The Journal of the Children's Literature and Reading
Special Interest Group

INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

The Dragon Lode

VOLUME 24 NUMBER 2 SPRING 2006

Letting Arnold Lobel Pack My Luggage:

From Reader Response to Composition Strategies

By Kari Winters

Children are inspired by the writers they read. I find it useful to explore how professional writers write in the genres children are working in.... Children are seldom shown how to read their work using actual texts. Rather, they are cajoled into "writing better" without knowing how good writing unfolds or how a writer thinks (Graves, 1994, p. 222).

More than a decade ago, Donald Graves (1994) introduced teachers and children to, as he titled his book, *A Fresh Look at Writing*. Among his many excellent suggestions for improving student writing, one stood out for me: observing a professional writer's use of conventions and his or her craft to inform students' writing.

By analyzing the way a skilled, professional writer constructs a text, students not only respond to the story, but they also have opportunities to improve their own writing (Calkins, 1994). These students may begin to realize their own lives hold stories and they can use the professional's craft (how the author put the text together) to format their own understandings as they write. Rebecca Olness (1995), building on this argument, demonstrates that in helping students to discover this reading-writing connection, teachers can encourage independence while leading them to a greater vocabulary and better understanding of concepts like "voice" and "audience".

Teaching students about these connections helps them pack their own set of tools for literary criticism and composition, strategies which the students will adapt, build on, and carry with them their entire lives. It's like luggage, a "suitcase of learning." Once this reservoir of skills is packed, the students can gain independence as readers and writers. They will carry this set of reading-writing comprehension/composition strategies with them through the years, pulling out the strategies and understandings they need for each new manuscript they read or project they write.

As a writer (Winters, K., forthcoming *Jeffrey and Sloth,* Orca Book Publishers), I too am curious about the craft of others — how they write and also how they helped me pack my luggage. Many literary, musical, visual, or dramatic artists have informed my creative work — Dr. Seuss, Matisse, Judy Blume, Lyle Lovett, Robert Munsch, Dennis Lee, and Jim Henson come immediately to mind — but none as profoundly as Arnold Lobel. Lobel was an acclaimed children's writer and illustrator, who won two of the most distinguished awards in children's literature (the Caldecott illustration award for *Fables*, 1980, and the Newberry Honor Medal for exceptional writing for *Frog and Toad Together*, 1971). He also left a legacy of more than 70 published children's stories. I carry his images and words with me. They continue to teach me strategies, influence my craft, and extend my journey as a writer. Throughout this article, I will share some of the composition strategies I learned from Lobel and examine the ways that his illustrations and his narratives have been two of my essential travelling companions.

Composition Strategy #1:
Keep it Simple

I was first introduced to Lobel's books in grade two. I remember sitting weekly in the library with his characters, studying the droll brown, green, and yellow images. Compared to other illustrators at the time, I felt that his artwork enabled me to focus more clearly on the characters, giving me an opportunity to know each one intimately. Sometimes I even felt that Frog, Toad, Uncle Elephant, or Owl were drawn just for me. Perhaps I was captivated by the simplicity of the pictures — one or two characters, always foregrounded with just enough setting to place the

character/s within the narrative — or perhaps it was the believable, straightforward stories that seemed to extend my understandings of the illustrations. Either way, Lobel knew the importance of keeping it simple. His minimalism was evident both in his illustrations and in his writing.

"Keeping it simple" is emphasized by others in the field of children's literature (Amoss & Suben, 2000; Bolton, 2003; Lieurance, 2003). For example, picture book writer Darcy Pattison (2003) states "Unless a description is crucial to the story, cut it" (p. 62). And when Tradewinds book publisher Michael Katz was asked how much description of setting should be included in children's picture books, he responded: "As little as possible. Because if you add too much, kids won't read it. When authors ramble on about unimportant details, kids get bored and will choose another 'more interesting' book" (class notes, May 2005).

Research studies (England & Fasick, 1987; Irvine, 2002) demonstrate that children tend to prefer stories with straightforward language structures, few metaphors, and a clear, understandable vocabulary. As a teacher/researcher who has witnessed hundreds of children choosing books, I have noticed that books using a lot of figurative language or that are overly written (too descriptive or "wordy") can be frustrating or boring for children, causing them to quickly put the book down. According to author Anna Quindlen (2003), "the most common shortcoming of novels is excess" (p.196). She has learned to distinguish between words that exist and those that reveal. Lobel, too, knew this intuitively:

> Frog knocked at Toad's door.
>
> "Toad wake up," he cried. "Come out and see how wonderful the winter is!"
>
> "I will not," said Toad. "I am in my warm bed" (Lobel, 1976, p. 4).

In this segment from *Frog and Toad All Year*, we can see that less is more. With just these three lines the reader is offered the opportunity to (1) engage with the story, (2) understand and make connections with each of the characters, (3) visualize the setting, and (4) predict the impending conflict of the text. This example demonstrates that effective illustrated book texts do not need to be wordy or overly descriptive. Efficient writers and illustrators like Arnold Lobel are able to keep things simple, making each word or brushstroke count.

Composition Strategy #2:
Create Strong, Likable Protagonists

Creating protagonists who are both strong and likable is easier said than done. If it were as easy as Lobel makes it seem, everyone would be an award-winning writer and illustrator.

> At last the Camel said, "Now I am a dancer." She announced a recital and danced before an invited group of camel friends and critics. When her dance was over, she made a deep bow.
>
> There was no applause.... Chuckling and laughing, the audience moved away across the sand.
>
> "How very wrong they are!" said the Camel. "I have worked hard. There can be no doubt that I am a splendid dancer. I will dance and dance just for myself."
>
> That is what she did. It gave her many years of pleasure. (Lobel, 1980, p. 22)

What is it about the camel that makes her strong and likable? First, she endures. Children, like adults, appreciate characters who don't feel sorry for themselves or give up easily. Here, as depicted both by the words and in the illustration, Camel refuses to be constrained by the audience and critics. She is determined to overcome these obstacles and continue dancing. We readers understand the limits that are put on her, but still we want equity for her. When Camel says "I will dance and dance just for myself," our hearts fill with cheer and dance along with her.

A second facet is that she has flaws. As Rosellen Brown (2001) writes, "Characters' weaknesses build fiction's strengths" (p. 28). Few readers like a perfect character. Lobel demonstrates in all his works that imperfect characters appear more realistic; they work well in children's literature. To understand this idea, look carefully at *Small Pig* (1969), *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (1970), *Owl at Home* (1975), or *Uncle Elephant* (1981). Perfect characters are impenetrable, and since no one is perfect, they stunt plots. Only imperfection can allow characters the opportunity to grow and develop.

Finally, Camel has a strong voice. Voice, in writing, refers to a character's distinct feel or tone. One could say it is the character's perceived identity. In *The Camel Dances* (1980, p. 22), Lobel gives the camel a unique, determined voice by using active, direct language. Compare the two sentences below:

> When the dance was over, she made a deep bow.
>
> *or*
>
> When the dance was over, a deep bow was made by her.

Which is more engaging and more comprehensible? Readers, especially young ones, do not like to be distracted by convoluted, passive language. It

is unnatural and inaccessible. By using simple, understandable language ("When the dance was over, she made a deep bow."), Lobel conveys Camel's direct, self-confident personality.

"Show, don't tell" is a phrase often heard in writing workshops. Why? Because people, especially kids, hate to be told what to think. Again, which is more powerful?

> Toad did not want the turtle to look at him. He told Frog he was embarrassed because his bathing suit was old and unfashionable.
>
> *or*
>
> "Frog, tell that turtle to go away," said Toad. "I do not want him to see me in my bathing suit" (Lobel, 1970, p. 44).

Certainly, the second example is more empowering to the child. Not only does it evoke more of an emotional response, it gives the reader the opportunity to look from the picture to the words and back to the picture in order to figure out why Toad is embarrassed. One sees that, by using dialogue, Lobel has more effectively created empathy within the reader. I personally feel sorry for Toad. I, too, do not want him to be noticed! This dialogue makes the plot's conflict more engaging and less trivial. It is an important problem that Toad must overcome. Eventually he decides not to care that the others laugh at him, thus becoming stronger and more likable in the mind of the reader.

Composition Strategy #3:
Activate Both Verbal and Visual Literacies

Good picture books marry illustrations with text — as we look at the images and read the words, our eyes move between the two literacies, piecing together a more complete and meaningful story (Lewis, 2001). As a child, I remember how Lobel's pictures seemed to go with, but also extend, the narrative. For example, in *Owl at Home*'s chapter entitled "Strange Bumps" (Lobel, 1975), Owl is confused and a little scared by the strange bumps at the bottom of his bed. Although it is never mentioned in the text what the bumps are, a quick look at the picture informs the reader that the bumps are actually Owl's own feet. This example demonstrates how a reader who has access to different literacies can construct a fuller, more comprehensive reading experience. The sum of the parts is bigger than the whole. In other words, the text gives us one type of information (e.g. a sequence of time, the action, the character's thoughts) and the picture another (e.g. the spatial look of the room, what the character or actions looked like) (Sipe, 1998). But together, we can understand the narrative much more completely (e.g. the mood of the story, Owl's feelings about the bumps).

Lobel's books help develop verbal literacy by expanding the reader's vocabulary and comprehension. As well, they unconsciously teach about rhythm and the power of dialogue in writing. But that is not the full extent of how his books can help a reader/writer to pack his or her luggage. In addition, his illustrations capture the reader's interest and help to form his or her visual literacy. According to Sinatra (1986), visual literacy is "the active reconstruction of past visual experiences with incoming visual messages to obtain meaning" (p. 5). Stated plainly, the readers employ what they understand from past experiences and combine these understandings with new image reconstructions. In the second grade, I was coming to know that pictures are not things, but representatives of things (Snow & Ninio, 1986). I was also broadening my understanding of how an image could be represented (for example, what a drawn weasel might look like or how small a mouse might look when standing next to a weasel [Lobel, 1977]), and compiling an array of visual images that would extend my meaning-making in the future.

Perhaps this is why picture book publishers prefer that authors and illustrators not work together. They want to leave space for the writer's and the illustrator's separate visions. In this way, two similar stories — one textual and the other visual — can come together to create a dynamic relationship using distinct media; a "symmetrical vision," so to speak (Lewis, 2001).

Composition Strategy #4:
Keep Them Laughing

Lobel knew how to find humor in everyday life. Perhaps this is one of the reasons he was so well loved. Certainly children love stories that make them laugh (Bolton, 2003; Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; England & Fasick, 1980; Irvine, 2002). This is also confirmed by the number of humorous books that are nominated for child-juried awards such as *The Young Reader's Choice Award* (Pacific Northwest Library Association, 2006) or *The Irma Simonton Black and James. H. Black Award* (Bank Street Library, 2005). Both of these highly prestigious awards demonstrate that humor is a powerful composition tool.

Lobel teaches about writing humor. From his bag of tricks Lobel calls upon (1) irony, (2) disclosure, and (3) exaggeration to make us laugh. All three can be found in *Owl at Home* (Lobel, 1975).

1) Irony, defined as "an incongruity between what might be expected to happen and what actually occurs" (http://www.dictionary.com), is demonstrated in "The Guest" (pp. 4-17):

> Owl opened the door. No one was there. Only the snow and the cold.
>
> "The poor old winter is knocking at my door," said Owl. "Perhaps it wants to sit by the fire. Well, I will be kind and let the winter come in." Owl opened his door very wide. "Come in, Winter," said Owl.

This is funny because we expect Owl to be angry that the winter wind keeps slamming his door with loud knocks, but he is not angry. Instead he treats the winter like a guest and tries to be most hospitable (e.g. opening the door very wide and inviting it inside). This ironic behaviour continues until Winter blows out his fire-place and whirls up his stairs. Only then does Owl get mad and toss Winter out! This story is not only funny, it is clever and ground-breaking for its time period. Today other authors have followed Lobel's example and successfully used ironic humor in their children's books, e.g. *Amelia Bedelia* (Parish, 1992) and *Minerva Louise* (Stoeke, 1997).

2) Irony goes hand in hand with disclosure. "Disclosure allows the reader to know something that the protagonist does not know" (Agosto, 1999). In the above example, the reader knows that the winter is not a living guest, and also that most sensible characters would not let the winter in because it would make the house cold and the rug wet. Lobel skillfully uses this tool in other stories in this book too, including "Owl and the Moon" (pp. 51-64) and "Strange Bumps" (pp. 19-30).

3) Exaggeration is a slightly different but equally funny technique. In "Tear Water Tea" (pp. 31-40), Owl wants to make a kettle of tea made from his own tears. In order to get the tears he must think of things that are sad. But instead of thinking of real "tear-jerker" stories, Owl thinks of trivial instances such as "chairs with broken legs" and "clocks that have stopped... with no one to wind them." He continues to exaggerate meaningless events, appearing sillier and sillier to the young reader. By the end of the story he is sobbing over "mashed potatoes left on a plate" and "pencils that are too short to use."

Conclusion

"Unless children are conscious of an author's technique when they read, it is hard to imagine that they will deliberately borrow these techniques when they write (Calkins, 1994, p. 283). Like Calkins, I believe that children can benefit greatly both as readers and as writers by becoming aware of a professional writer's craft—learning how an author makes the student transact with, or think differently about, a particular topic.

I have gained a great deal from Lobel. He has helped to pack my luggage as a literacy teacher, as an author, and as a researcher of writing. He implicitly taught me at least four of the important writing strategies discussed above. As I continue to develop my own craft, I hope that I continue to draw upon his examples in order to engage children in the same delightful ways that he engaged me.

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