The Role of Peritext in Reading Children’s Books

By
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What is Peritext?

Peritext is a term from literary theory that is coming into more common usage among readers with an interest in how a book actually works. You won’t find a definition in the Oxford or Macquarie dictionaries however some web dictionaries define it thus:

(literary theory) Images and textual elements which surround, or are secondary to, the main body of a published work, such as an introduction, notes, front covers, etc.

Wiktionary (1)

The peritext includes elements such as titles, chapter titles, prefaces, captions and notes. It also involves dedications, illustrations, epigraphs and prefaces.

YourDictionary (2)

Think of periphery and perimeter which share the same Greek root derivation; peritext refers to the elements of a book that are around the primary word text.

The concept of peritext originated with French literary theorist Gerard Genette. He identified periphery texts, which he termed ‘paratext’ which, in turn, is comprised of two categories—peritext and epitext.

They are the framing elements both inside and outside the printed text that shape the reading experience although they are not part of the text proper. (3)

The paratextual elements motivate the reader to choose a book and enable comprehension, appreciation and navigation through the text. Peritext refers to structural elements of book design such as cover, title page, endpapers, the bibliographic details of the imprint page, chapter headings, pagination, illustration, contents page, author’s notes, etc.

Epitext refers to external elements that influence whether and how a reader reads a book such as book reviews, interviews, authors’ websites, etc.

Why Should Readers Know About Peritext?

Try to imagine a picture book text with no cover, no endpapers, no title page, no illustrations. What is missing is the peritext. Clearly, it is fundamentally important to the meaning and enjoyment of the story text. A reading of a picture book will be more meaningful and enjoyable for children if the cover and front matter of the book is considered before the reading of the text begins; the cover, endpapers, half title page and title page are instrumental in establishing characters and setting as well as the mood of the story. Martin Waddell’s Farmer Duck is an excellent example of the vital supportive role of peritext.

The peritext of novels makes for interesting discussions in mid-upper Primary classes.
I once laid out six various editions of *Treasure Island* before a class of ten year-olds and asked them to assess the books in terms of design and appeal:

*Which would you choose to read?*

The primary text was, of course, the same in all editions. However, the children considered the cover, the illustrations, the whiteness and weight of the paper, the typography, the chapter headings. The book was more than its story, it was a cultural object that invited them into a world of its own as suggested by its peritextual elements.

The edition most chosen was the 1994 Viking/Éditions Gallimard edition printed in Italy on coated white paper in clear serif text, with text-wrapped illustrations on every spread and richly bearing informatively captioned contemporary material in the outer margins to clearly illustrate the historical context of the story.

Nonfiction and information books absolutely rely on peritext for their efficacy. Elements such as the contents page, index, glossary, notes, illustration, timelines, graphics and captions enable readers to navigate the book to the information they seek. It is interesting to note that the peritextual elements are often the work of the publisher, rather than the author whose contribution largely ends with the primary text.

Readers will unconsciously use peritext in the course of reading nonfiction and information texts. However, if children learn about peritext and its role in fiction books it will enhance their skills of visual literacy as well as enriching their reading experience and developing an interest in books per se.

Showing a class how to read the imprint page with all its bibliographic details that lay out the publication history of a book can be instructive. At a time when a book’s publishing and printing history was enumerated in detail on the imprint page, one class was fascinated to deduce from the imprint page of the Puffin edition of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* its awesome popularity—year after year of reprints and new editions; *This must be a good book to read.*

**The Functions of Peritext**

There are six main functions of peritext. A US school project—the Peritext Book Club (4)—in which a student group analysed a variety of books for the function of different peritextual elements identified the following functions of peritext:

- **Bibliographic:** Elements that uniquely identify a work. Examples include author’s name, work’s title, publisher’s name and publication date.
- **Promotional:** Elements that interface between the work and its potential audience. Examples include the dust jacket, endorsements, author’s biography and award medals.
- **Navigational:** Elements that assist the reader in understanding the organisation of the work and how to search the content. Examples include table of contents, chapter titles and index.
- **Intratextual:** Elements within the work that interface between the work and the reader. Examples include acknowledgements, preface and afterword.
- **Supplemental:** Elements outside the text proper that augment understanding of the content. Examples include glossary, maps and timelines.
- **Documentary:** Elements that connect the audience to external works used in the production of the work or that reify or extend the content of the work. Examples include bibliography, references and source notes.  (4)

These points provide a useful scaffold for discussion in the classroom prior to a class reading of a picture book or novel. They also provide suitable guidance for evaluating the usefulness of informational books ahead of a research project.

Prefacing a reading of a book, if only occasionally, with a discussion of the peritextual elements enhances students’ enjoyment of the story and offers insight into
the book as an end object of a cultural and artistic endeavour that involves many people. It develops ability to critically analyse information and understand how parts work together to make an entity. It also positions students to form more critical opinions of texts and to assess the credibility of information they read.

The following activities serve as models for book discussions at various year levels.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIC PERITEXT**

Apart from the title page with the book’s title and the name of the author, illustrator and publisher, the imprint page—usually on the reverse of the title page—contains all the details of the book’s publication. A browse through the page often reveals an interesting publication background, eg. *And Picasso Painted Guernica* published in Australia in 2010 by Allen & Unwin was initially published in France in 2007, its author also being the book’s designer.

Australian Rosalind Price translated it into English for Australian publication; the book was printed in Malaysia, a whole publishing process involving three countries.

- Pick a book and examine its imprint page. Find its year of publication, the name of the publisher, where the publisher’s office is located. Was the book previously published by another publisher? In another country?
- Publication involves many different specialists. Identify different personnel who were responsible for the book, eg. book designer, cover illustrator, translator ...
- Does the book have ‘CIP’ (Cataloguing in Publication) data? What is its Dewey number? What is the book’s subject?
- If you wished to contact the author through the publisher, are the publisher’s contact details set out?
- Sometimes the font in which the text is printed is named. If the selected book identifies the font, is it a familiar one? Does the font have serifs (little cross strokes) like Times New Roman or is it sans serif (plain, without strokes) like Arial?
- All books are given a unique identifying number—the ISBN (International Standard Book Number). What is the ISBN for the book?
- In which kind of books would it be important for a reader to know the year of publication? Why?

**PROMOTIONAL PERITEXT**

Books compete for reader appeal; the reader needs to be drawn to the book. So a variety of promotional peritext is added to the book. Cover art is vital to reader appeal; a famous cover in Australian children’s books had no title nor author’s name, it simply had the image of a string of barbed wire running around the black dustcover; series fans knew it to be the latest volume in the *Tomorrow, When the War Began* series (*The Other Side of Dawn*, 1999 1st edn). The inclusion of an author biography is important in informational books in establishing the author’s credentials for writing on the particular subject.

- The front flap of a dustcover usually has a brief outline of the plot, the back flap usually has a short biography of the author. What kind of information is mainly contained in the biography? What would the reader want to know about the author? How could this information motivate them to read the book? Where are these texts usually placed in a paperback book?
- Prior to publication, publishers often send out proofs to be read by well-known authors (fiction books) and subject experts (non-fiction books). Comments written by these people are printed on the cover or elsewhere in the published book as endorsements. Locate books on the library shelves with such endorsements. Do you recognise any of the names? Why might those writers have been chosen to endorse those particular books?
- Most books carry a blurb on the back cover. Blurb writing is a tricky business—to briefly tell enough about the book without ‘giving the story away’ in a way that motivates the reader to want to read the book.
Read the blurbs of some books you have read:

How accurately do they describe the tone and plot of the story?

How is language used to persuasive effect?

- A big facsimile medal on the cover is a powerful enticement to read a book. What Australian and international book awards are represented on covers of books in the school library?

**NAVIGATIONAL PERITEXT**

Fiction as well as nonfiction books have textual features that guide the reading of the text or the location of specific information. Both have a primary text that is divided into chapters hence the need for a table of contents but the nonfiction book needs an index to facilitate the location of specific parts of the text.

- Most novels just number the chapters, others have headings that indicate the setting or the main action of the chapter or the name of the character who may be narrating that chapter.
  
  **Sandy Feet** is a novel about a family car trip.

  From the following successive chapter titles, in which Australian state were they travelling? Mossman; The Gorge; The Daintree; Snapper Island.

- Thematic motifs are often used to head a chapter.

  In **Crossing**, each chapter number is underlined with a short piece of barbed wire. What might that little image suggest about the book and its theme?

- Indexes in nonfiction books usually differentiate between text and images; page numbers referring to images are usually printed in italics or in bold type.

  Look at several information books to see which method has been used (a note usually appears at the beginning of the index).

- Some information books use book design to help the reader navigate through the different sections of the text, such as using different coloured leaves for each chapter. Find books which use unusual methods of helping the reader find their way through the text and its various parts.

**INTRATEXTUAL PERITEXT**

While most peritext is added by the publisher, there is some contributed by the author—a dedication and, if the book needs some explanation, a preface or foreword. Literary quotes which inspired the author or informed the theme may also appear in the front matter of the book. Acknowledgements of the contribution of others to the book—family supporters, publishing personnel, writers’ groups, expert advisors, et al—usually appear at the end of the book.

- Dedications often have no meaning to readers; books are usually dedicated to family members or friends but sometimes the dedication reveals literary and historical associations. **Razorhurst**, set in 1930’s Surry Hills, is dedicated to two famous writers who made the Surry Hills milieu their literary patch—Ruth Park and Kylie Tennant. Find other examples where books have been dedicated to fellow authors.

- Peritext works ‘hand in glove’ with the primary text in the **A Series of Unfortunate Events** series. Every book is dedicated to a Beatrice who is not a character in the books but whose name crops up from time to time: To Beatrice—darling, dearest, dead; To Beatrice—I would much prefer it if you were alive and well; For Beatrice—I cherished, you perished. The world’s been nightmarished. What might the reader predict about the books from these dedications?

- Humorous books often have comical dedications. Check the dedications in books by well-known writers of humour, eg. Anh Do, Andy Griffiths.

- Historical fiction humanises history with a character-focussed story. However, the reader may be left wanting to know more about that era and its events. So the author provides background information in an afterword. **The Rattercher’s Daughter** sets out a brief history of the plague in Queensland and its occurrence
in other parts of the world to this day. Locate books of historical fiction and check their afterwords for an account of the history on which they are based.

- The preface usually notes the author's intention for writing the book. A particular person or event may have inspired her. In Off to War Deborah Ellis tells why she felt the need to interview the children of soldiers sent by their countries to fight in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
  - Why might some books need the author to explain why the book was written?
- A poem, quote or song lyrics sometimes begin novels; it is like a key to understanding the story or its characters. Two Wolves opens with a little fable about a battle between a good wolf and a bad wolf.
  
Read the fable and suggest how it might relate to the characters and plot.

SUPPLEMENTAL PERITEXT

To help the reader understand the text, features such as a glossary, maps and timelines are sometimes appended to a novel, usually historical fiction even though these are normally featured in informational texts.

All three reference features are found in the novels of the Through My Eyes series which relate a child's perspective of various wars and conflicts. How might these features help a reader empathise with Malini, a young girl in war-torn Sri Lanka?

DOCUMENTARY PERITEXT

Again, this is peritext found in informational books which verifies the content and lists various sources of information used in researching the content of the book—references, bibliography, websites. There may even be suggested reading lists, websites or organisations that can be accessed for further information on the subject.

These texts are sometimes seen in novels, such as the Through My Eyes series.

- The historical novels of the My Australian Story series often acknowledge research sources as can be seen in the end matter of Convict Girl. Select titles from the series and peruse the end matter to appreciate the depth of research that goes into such historical fiction.

WHEN PERITEXT BECOMES PRIMARY TEXT

In some novels, especially facsimile diaries and other epistolary stories, all parts of the book combine to relate the story. An excellent example is 45 & 47 Stella Street and Everything that Happened.

The narrative begins on the cover with hand-scrawled ponderings about setting out to write the story.

The book finishes in similar style on the back cover with a handwritten blurb by the protagonist/narrator's best friend.

Inside, everything including the title page and contents page is the work of the young narrator, Henni Octon.

So convincing is it that I once saw this novel by Elizabeth Honey catalogued in a school library under the authorship of Henni Octon!

We can dismiss the old saw about never judging a book by its cover. Covers, and all other peritext, do indeed help readers ascertain what a book is about, what it is like, and if it is of particular interest to the reader to proceed to read it.

Miriam Martinez etc in their investigation of the peritextual elements of Caldecott Award-winning picture books acknowledge trends in book design that underscore the role of peritext. In more recently published books especially, important plot elements may unfold only in the peritext (This can be seen in Bob Graham's picture books). Their analysis led them to conclude that exploration of peritextual features fosters in young readers a richer understanding and fuller engagement with the narrative.
CITED CHILDREN’S BOOKS


Sandy Feet (2014) Nikki Buick, UQP, 257pp. 978 0 7022 5315 7 Pb


Off to War (2009) Deborah Ellis, Allen & Unwin, 175pp. 978 1 74175 679 1 Pb


Convict Girl (2014) Chrissie Michaels, Scholastic Press (My Australian Story), 235pp. 978 1 74362 015 1 Pb


Treasure Island (1994) Robert Louis Stevenson, Viking, 296pp. 0 670 86795 0 Pb


REFERENCES

1 https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/peritext
2 http://www.yourdictionary.com/peritext#SVVlUvICQG8PaIz.99
3 https://muse.jhu.edu/article/494296/summary
   Expanding Genette’s Epitext Narrative, Vol.21 No.1, Jan. 2013 pp.105-124
4 https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1125289.PDF
5 https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1107236
A PERITEXTUAL EVENT


Lemony Snicket's series uses peritextual features very effectively to attract readers and to establish suitable mood and mystery.

1. What is your first impression of the book? What do you expect from it?

2. List the design features that make it like a book from many decades in the past.

3. Look at the expressions on the faces on the covers. How would you describe them?

4. What is the 'tone' of the dedication inside to someone named Beatrix?

5. The blurb is unusual with its suggestion that you do NOT read this book! How can this attitude possibly promote the book? What is going on here?

6. Describe the style of language used in the blurb.

7. What might the style of language in the blurb suggest about the story inside?

8. Look at the chapter opening illustrations. How are they all different yet similar?

Even the author's biography is bleak. Why is this so?

9. 

10. The books are very cleverly designed. All the peritextual elements you have examined combine to stimulate a response from the reader. In which ways did the book attract you and what kind of story did you expect to read in it?

Name:
PICKING PERITEXT

Pick out the different peritextual elements that provide the following functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIBLIOGRAPHIC</th>
<th>INTRATEXTUAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elements that identify the book</td>
<td>Elements that communicate between the author and reader</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROMOTIONAL</td>
<td>SUPPLEMENTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements that promote the book to the author</td>
<td>Elements added to the list to help understand the content</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAVIGATIONAL</td>
<td>DOCUMENTARY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements that organise the text content</td>
<td>Elements that connect the reader to sources of information used to write the text</td>
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Name: _______________________________