her mother has just managed to make over a coat for her, despite the fact that "the trial period for the sewing machine ha[d] already run out" before "the horse-drawn Eaton's wagon pull[ed] up to the door and repossess[ed] the precious sewing machine" (37). Conway identifies the sub-theme "of material prosperity and desirable possessions" as one of the effects of the illustrations, which in the case of

the Eaton's pictures project an oddly ironic message, especially striking in their function as part of a children's book. What they illustrate, most often, is not the achievement of the tokens of prosperity and comfort; instead, they form a kind of negative image of the Thompson family's grinding poverty. The advertising text, and the sharply rhetorical accompanying illustrations, both thrust upon our awareness the merchandise that embodies convenience, comfort, and beauty. As such they furnish a bitterly exact record of what the various members of the family, especially Booky and her mother, long for in vain. (47-48)

Conway's point that the illustrations serve to highlight the irony of a situation described in the text recalls the questions raised earlier: How carefully thought through was the choice of illustrations? Were they an afterthought? Is the gap between words and pictures deliberate? The immediate-engaging written narrative itself is not ironic, and so this apparent inconsistency is further complicated by the fact that the irony itself is a result of metalepsis, of the reality represented by the images imposing itself on the fiction. Does this effect improve the fiction and/or the realism? The image of the sewing machine does not simply illustrate what a treadle sewing machine looks like; it also functions as a negative image, an image of the unattainable. While the picture provides visual clues for the historical

# MOTHERS! YOU SHOULD BUY

## You'll Find These Values Outstanding



**Black Patent**

**662-633, Black Patent Boudoir Slippers.** They have padded soles, low wood heels and dainty poms. Sizes 11, 12, 13, 1, 2 (no half sizes). Per pair.... **79c**



**Sport Oxfords**

**Sturdy Suntan and Brown Leather Sport Oxfords** with husky "No Trax" soles and heels. Just the thing for run-about wear because they'll stand lots of hard usage. No half sizes.

**662-636, Misses' sizes** 11, 12, 13, 1, 2. Per pair..... **1.35**  
**662-637, Child's sizes** 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Per pair..... **1.10**



**Snappy Oxfords**

**662-582.** Just the thing for the modern miss with a flair for style. These **Gunmetal Leather Oxfords** with the new strap and buckle sport effect are bound to be popular. Have low heels with rubber top lifts. Sizes 11 to 2 (including half sizes).

**1.98**  
Pair

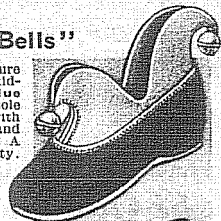
**Blue Felt**

**Pretty little Blue Felt Ribbon-Draw Slippers**, with Pawn-colored vamps and padded soles and heels. So cozy! No half sizes.

**662-655, Misses' sizes** 11, 12, 13, 1, 2. Pair..... **53c**  
**662-656, Child's sizes** 8, 9, 10. Pair..... **49c**

**"Jingle Bells"**

**662-673.** Sure to please the kiddies, these **Blue Felt, padded-sole Slippers** with Red tops and jingling bells. A decided novelty. Sizes 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Per pair... **69c**



**The "Cavalier"**

**662-632, Child's Blue Felt "Cavalier" model Slippers**, with Red collars and neat pom-poms; padded soles. Sizes 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 only. Per pair..... **65c**



©Eaton's Archives

Image 3

time period, its inclusion raises more questions than it answers.

Another example of such a negative image occurs in the chapter "Hiding from the Bailiff." Because she has been expelled from the free meal program for complaining about the food, Booky is home for lunch on a washday. Her mother is "tired and crabby" from "scrubbing on the board for seven people" (68). It is not one of the times she has an electric washing machine on a 30-day trial. Facing this description is another photo from the Eaton's Archives showing a horse and, presumably, the driver of an Eaton's wagon — he who takes away "unsatisfactory" (that is, unpaid for) merchandise. The photograph is placed facing a description of how people on "pogey" (68) managed to avail themselves, temporarily, of modern conveniences. As Conway notes, "the institutionalized memory of the commercial archive, fixing a benign image of retail distribution, is ironically converted into a private family memory of anxiety, deprivation, and overwork" (48). The photo of the Eaton's wagon and driver heightens the topic of deprivation in this chapter when Booky, her mother, and her two younger brothers lock the doors and hide upstairs while the bailiff bangs on their door. Although there is no photograph of the bailiff, he is linked with the anonymous Eaton's driver: both men have the unpleasant job of taking valuables away from people who need them but cannot afford to pay for them. The Eaton's driver's job is forgiven and understood; his retrieval of the merchandise is part of the bargain agreed to when ordering items "on trial." By contrast, the bailiff's job is resented and causes fear and anxiety. The bailiff is the scapegoat for the family's frustrated desire for a stable income.

The final illustration from the Eaton's catalogue pits desire for the fancy over the plain in its depiction of a choice of shoes, a choice that is further compromised by the necessity of taking advantage of "Opportunity Day at Eaton's" (90). Once Booky and her mother get to the shoe department in "The Annex," "Eaton's bargain store" (96), Booky falls in love with a pair of fashionable shoes, which are really too small for her, while her mother examines a sturdy, sensible pair. Booky says,

The minute I laid eyes on them I knew I had to have them. They were black patent leather with white patent bows and they were absolutely gorgeous. I could see myself in Sunday School swinging my feet out for Mr. Henderson, the Superintendent, to see. (97)

In case readers have any doubts, there is a shoe advertisement on the following page (see Image 3): "MOTHERS! YOU SHOULD BUY / You'll Find These Values Outstanding" (98). The "Black Patent Boudoir Slippers" are clearly a frivolous choice beside the "Sport Oxfords" or the "Snappy Oxfords," even if they are cheaper (in the catalogue). Here, the moral of the story is that practicality (and size!) has greater virtue than fashion, a fact

that is evident in the illustration despite the lure of the boudoir slipper.

The photographs from the Eaton's Archives holdings are not limited to catalogues and merchandise conveyance. Indeed, the double-page spread photograph of the Santa Claus parade has a similar effect to the catalogue items. The magnitude of the Santa Claus parade in Booky's mind is on par with, say, a literary allusion to Shakespeare. The photograph heightens the historical significance of the parade by virtue of its inclusion in the text. According to Booky, the best thing about the Eaton's Santa Claus Parade is that "it was absolutely free," but her father denies such a simple view: "in a pig's eye it was free . . . it was nothing but a big conspiracy by the rich capitalist Eaton Company against the downtrodden poor of Toronto" (40). Asked what a conspiracy is, he replies, "Conspiracy is when Eaton's makes poor children hanker after things their parents can't afford" (40), and yet, Booky adds that he "never failed to take us to the parade" (40). Booky's mother holds the Eaton's company in such high esteem that she tells her children that "only the real Santa was allowed to come to Toronto in Eaton's Santa Claus Parade" (43).<sup>6</sup> The parade mirrors the effects of advertisements in the Eaton's catalogue by creating a longing for an impossible ideal.

The double-page spread photograph accentuates the impossibility and the vain longing that mark Christmas for the Thompson household that year. The glories and indulgences of the parade and the Crystal Palace in Eaton's department store are starkly contrasted to the prevalent gloom and the complete absence of Christmas preparations in Booky's home:

There was nothing to show it was the day before Christmas. No last minute preparations, no whispered secrets, no delicious smell of bread and sage and onions coming from the mixing bowl. The red and green crepe-paper streamers were still in the box in the attic. . . . (52)

Neither Willa nor Arthur hang up their stockings and in "a queer voice" Willa tells Bea she does not "think Santa is coming this year" (55). When they wake up there are four stockings with "an apple, an orange and a little bag of candy" (57), but there is still no tree. A man from the Star Santa Claus fund delivers four boxes for the younger children. Booky's contains a sweater coat and matching toque and "a Betty-Boop doll with huge painted eyes looking over to one side, black-painted hair and fat stuck-together legs" (59). At the end of the day, after a satisfying meal donated by rich neighbours and a few pleasant hours with her siblings, Booky lies in bed thinking. She remembers what Santa brought Audrey last year and, as if the contrast between their lives were not stark enough, especially considering Booky's thoughts about why her mother had even considered giving Billy up for adoption, there is another Eaton's advertisement, this one for a Beauty Doll — quite a contrast to the Betty-Boop doll in the Star box. The placement of the advertisement puts an odd emphasis on one line of

text: "Last year Santa had brought [Audrey] an Eaton Beauty Doll" (64). The narrative focuses on having the means for a comfortable life, on adoptive parents who would have been "rich and kind and good, who could have given Billy wonderful Christmases so he wouldn't have to find out about Santa Claus too soon" (64). The Eaton's Beauty doll, we are led to believe, "naturally" fits into the scenario of a family in which "Billy had lots of milk and a warm cot and parents who didn't fight all the time [and in which Billy therefore] probably wouldn't cry at all" (65). The Beauty doll becomes the poor child's icon of a secure home, filled with love, food, and consumer goods, some of which are (inequitably) delivered by Santa. Ultimately, all the pictures from the Eaton's Archives foster a desire for consumer goods that serve as a measure for social success. A writerly reading inevitably leads readers to cynical conclusions about the power of advertising and the status quo.

### City of Toronto Archives

Of all the pictures in the text, the photos from the City of Toronto Archives destabilize the story the most. The captionless photo on page 77 of the house from the James Collection creates another remarkable disjunction between the written narrative and the illustrations.<sup>7</sup> In front of a window with dilapidated shutters stands a girl holding the rope of a sled with two younger children on it. Whose house is this? Are the children Booky and her brothers? Presumably it is just a house, one that looks like one of the many houses in which Booky has lived. The absence of a caption is baffling, given that there is nothing self-evident about this photograph other than that it is of a house and that the photograph does not belong to Bernice Thurman Hunter. Why, then, was it chosen? In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag maintains that "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (5). In this case, the reader has no particular reason to doubt Booky's account. While the photograph does furnish evidence, the photograph does not dispel doubt; in fact, it causes uncertainty by alerting the reader to another rift in the fictional fabric. Up to this point in the narrative, the photographs have been either Hunter's family photographs or material from the Eaton's Archives, both of which have functioned as a kind of archival/historical substantiation of the setting. As Sontag adds, "A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (5). Sontag also discusses the difference between writing, or print, and photographs in conveying knowledge of the past, a curious combination of which is at work in the *Booky* books:

But print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images, which now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. (4)

Booky's narrative gives the reader a sense of daily life by detailing her activities and preoccupations. Her turns of phrase and use of expressions are very aural and add to the written interpretation of her world. For the most part, her use of written images is underscored rather than undercut by the use of photographic images, but it is not always clear how these "miniatures of reality" fit into the narrative reality. As someone who has worked in archives, I find myself always wanting more of a context for the photographs. Are those photographs really from the 1930s? What are their precise dates? Surely someone knows the stories behind them. As a reader, I would be satisfied even with fictional captions, and so the lack of any kind of caption disturbs me.<sup>8</sup> How do the pieces of the world presented by the photographs fit into the interpreted world of the narrative?

Conway has also struggled with the issue of the "illustrations" in the *Booky* trilogy. She points out not only that "the pictures are not consistently captioned by Hunter's text" and that the pictures "are not always present or arranged so as to complement, match, or extend our reading of the text" but also that, as a result,

At first sight . . . the text and the illustrations seem almost to have been assembled under two very different impulses: the narrative is apparently controlled by memory of what happened "historically," as a piece of a personal memoir exemplifying and explained by social history; the pictures seem to represent what was more or less accidentally available or interesting to the author from either private family collections or the various public deposits of images. (46)

The feeling that the images were "accidentally available or interesting" adds to the shakiness of the text. The issue is not whether the choice of images was good or bad but rather what the overall effect of their inclusion is. The text stands on its own, but the illustrations do not, nor are the two intimately related. They are, rather, incidentally related. As Conway puts it, "Repeatedly, then, in reading the text and illustrations together, the reader is involved in determining primacy of meaning" (46). Why, then, is there a picture of a run-down house in a chapter called "Our New House"? Is it to show what Booky and her family have the good fortune of leaving behind for a few months, given that for the first time they do not end up in a house "full of dirt and bedbugs" (78)? The fact remains that the Thompsons do



*Image 4*



not simply move into a different house but into “A brand new house!” (79); this fact makes it all the more unbearable when the bailiff sends them packing again five months later. The fact that the picture of the house is “accidental” is proven by the picture of the actual house in question, which is still standing and is included here courtesy of Hunter (see Image 4). The renovations to the house do perhaps tip the balance in favour of a more historically accurate picture; however, the choice of house picture and particularly its positioning raise questions about the impulses governing the relation between fiction and autobiography. Hunter’s editor claims that one of the considerations was to not include too many family photos in order to not encourage a biographical interpretation (Kerner). Yet in this case surely the choice of photograph was not governed by the desire to preserve the anonymity of the house, especially given the fictional street name. The choice of pictures can easily be explained in an afterword; however, given the lack of explanation, it is the positioning of the pictures in relation to their content that is the source of perplexity in this book.

The double-page spread photograph of children playing coach and six<sup>9</sup> is the most “accidental” of the twelve illustrations in this book because it is not related to the text at all. It is placed in the middle of a chapter describing the last of the Thompson family’s moves, back to Swansea where Booky’s mother is from. Booky’s description of the street they now live on emphasizes the closeness of the gang of children, most of whom are related somehow: “There must have been twenty of us kids in the middle of the road on unpaved, dead-end Veeny Street” (123). One can easily imagine that the “twenty of us kids” might get up to games like the one in the photograph, but no such game is described, and, again, the lack of a caption leaves the relationship between words and illustration uncertain at best. Conway refers to this photograph under a mistaken assumption:

Another instance of the commercial iconography’s influence in family snapshots is obvious when we compare the composition of the Eaton’s Archive photograph of the Santa Claus parade . . . and its echo in *the family snapshot* of the little boys harnessed to their wagon. . . . (49; emphasis added)

While the photograph is quite likely a family snapshot, there is no indication of whose family it belongs to. This photo, like the one of the house, would work better if it were treated as a family snapshot rather than as a fortuitous but disconnected example of children at play. Captions could be used to give these photos significance in the fiction without diminishing their writerly edge. Carol Shields uses this technique in *The Stone Diaries* (1993), in which the captions accompanying all the photographs thereby invite readers to incorporate them into their reading of the narrative. Shields uses the photographs as part of her fiction and the captions help to amplify the narrative. While they function to make it appear that the story really

happened and the characters really existed, they are not surrounded by the same aura of accident and happen-chance that mark the selection of photographs in the *Booky* books. Because there are no captions to the illustrations in *That Scatterbrain Booky* and because the photo of the children playing is only obliquely connected to the text proper, the effect of the illustrations is clearly to open questions about the construction of the text rather than closing — or answering — questions, especially in the final book where there is no acknowledgment made for any of the illustrations (except for the cover photo — not a productive reversal of trends).

The illustration of the 1933 Canadian National Exhibition poster facing the opening of chapter nineteen, “Kids’ Day at the Ex,” has archival appeal and functions to substantiate the historical setting. However, what the poster depicts — working men representing power, courage, and faith — has next to nothing to do with Booky’s representation of the national exhibition. The poster can therefore be seen as a reminder that onlookers and participants perceive the exhibition differently, particularly if the onlookers are children. The other illustration of the “Ex” also does not capture the participatory nature of such an event. Booky describes one of the more freakish aspects of the exhibition, namely a side show that claims to exhibit the wonders of the world, one of which is a 36-and-a-half-pound midget mother and her 200-pound son (155). This is one time where a City of Toronto Archives photograph helps to prove the likelihood of the narrative. However, the photo depicts not just two people but a host of exoticized people, both large and small, being “exhibited” (156-57), so that the juxtaposition of Booky’s story and the photographic proof nevertheless results in a disjunction because of the difference between the story details and their photographic representation.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion: Writerly Reading

The use of family photographs throughout the *Booky* books obviously joins two projects: the narrative interpretation of growing up in Toronto in the 1930s and the chronicling of that time through visual images. The photographs that do not fit in seamlessly, like the ones depicting the house and the children playing, are like the parts of the narrative that “didn’t happen exactly as they’re portrayed,” as Hunter claimed in the author’s note quoted earlier in this paper, whereas the family snapshots add to the homey quality of the narrative: both kinds of visual representation are accessible and unpretentious and only aim to show what the “old times” were like. Their amateurish quality substantiates Sontag’s claim that “photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing — which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art” (8).

The “accidental” quality of the illustrations in *Booky* can also be under-

stood as a “making do” with what can be salvaged or what remains of the past, be it memories or photos or, in this case, a combination of both. Sontag’s remark applies equally well to Booky’s narrative:

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself — a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished. (8)

*That Scatterbrain Booky* is a narrative portrait-chronicle of the Thompson family. What connects the various images and events are the family members and the fact that they cherish the events being narrated. The ways in which readers interpret the narrative will determine not only the meaning of the narrative but also the real effect of such texts in the world.

The slippage between real and fictional worlds multiplies narrative interpretations and heightens our understanding of the role of stories in the world. Rather than offer us the completed, closed, and separate kinds of stories that readerly engaging narrative does, writerly engaging narrative gives us stories that seem incomplete, almost as if they were works in progress. Not all the ends are tied up in such stories: some gaps and puzzles remain, allusions are not necessarily predominantly classical or literary, something is always left open, and there is always room for more. Such stories make at least one significant demand on readers: they ask them not to compartmentalize fiction and reality in two separate spheres but rather to understand how they coexist and interact. Not all art need become a mass art form in order for the symbiotic relationship between life and art to be recognized. Thus, books like *That Scatterbrain Booky*, which challenge us to understand the relation between reality and fiction, between the present and the past, between being engaged and being disengaged, have an effect in the real world. This effect can be to increase discussion and to broaden definitions of literary trends and genres; to represent a recognizable life story that will either put readers in touch with their history, their families, and themselves; to change their perspective and insight on the familiar in some way; or simply to introduce them to an aspect of life they had not known or contemplated before. Even such apparently minor effects can eventually plant the seeds of change or cause readers to question the notion of progress. Recognizing the social changes that have taken place between Booky’s narrated experiences in the 1930s and the realities of growing up during the 1980s, when Hunter wrote the *Booky* stories as well as the present in which they continue to be read makes readers aware that, although change is slow, it is possible, and these recognitions can also make them aware of what kinds of attitudes and practices need changing or preserving.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- 1 I use the terms “immediate-engaging narration,” “distant-engaging narration,” and “distancing narration” to distinguish between three kinds of first-person narration. Immediate-engaging narration is when the narrator-protagonist relates the story very soon after the events have taken place, so that there is no dramatic, structural, or romantic irony built into the telling. For a fuller explanation, see Wyile, “Expanding the View”; for how such a distinction applies to picturebooks, see Wyile, “First-Person Engaging Narration”; and for how this distinction applies to third-person limited narration, see Wyile, “The Value of Singularity.”
- 2 The *Booky* books do not suffer because of a lack of plot (and some might debate the claim that they have no plot), but not all weaknesses can automatically be construed as strengths simply by engaging in a writerly reading.
- 3 Currently, the three titles are only available in collected form under the title *The Booky Trilogy* (1998), which uses the same picture as the cover of the first single title. The first edition used a different picture that was fortunately replaced because it did not suit the story. The replacement is actually a photograph of Hunter’s granddaughter, who appears on all three of the individual titles. This information is not given anywhere in the book, but I found it out during a telephone conversation with the author. Although Hunter told me that her granddaughter looks a lot like she did, she asserted with grandmotherly pride that Booky’s stand-in is much prettier. The second book, *With Love from Booky*, also went through two cover phases. Although both versions depict the same child, the lighting in the first version turned her hair from blond to black, a transformation that left many readers puzzling over the cover. The second version was shot at Mother’s Restaurant. The tablecloth and chair are very similar to what Hunter grew up with.
- 4 In her initial response to my queries, Hunter mentioned that “The publisher decided on using the pictures in ‘Scatterbrain’. . . . 21 years ago, when that particular book was published, nobody asked for my permission. I don’t know what guided the decisions” (Letter).
- 5 According to Hunter’s editor at Scholastic, Hunter helped select these ads (Kerner).
- 6 Eaton’s is of mythic importance in other Canadian texts as well, for example, Roch Carrier’s *The Hockey Sweater* (1984) and Gabrielle Roy’s autobiography, *Enchantment and Sorrow* (1987).
- 7 Regrettably, the reference numbers for these pictures are not included in the acknowledgement of permissions and are no longer on file. The James Collection of the City of Toronto Archives contains over 12,000 pictures. Some of these can be viewed on the web at <<http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/archives/>>. The only picture I was able to find there is the contentious picture of “The Circus People” (Fonds 1244 Item 279B), which I discuss further on in this paper.
- 8 Captions are used twice in *As Ever Booky*, in pictures relating to Deanna Durbin (30-31, 47) and once in Hunter’s *Hawk and Stretch* (1993) to identify “Arthur with Mum” (127). However, neither of these books acknowledges where the photographs are from.
- 9 “Coach and six” is my own description of the game being played in this photograph, in which six children, harnessed by thin rope, pull two others — the drivers, stacked one above the other — in a makeshift coach constructed out of a wagon and an elevated platform.
- 10 The picture of the Canadian National Exhibition was the one that Hunter was least happy about. She wished there had been a picture of the midway instead, something that depicts what kids did at the Ex. Again, part of the problem with this picture is the lack of context. Given Booky’s immediate-engaging first-person narration, it was difficult to include reflective commentary on the practice of exhibiting “freaks” within the story. While the mingling of Booky’s curiosity and discomfort with this “side show” is evident in her narration, the inclusion of this picture emphasizes the otherness of the circus

people rather than the ethical questions of such an exhibition. Here again, an afterword or picture notes at the end of the novel could have provided supplementary information. Apparently, the author was regularly asked during school tours whether this was a picture of her family, a fact that demonstrates how greatly meaning can be distorted in the process of interpretation.

- 11 Between the time that I wrote this paper and its publication, Bernice Thurman Hunter died (29 May 2002). I would like to acknowledge Hunter's generosity of spirit, her time, and her inspiring enthusiasm for writing — long live Booky and her extended family!

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