

11-15-2010

Picturing Rural America: An Analysis of the Representation of Contemporary Rural America in Picture Books for Children

Karen Eppley

Penn State University, Altoona, keh118@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eppley, K. (2010). Picturing Rural America: An Analysis of the Representation of Contemporary Rural America in Picture Books for Children. *The Rural Educator*, 32(1), 1-10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v32i1.433>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Rural Educator by an authorized editor of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

Picturing Rural America: An Analysis of the Representation of Contemporary Rural America in Picture Books for Children

Karen Eppley

Penn State University, Altoona

A quiet but persistent dialog about the importance of place is happening in educational research. This study contributes to that conversation by offering a critical analysis of how picture books show a “placed,” rural America. To increase understanding of the social constructions of rurality, 24 picture books were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to determine how contemporary rural life is represented in picture books for children. Results indicated images falling into six categories: Rural people are self-reliant; rural people are connected; rural people are satisfied and happy; rural people are diverse; rural areas are expendable and, rural people are ‘Other’.

Key words: Picture books; children’s literature; representation; semiotics; contemporary rural life.

Children’s literature portrays particular aspects of reality and the human condition (Serafini, 2004), offering children insights into worlds like and unlike their own. Picture books that portray rural America represent a tiny fraction of picture books published each year, yet 30 percent of school-aged children live in rural America (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009, n.p.). At the very least, this statistic points to a disconnect between the imagined audience for picture books and the actual context in which a significant percentage of their readers live. A report by The Rural School and Community Trust (2009) indicates that although the children of rural America are “widely dispersed, and richly diverse in many ways, these students are largely invisible, ignored in educational research, overlooked in state and national policies, and sometimes caricatured as backward or worse” (n.p.). Rural representation in picture books is a decidedly smaller domain than policy or educational research, but one that is perhaps equally relevant in the everyday life of a child. Countering a general preoccupation with all things urban (Johnson & Strange, 2005), this qualitative visual content analysis of contemporary rural America in picture books adds to understanding about the social construction of rurality. The choice of the picture book genre is important because the texts contribute to children’s understandings of place and what it might mean to be rural.

The Genre of Picture Books

Nodelman (1998), in *Words About Pictures*, the seminal text about the picture book genre, defines picture books as “books intended for young children which communicate information or tell stories through a series of many pictures combined with relatively slight texts or no texts at all” (p. vii). They are written for children and thus are short texts compared to novels or juvenile

literature. The text is often, but not always, succinct and undetailed (Nodelman, 1988). Picture books ranked in the top ten on Publisher’s Weekly most recent list of all-time bestselling children’s books include *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, and *Pat the Bunny* (Roback, Brittan & Hochman-Turvey, 2001). The illustrations in such picture books function differently than pictures hanging on a gallery wall. Print and pictures are combined, working together to tell the story (Nodelman, 1988), and often the pictures assume more than a supporting role in the narrative. The illustrations confirm and make more specific both the print and the other pictures in the book; they explain and clarify words, and not only take up most of the space in a picture book, but also bear the burden of conveying most of the meaning (Nodelman, 1988). The picture book’s reliance on visual information makes the genre somewhat of a literary anomaly. The setting of a picture book, included in what Nodelman calls “the way things look” (p. 202) is most often portrayed visually, rather than in the prose. The setting also establishes what Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) describe as a “pervasive affective climate” (p. 61), such as a sense of nostalgia that orients readers’ emotional responses. The amount of visual support offered in books for children is directly proportional to the age of the intended audience. Younger readers are often the intended audience for picture books because typically, the visual information in picture books offers more support than texts with fewer pictures (Nodelman, 1998).

Picture books are common in early elementary classrooms: The benefits of reading aloud to children are well-established in language and literacy education research (Beauchat, Blamey, & Walpole, 2009; Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004). In addition, picture books are frequently used more directly for reading instruction

(Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Thompkins, 2011).

In response to the whole language movement of the 1980s, adapted versions of picture books frequently appear in commercial reading materials (see Goodman, 1988; Goodman, Maras, & Birdseye, 1994; Hade, 1994; Shannon & Goodman, 1994). Commercial reading programs, often called basal readers or core reading programs, include abridged versions or full texts of children's literature grouped in grade-specific reading anthologies (Goodman, Maras, & Birdseye, 1994; Hade, 1994; Shannon & Goodman, 1994). These reading anthologies include previously published picture books in their entirety or re-formatted and abridged versions, and are used as the main reading instructional material in many school districts across the country (Faison & Ruetzel, 2000; Kersten, Apol, & Pataray-Ching, 2007).

We know that literature has the power to bridge the known to the unknown (Marshall, 1998), can work in support of an anti-bias curriculum (Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Harris, 1997), and can be an impetus for social justice. Equally important, is the knowledge that literature also validates children's identity and knowledge of self (Agbaw, 2008; Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001), writing about African American children's literature, ask "What if you can't find yourself?" (p. 810).

The notion that the texts with which children interact influence their views of themselves and others is not new territory in the study of children's literature. Scholars of children's literature have analyzed the portrayal of Native Americans (Lewis, 1987; Roberts, Dean & Holland, 2005), the portrayal of African Americans (Agbaw, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd 2001; Hughes, Barkley & Koehler, 2010), and gendered images (LaDow, 1976; Peterson & Lach, 1990) in children's literature in an effort to understand the representation of marginalized groups. The printed texts of childhood are powerful sources of information, both positive and negative, that readers use to inform and revise their understanding of the world and themselves (Fleckenstein, 2002). The images we see, in printed texts and elsewhere, not only structure our worlds, but also position us in our worlds (Fleckenstein, 2002). Children's literature is uniquely powerful in that the most revered texts, such as *Winnie the Pooh* or the *Little House on the Prairie* books, "become assimilated into the ongoing development of discourses as they are re-read by subsequent generations" (Jones, 1997, p. 160). The visual images that we see become a part of us, anchoring us to our identity and our place in reality (Fleckenstein, 2002). The images we see structure our perspective of and relationship to rural life (Bell, 2000).

These images are not always complimentary and sometimes show what Donehower (2007) characterizes as extreme deficiency, for example, "illiterate hillbillies" and "ignorant rednecks" (p. 37). Appalachian writer Gurney Norman claims that "hillbillies" are the last group it is

acceptable to ridicule (Billings, 1999, p. 9). As adult readers of these books, we present them to children because we approve or at least are comfortable with the values and images they contain. Both the writing and sharing of the books work to reinforce their messages for the children and adults who engage with them. The result is a contribution to a cycle of socially acquired knowledge about what it means, and does not mean, to be rural.

Bell (2000) argues that stereotypical representations should not be dismissed because decoding them helps us understand more about the ways we construct the world around us and how "we" are constructed by others. Bakhtin (1981) observes that learners' "struggles" with discourses of others are enormously important (p. 348). Though Bell does not use the term, he is advocating reading the texts from a critical stance. Critical literacy means approaching texts with the awareness that they are not neutral. Power relationships and identities are reinforced and contested in text and their interpretation is open. Reading from a critical stance means that readers question how events and people are created in texts (See Christensen, 1999 for examples). Both the complex act of critical deconstruction where readers begin "to see how we see things" and the consequences of the new understandings, are difficult (Jones, 1997, p. 158).

The study explores the following set of questions: How is rural life constituted in picture books? What elements of rural life do the authors reinforce? In what way do the texts caricaturize rural residents? The analysis engages poststructural ideas about discourse, representation and text.

Poststructural Concepts

Poststructuralism, according to Davies (2000), "open(s) up discourses and practices to questioning" (p. 169) and provides strategies to interrogate what might be considered common sense discourses and practices. Discourse in poststructural theory is similar to ideology in that both are ways of making sense of the world (Davies, 2003). In the Foucauldian sense, discourses are bodies of knowledge (McHoul & Grace, 2002) through which we understand and express meaning. The language and language-like communication system of a group (Davies, 2000), such as 'rural' or 'teacher', is discourse; everyone has membership in multiple discourses (Davies, 2000). One discourse about rural people, for example, includes ideas about the passivity of rural citizens. Billings, Norman & Ledford (1999) offer stories about activism in Appalachia that counteract this discourse. A portion of their edited volume highlights a rural tradition of grassroots efforts to improve and maintain rural life by actively resisting political and economic repression. Another "commonsense" view or discourse about rural life is that Appalachia is isolated and homogenous (Lewis, 1999).

Any text, this analysis included, is both authored and interpreted from a “situated interpretation” (Alcoff, 1995, p. 101) based on one’s multiple discourses. The text of this analysis is authored from the perspective of a lifelong rural resident who has used poststructural and critical theories to consider the complexity of rural life and its representation (see Eppley, 2007). In the Derridean sense, all texts are ambiguous and invite multiple rather than one conclusive interpretation. Within this view, no text is neutral, and interpretation is value-laden: Texts are not only created within discourses but also actively position readers within discourses. The books in this study define rural in particular ways and the analysis is based on the premise that their defining of rural is neither accidental nor neutral. Semiotics assert that even the most literal representation is not literal at all because our social context informs the meaning we make from the representation (Barthes, 1985). Our social context and cultural experiences, then, dictate the sense we make from text, but this relationship is dialogic in that what we read influences our other meaning-making. In Bakhtinian terms, the reader/text dialogue, “leaves its imprint on both the reader and text, and that dialogically contributes to others’ readings and uses of language and the construction of other texts and utterances across time/space” (Dressman, 2004, p. 43).

Method

The methodology used was qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Although content analysis is more often quantitative than qualitative, quantification is not a “defining criterion” for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 87). A qualitative content analysis of the visual images in the books was especially appropriate for this study for two reasons. The categories derived from a qualitative analysis can include either explicit or inferred information (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Because of the rather “slippery” nature of the concepts being analyzed and the small sample size, this approach was a necessity in this study. Subjective judgment was necessary because visual representations of a construct such as “rural” cannot be quantified and still retain a meaningful whole. Additionally, conventional qualitative content analysis, where coding categories are derived from the data, is appropriate for new lines of inquiry such as this one because there are no preconceived categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) from existing research to color the analysis.

The Sample

A list of potential titles was generated using a variety of strategies and sources: Internet and university library catalog searches, a post to a children’s literature listserv, recommendations from colleagues, book store browsing, and the author’s personal knowledge of children’s literature. Because the intent of the analysis was to analyze the portrayal of *contemporary* rural American life being lived by child readers today, scores of books with historical settings were excluded. Subjective judgment was required to determine which texts counted as contemporary. “Contemporary” meant modern life in general, rather than a particular span of dates, but many of the books appear to take place in the 1980s. Defining contemporary in this way was also compatible with the author’s own identity as a contemporary rural resident. If the setting of the book depicted a rural life as lived by contemporary children, it was included. Most books were set clearly in either historical or contemporary time; automobiles and clothing were frequent indicators. For example, a text by Patricia McLaughlin, *What You Know First* (1995), was excluded because a Model-T Ford dates the story. What remained was a small pool of 24 texts¹ that were either clearly contemporary, such as *The Chicken Chasing Queen of Lamar County* (Harrington, 2007), borderline, such as *Prairie Town* (Geisert, 1998), or nondescript such as *Old Henry* (Blos, 1987).

To maintain an adequate sample and accommodate the varying definitions of what counts as rural, qualifying portrayals of rural life were not strictly defined. Judgments about what could be a portrayal of rural life were generous and based on the author’s own identification as a lifelong rural resident. Open space was the clearest indicator, but there were exceptions. *Old Henry* (Blos, 1987) shows what appears to be a rural village, even though the residents form a “committee” and tell Old Henry to clean up because, “We are proud of our city” (Blos, 1987, n.p.). “Committee” and “city” work within the rhyming scheme of the story, and so, because there are no other indications that the book is set in a city, the book was included in the sample. Outdoor scenes usually offered clear signals about the setting of the book. It was easier to determine if the books had a rural setting (or not) than it was to determine if they were contemporary (or not) because characters were often shown outdoors. Although only four of 24 books were authored by African American writers and showed rural African American children, an eye was kept to diversity during the sampling process. Because the analysis concerns the representation of children in rural America, picture books that depict animals as characters were excluded. Books based on childhood memories of Canadian authors such as *If You’re Not from the Prairie* (Bouchard, 1993) were also excluded, as were alphabet books such as *S is for Sooner: An Oklahoma Alphabet*

¹ See list of cited children’s literature in the bibliography.

(Scillian, 2003).

Banks (2001) notes the importance of differentiating between the form and content in the analysis of visual data. The analyzed images are in the “form” of picture book illustrations, while the “content” is the depiction of objects, characters, activities, and places. Banks refers to the content of the images as constituting an “internal narrative” (p. 44). While this study analyzes the internal narrative of the books, that is the content, the findings are contextualized within “external narratives” (Banks, 2001, p. 44) about rural life in contemporary America.

Data Analysis

As suggested by Tesch (1990), data analysis began with repeated readings of the data pool to get a sense of what remained after the exclusions. The overarching question kept in mind during the initial reading was *What does it mean to be rural?* Because pictures and print work closely together in picture books (Nodelman, 1998), while the words of the story cannot be ignored, particular attention was paid to the pictures in each book. After and during the repeated readings, notes were made about each title related to how objects, characters, activities, and places were depicted. The initial notes were early codes; related codes were then grouped into larger categories. Most books were represented in multiple categories. Characterizations of rural life not common to several other books were discarded or subsumed within a larger category. The coding categories were open in the sense that they were not identified in advance, but were derived through the process of analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) characterize this type of qualitative content analysis as conventional. In other words, this was not a process of identifying data to validate or disprove a theory about the representation of rural American. While the data analysis was linear, especially early in the process, it was often recursive, too. Numerous repetitions of each step led to new insights and clarification of the themes. The exemplars used in the findings and discussion were titles that offered particularly clear examples of a code such as “slovenly appearance” or category such as “rural as Other”.

Findings

The representations of rural life in the books were grouped into six major categories; the number of incidences appears in brackets after the category: (a) *Rural people are self-reliant* (11); (b) *Rural people are connected* (18); (c) *Rural people are satisfied and happy* (22); (d) *Rural people are diverse* (5); (e) *Rural areas are expendable* (2); (f) *Rural people are depicted as ‘other’* (8). The small sample size confirms the relative invisibility of rural America (The Rural School and

Community Trust, 2009, n.p.) in children’s literature.

Rural People are Self-reliant

In roughly half the books, rural characters display self-reliance and a positive work ethic. Instead of purchasing goods and services, they frequently produce agricultural products for others to buy or operate a small business, such as the junkyard in *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997). They demonstrate self-sufficiency in ways that allow them to consume less frequently by vacationing at home, heating with firewood, collaborating with neighbors on construction projects, gardening, and making their own toys and found art. Nonna’s grandson who visits from the city in *Everything is Different at Nonna’s House* observes, “We don’t get flowers at the corner shop. They grow right outside the kitchen door” (Cohen, 2003, n.p.). In *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992), it is not the community as a whole that demonstrates self-reliance, but rather the individual. Indeed, the reader wonders if his community has not deserted the Paper Bag Prince who subsists entirely on the town’s garbage. He rejects electricity and lives in the town dump.

Rural communities as a whole also exhibit self-reliance by taking care of their own needs. Every page of *Prairie Town* (Geisert, 1998) shows townspeople completing various outdoor tasks together. In *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005), the main character, Darrell, plows 21 driveways, gives a neighbor wood for heat “to keep those kids warm,” excavates the neighbor’s foundation, puts in a pond for a child, and approaches neighbors to ask what they need for winter. In turn, the neighbors reroof Darrell’s barn without being asked. The reciprocity between Darrell and his neighbors enables them to live independent of outside assistance. When one family needed assistance with heating, it was a community member who assisted, rather than a social service program.

Images of outdoor manual labor were very common, suggesting a specific kind of self-reliance. Rural people were not seen carrying briefcases, doing paperwork, or using technology. Images of reading were limited to one instance of newspaper reading in *Auction* (Seymour, 2005). Traveling to and from construction jobs in pick-up trucks was common, as was engaging in work around the farm or home. Women typically completed indoor work consisting of washing dishes by hand or cooking. The rural characters rake, garden, repair broken items such as fences and toys, paint, farm, hang laundry out to dry, work on construction projects, and do auto repair. One character who owns his own business quips, “Ain’t nobody that don’t need a mechanic” (Borton, 1997, n.p.).

Rural People are Connected

Fifteen out of the 24 books in the sample clearly demonstrated positive family relationships. Shared meals were overwhelmingly common, suggesting wholesome, safe, and nurturing rural family environments. Relatives of all ages talked, hugged, walked, slept, worked, explored, vacationed, and played together. Seven of the 15 books depicting positive family relationships displayed explicit efforts to strengthen intergenerational ties. In five of the books, storytelling was the tie between grandchild and grandparent. Grandparents offered life lessons and shared particular places and activities that were significant in their own childhoods. *The Auction* (Andrews, 2007) tells of how a grandfather and grandson use storytelling to cope with the loss of the family farm. While the child in *The Auction* (Andrews, 2007) will not be able to realize his dream of becoming a farmer like his grandfather, supporting a young child's efforts to participate in farm work was a common activity in the books.

Rural people are also connected to nature. The rural characters in the book were often explicitly connected to the outdoors. The nature of the work rural people do is highly seasonal, but almost all of the books take place in the summer. Time is frequently measured explicitly by the sun and moon, and characters often comment on, and are outside under, the night sky. Sometimes the connection is more intentional. In *Grandpa and Bo* (Henkes, 2002), for example, Grandpa teaches Bo the names of multiple plants and animals. *Prairie Town* (Geisert, 1998) is organized seasonally, and the length of the vacation in *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1993) is measured by the amount of time it takes a grape crop to ripen. The depth of *The Paper Bag Prince's* (Thompson, 1992) connection to his land is such that it presents as mental illness.

Rural People are Satisfied and Happy

In all but two of the books, *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992) and *The Auction* (Andrews, 2007), rural people appear satisfied and happy, regardless if they are living in poverty or lead uneventful lives: "Exciting things don't happen very often in Crabtree County" (Nolan, 2003, n.p.). The plots of six books are based on vacations to the country, often to visit elderly relatives. Rural life is romanticized, evidenced by the noticeable lack of tension in most of the stories, the repeated references to quiet and the slow pace, the bright colors used in the illustrations, and the pastoral scenery. Sensory details are prevalent and interior scenes are appealing and often depict family mealtimes. Even when the books appear to be depicting poverty, such as *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1993) and *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997), it is not offered to the reader as germane to the story.

Rural People are Diverse

Diversity was limited not only to race, but conceptualized broadly to include other markers of difference. Just three of the books depict rural African Americans; all other characters are Caucasian. However, other differences within rural communities are shown, contradicting a commonly held misconception of the homogeneity of rural communities (Lewis, 1999). Difference in aesthetics and class, for example, is offered in *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) and *Old Henry* (1987). Robert, in *Junk Pile*, "just moved into the big house on the ridge" (Borton, 1997, n.p.) and teases Jamie Kay because of the junk in her yard. Similarly, Henry's adult neighbors in *Old Henry* (Blos, 1987) object to the rundown condition of his rented home. They confront him, demanding that he maintain a neater yard that meets the neighbors' standards. He initially resists, but unlike Jamie Kay in *Junk Pile*, his loneliness eventually compels him to comply.

Rural Areas are Expendable

While only two of the books explored the expendability of rural spaces, it is a significant theme that reflects current struggles in many rural communities and thus bears mentioning. Neither text in the sample suggests that the citizens resisted the government-initiated changes to their community. In *Letting Swift River Go*, Jane Yolen (1995) details the effects of the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir on a number of small towns in western Massachusetts. The story is told from the point of view of a former resident who returns home to reflect on the changes to her growing-up place. Finally, *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992) offers readers insight into how an individual's property rights can be usurped for governmental interest and alludes to the use of rural areas as toxic waste depositories.

Rural People are Depicted as Other

One-third of the total sample fell into the category in which rural people were depicted as other. These books were grouped together not only because of messages about aesthetics and poverty, but also because the characters exhibited a variety of what could be considered atypical or stereotypical behaviors. Sometimes this presented as "hillbillie" imagery.

Three books: *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1993), *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992), and *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) depict rural people as slovenly or unkempt. Characters wear ill-fitting, dirty, or tattered clothing. Consistent with such a depiction of rural people, a segment of books focused with varying detail on the "un-suburban like" condition of the homes and outbuildings. Exterior spaces are shown replete with

broken down cars, cluttered yards, half-completed construction projects, and houses in various states of disrepair. Two notable characters, both older men, choose to live in stereotypically “junk” surroundings. Of the books that depicted poverty, only one, *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005) does so without stereotypical representations.

Four of the books explicitly depict rural people as dim-witted or, in some texts, mentally ill. The rural residents in *The Lizard Man of Crabtree County* (Nolan, 2003) mistake flipper tracks for monster tracks, a dog howling for monster wailings, and a pool toy for a monster. In a much darker book, the 69-year-old male, paper bag collecting main character from *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992) refused to leave his land after a forced sale to the city. The city purchased his property for a new town dump, but the Paper Bag Prince does not leave. In suit and tie, he scavenges and hoards: 12 wardrobes full of paper bags, 19 television sets, and 87 odd shoes. The book reinstates the discourse of rural residents as victimized by outside interests. In another book, *Old Henry* rents a dilapidated home, choosing not to “live like the rest of them, neat and the same” (Blos, 1987, n.p.). He lives in his dirty, falling-down house, “With enough money to pay the rent, his books, and cooking pots, he was content and never did notice (or else didn’t care) that people whispered everywhere: ‘That place is a disgrace’” (Blos, 1987, n.p.). Old Henry is eventually run out town for his refusal to conform, but later asks the neighbors if he can return. The book never tells why the neighbors felt Old Henry, rather than the landlord, should be responsible for fixing up the house.

Auction by Tres Seymour (2005) portrays a family’s experience at a country auction. The author attempts to portray the country auction as the unique part of rural culture that it is and for this he should be commended. The book captures the fun of making an impulsive purchase and the pleasure of outbidding competitors. More importantly, Seymour represents the country auction as an important site of interaction in this rural community. These positive aspects of the text, however, are overshadowed by its garish portrayal of rural people as “hillbillies”. While the characters’ appearances are slightly odd, with ruddy red complexions strikingly similar to Li’l Abner, and clad in ill-fitting, homemade clothes, it is the enthusiasm with which they bid on junk that is offensive. The objects that they purchase at the auction not only appear to be worthless, if not broken (“a guitar with no strings”), but are stereotypical icons of rural life: a washtub, potbellied stove, a “ragged old” cowboy hat, stuffed groundhog (sold for \$175), an old saddle, plastic flowers, and deer antlers. While an estate auction is a great place to find unique or interesting items at bargain prices, the message here is that these rural people either lack the commonsense to know junk when they see it, or lack impulse control and adult judgment

about money management. Despite the positive aspects of the book, the result is a parody of the country auction and a missed opportunity to candidly represent this element of rural life.

Discussion

The last category, *Rural People as Other*, is the most negative and thus additional contextualization is required. Clearly the books in this category present stereotypical ideas about rural people and their lives. Because of this, it might be tempting to simply avoid them. However, these books in particular invite opportunities for children to interact critically with the texts. Depictions of rural people as slovenly or unkempt such as *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1993), *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992), and *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) invite critical discussions about assumptions regarding the relationship between appearance and poverty. For example, the automotive “junk” in Jamie’s yard in *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) initially is a source of ridicule from a more prosperous peer, Robert. However, after Jamie is given the opportunity to demonstrate her specialized automotive knowledge, Robert understands that the “junk” is useful for auto repair, art material, and imaginative play. Borton offers readers an opportunity to re-think the presence of “junk” in the yards of rural homes like Jamie’s. Further, Jamie herself is cast not as a “hillbillie” or “ignorant redneck” (Donehower, 2007, p. 37), but rather as smart, artistic, and forgiving.

Critical reading of these books is not simply an act of defensiveness, but one of political participation because the images affect both commonsense behavior and rural policy actions (Eller, 1999). In the hands of a skilled teacher or parent, the texts in this category can be useful tools to interrogate the construction of rural life. Together, children and adults can analyze the variety of discourses around rural life offered in the texts, consider their own acceptance or refusal of the messages, and begin to explore the political consequences of the representations.

Would it be better, however, if books set in contemporary rural America depicted a more flattering vision of rural life using imagery that reinforces long-standing ideas about the rural idyll? Such a portrayal might avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and casting rural American as a site of deficiency. Relying exclusively on images of the rural idyll, however, may instead replace one platitude with another, and also result in an incomplete representation of rural life that reinforces political and cultural tendencies to ‘otherize’ or ignore rural life and people. Thus, there is a tension between reinforcing negative caricatures of rural life and relying on more comfortable, but equally inaccurate fantasies or childhood memories. Books such as *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005) and *Down the Winding Road* (Johnson,

2000) that achieved a balance between these two positions did so with careful, current and sensitive portrayals of the complexity of rural American life.

Seeing Yourself and the Other: Representation of Rural America

Recall that The Rural School and Community Trust (2009) state that the children of rural America are widely dispersed and richly diverse, but also invisible, and sometimes, caricatured as backward or worse. While picture books showing the romanticized past of rural America are numerous, *contemporary* rural America is too often invisible or caricatured. While there are a few books that portray rural America with respectful authenticity, the sample as a whole echoes a general confusion and naïveté about rural America.

One of few characteristics common across the sample was the clear delineation of a rural setting. While scholars of rural educational research vigorously debate what counts as rural, rural settings are easily identifiable in the books. Two books are set in Appalachia: *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) and *The Relatives Came* (1993). Quaint villages or open farmland signal the rural settings in the remaining 22 books and there is no ambiguity between these categories. The settings do not reflect the reality of a “widely dispersed” (Rural School and Community Trust, 2009, n.p.) rural America. While the books as a whole reinstate a variety of discourses about what it means to live a rural life, the physical settings in which the characters live are noticeably homogenous and heavily reliant on the adult-created rural idyll. The books insist that rural is a small, specific, and homogenous context. Although the assumption must be that the uniform and romanticized settings of the books were drafted with the intent to construct a positive portrait of rural life (because, generally, they do), the reliance on the rural idyll has the unintended consequence of reinforcing ideas of rural America as separate from mainstream America. Who identifies with the rurality presented in these texts? “Fiction captures an author’s version of what really is, what used to be, and what ought to be” (Agbaw, 2008, p. 4). The author’s descriptions are not random, but reflect assumptions constructed socially from observation and discussion (Nodelman, 1992).

A clear majority of the books positively reflect rural life. Readers learn that rural people are happy and content, that their lives, by and large, are devoid of complications and challenges. The books do not hint at the need for any support from research or governmental policy. The theme of self-reliance is contradictory in that it does perpetuate stereotypical ideas about the rugged individualism and independence of this “other” America, but at the same time, self-reliance is an authentic attribute worth celebrating. When problems exist in the rural communities of the books, residents take care of them

(and each other) independently, do not notice their circumstances, or adapt out of necessity. This contrasts to well-known picture books that deal directly with urban poverty such as *We’re all in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* by Maurice Sendak (1993), *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting (1993), and *Something Beautiful* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth (2002). In books like these, urban environments are presented as places imperfect and complex, where citizens are hopeful and committed to social and economic progress. Urban citizens are portrayed as people who resist the influence of outside forces on their community (see for example DiSalvo-Ryan, 2000) and work actively to improve their living conditions (see for example DiSalvo-Ryan, 2001). None of the rural books analyzed made similar overtly political statements about their rural communities.

Representation of the Rural Idyll

In addition to the representation of self-reliance in the books, other tensions exist among the range of potential stories that picture books might tell readers about rural life, for example, stories that revolve around notions of the rural idyll depict rural life in ways that are often positive, comfortable, and familiar. Within this view, rural America is a treasured, but “other” America. Life is simpler here. Problems are few. Books that contrast urban and rural life, such as *Everything is Different at Nonna’s House* (Cohen, 2003), often quite directly tell readers that rural America is a separate, perhaps better, America. Yet another story about rural America turns on “hillbillie” imagery. If we think of the representation of rural America as a continuum, such books fall on the end opposite to the rural idyll. Within the rural people as hillbillies discourse, complex social and political issues are reduced to “personality traits and cultural quirks” (Eller, 1999, p. x). In these books, rural people are more than just characters in the literary sense; rather they are characterizations of strange others. The mainstream populace benefits from the construction of rural in these books because it is absolved of any responsibility to attend to the problems in rural communities. It is easy to ignore rural because it is a small and specific (and sometimes quite odd) population and because it either has no problems or does not notice those that are present.

Few books fall in the middle of the continuum, where rural America is neither idyllic nor caricatured. These texts resist representing rural America as a relic of an imaginary and romantic past, but depict it rather as a place that is dynamic, imperfect, diverse, and worthy of authenticity. There are far too few exemplary books. In the hands of a caring adult, these books offer rural children opportunities to make decisions both about their representation in text and how they wish to live in together in their rural communities. Some representations they may choose to discard; others they might build upon.

But, most importantly, children's literature needs to provide models of successful predecessors. Stories of individual and organized efforts for change, such as those detailed by Billings, Norman & Ledford (1999), for example, are non-existent in children's literature. The nostalgic lens through which rural communities are most frequently portrayed in picture books is comforting and

familiar, but unhelpful. A quiet but persistent dialog about the importance of place is happening in educational research. This study contributes to that conversation by offering a critical analysis of how one group of picture books show a placed rural America. It invites readers to interact with texts critically and seek out others in which rural America is represented in ways that are recognizable and complex.

Cited Children's Literature

- Andrews, J. (2007). *The auction*. Toronto: Groundwood Books.
- Blos, J. (1987). *Old Henry*. New York: William Morrow
- Borton, L. (1997). *Junk pile!* New York: Philomel.
- Bouchard, D. (1993). *If you're not from the prairie*. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books.
- Bunting, E. (1993). *Fly away home*. New York: Clarion.
- Cohen, C. (2003). *Everything is different at Nonna's house*. New York: Clarion Books.
- DiSalvo-Ryan, D. (2001). *A castle on Viola Street*. New York: Harper Collins.
- DiSalvo-Ryan, D. (2000). *Grandpa's corner store*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Geisert B. & Geisert, A. (1998). *Prairie town*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Grimes, N. (2002). *Danitra Brown leaves town*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Harrington, J. (2007). *The chicken chasing queen of Lamar County*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Henkes, K. (2002). *Grandpa and Bo*. New York: Greenwillow Books.
- Johnson, A. (2000). *Down the winding road*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.
- McLaughlin, P. (1995). *What you know first*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Morris, L. (1991). *Morning milking*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Nolan, L. (2003). *Lizard man of Crabtree County*. New York: Marshall Cavendish.
- Rylant, C. (1993). *The relatives came*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sendak, M. (1993). *We're all in the dumps with Jack and Guy*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Schubert, L. (2005). *Here comes Darrell*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Seymour, T. (2005). *Auction!* Cambridge: Candlewick Press.
- Thompson, C. (1992). *The paper bag prince*. New York: Knopf.
- Wyeth, S. (2002). *Something beautiful*. New York: Dragonfly Books.
- Yolen, J. (1995). *Letting swift river go*. New York: Philomel Books.

References

- Agbaw, V. (2008). *Representing African in children's literature: Old and new ways of seeing*. New York: Routledge.
- Alcoff, L. (1995). The problem of speaking for others. In J. Roff & R. Weigman (Eds.), *Who can speak? Authority and critical identity* (pp. 97-119). Chicago: University of Illinois.
- Al-Hazza, T. & Bucher, K. (2008). Building Arab Americans' cultural identity and acceptance with children's literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(3), 210-219.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Banks, M. (2001). *Visual methods in social research*. London: Sage.
- Barthes, R. (1985). *The responsibility of forms: Critical essays on music, art, and representation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Beauchat, K., Blamey, K., & Walpole, S. (2009). Building preschool children's language and literacy one book at a time. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(1), 26-40.
- Bell, M. (2000). Farm boys and wild men: Rurality masculinity, and homosexuality. *Rural Sociology*, 65(4), 547-561.
- Billings, D. (1999). Introduction. In D. Billings, G. Norman, & K. Ledford (Eds.), *Confronting Appalachian stereotypes: Back talk from an American region* (pp. 3-20). Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Christensen, L. (1999). Critical literacy: Teaching reading, writing, and outrage. In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *Making justice our project: Teachers teaching toward critical whole language practice* (pp. 209-225). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Davies, B. (2000). *A body of writing: 1990-1999*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Davies, B. (2003). *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Donehower, K., (2007). Rhetorics and realities: The history and effects of stereotypes about rural literacies. In K. Donehower, C. Hogg, & E. Schell (Eds.), *Rural literacies* (pp. 37-76). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dressman, M. (2004). Dewey and Bakhtin in dialogue: From Rosenblatt to a pedagogy of literature as social, aesthetic practice. In A. Ball & S. Freedman (Eds.), *Bakhtinian perspectives on language, literacy, and learning* (pp. 34-52). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Eller, R. (1999). Foreword. In D. Billings, G. Norman, & K. Ledford (Eds.), *Confronting Appalachian stereotypes: Back talk from an American region* (pp. ix-xi). Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Eppley, K. (2007). *Friction, friction and failure: Scientifically based research and the rural*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT) database. (AAT 3298992) Retrieved July 28, 2010, from Dissertations and Theses database.
- Fawson, P. & Reutzell, R. (2000). But I only have a basal: Implementing guided reading in the early grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(1), 84-97.
- Fisher, D., Flood, J., Lapp, D. & Frey, N. (2004). Interactive read-alouds: Is there a common set of implementation practices? *The Reading Teacher*, 58(1), 8-17.
- Fleckenstein, K. (2002). Inviting imagery into our classrooms. In K. Fleckenstein, L. Calendrillo, D. Worley (Eds.), *Language and image in the reading-writing classroom: Teaching vision* (pp. 3-26). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goodman, K. (1988). Look what they've done to Judy Blume! The "basalization" of children's literature. *New Advocate*, 1(1), 29-41.
- Goodman, K., Maras, L. & Birdseye, D. (1994). Look! Look! Who stole the pictures from the picture books? The basalization of picture books. *New Advocate*, 7(1), 1-24.
- Green, C., & Oldendorf, S. (2005). Teaching religious diversity through children's literature. *Childhood Education*, 81(4), 209-218.
- Hade, D. (1994). Aiding and abetting the basalization of children's literature. *New Advocate*, 7(1), 29-44.
- Harris, V. (Ed.). (1997). *Using multiethnic literature in the K-8 classroom*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A. (2007). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension for understanding and engagement*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Hefflin, R., & Barksdale-Ladd, M. (2001). African American children's literature that helps students find themselves: Selection guidelines for grades K-3. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(8), 810-819.
- Hickman, P., Pollard-Durodola, S., & Vaughn, S. (2004). Storybook reading: Improving vocabulary and comprehension for English Language Learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(8), 720-730.
- Hsieh, H. & Shannon, S. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- Hughes-Hassell, S. Barkley, H., & Koehler, E. (2010). *American Library Association, promoting equity in children's literacy instruction: Using a critical race theory framework to examine transitional books*. Retrieved May 16, 2010, from http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume12/hughes_hassell.cfm
- Jones, O. (1997). Little figures, big shadows: Country childhood stories. In P. Cloke & J. Little (Eds.), *Contested countryside cultures: Otherness, marginalization, and rurality* (pp. 158-179). London: Routledge.
- Johnson, J. & Strange, M. (2005). *Why rural matters: The facts about rural education in the 50 states*. The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <http://files.ruraledu.org/whyruralmatters/WRM2005.pdf>
- Kersten, J., Apol, L. & Pataray-Ching, J. (2007). Exploring the role of children's literature in the 21st century classroom. *Language Arts*, 84(3), 286.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. New York: Sage.
- La Dow, S. (1976). *A content analysis of selected picture books examining the portrayal of sex-roles and the representation of males and females*. East Lansing, MI: National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 123165)
- Lewis, M. (1987). Native images in children's books. In J. Young (Ed.), *Breaking the mosaic* (pp. 108-144). Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Lewis, R. (1999). Beyond isolation and homogeneity: Diversity and the history of Appalachia. In D. Billings, G. Norman & K. Ledford (Eds.), *Confronting Appalachian stereotypes: Back talk from an American region* (pp. 21-43). Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Marshall, C. (1998). Using children's storybooks to encourage discussion among diverse populations. *Childhood Education*, 74, 194-199.
- McHoul, A. & Grace, W. (2002). *A Foucault primer: Discourse, power and the subject*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

- Nikolajeva, M. & Scott, C. (2000). *How picture books work*. New York: Routledge.
- Nodelman, P. (1998). *Words about pictures: The narrative art of children's picture books*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Nodelman, P. (1992). The other: Orientalism, colonialism, and children's literature. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 17(1), 29-35.
- Peterson, S. & Lach, M. (1990). Gender stereotypes in children's books: Their prevalence and influence on cognitive and affective development. *Gender & Education*, 2, 185-196.
- Roback, D., Brittan, J. & Hochman-Turvey, D. (2001). All-time bestselling children's books. *Publisher's Weekly*, 248(51), 24-33.
- Roberts, L, Dean, E. & Holland, M. (2005). Contemporary American Indian cultures in children's picture books. *Beyond the Journal, Young Children on the Web*. Retrieved December 10, 2009, from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200511/Roberts1105BTJ.pdf>
- Scillian, D. (2003). *S is for sooner: An Oklahoma alphabet*. Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.
- Serafini, F. (2004). Images of reading and the reader. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(7), 610-617.
- Shannon, P. & Goodman, K. (1994). *Basal readers, a second look*. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. Bristol, PA: Falmer.
- The Rural School and Community Trust. (2009). *The case for an office of rural education policy research in the U.S. Department of Education*. Retrieved June 8, 2010, from <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=1944>
- Thompkins, G. (2011). *Literacy in the early grades: A successful start for preK-4 readers and writers*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Karen Eppley keh118@psu.edu is an assistant professor of language and literacy education at Penn State, Altoona, where she teaches in an undergraduate teacher preparation program which prepares most of its teacher candidates for work in local schools. Her research interests include poststructural theory, rural education and rural teacher preparation. Karen is a 'rural' person who grew up attending country auctions.