

***Emergent Literacy: Children's Books from 0 to 3* edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2011. ISBN: 978-9027218087**

This collection of essays concerns itself with “emergent literacy” in two senses. Its authors explicitly investigate the experiences of very young children as they gain awareness of and access to printed forms of communication. But in the process, it also reveals that scholars in children’s literature and human development are constantly finding new layers, forms, and even ways of describing the process of decoding meaning in the physical world and/or social interactions. These essays repeatedly represent children struggling to master categories of description and representation, including those of language, while the authors resist the taxonomic limits arising from prior studies’ assumptions and conclusions about what emerging literacy practices look like, and when children become capable of them. They should find a ready audience under the umbrella of childhood studies. Moreover, a strong tendency toward reflexivity helps this collection reposition literacy as a “keyword” in a wide range of disciplinary discussions, in continuation of the project initiated by Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976).

The volume’s contents derive from papers initially presented at an international conference organized by the editor, and held at the Bilderbuchmuseum in der Burg Wissem (Picture Book Museum in Castle Wissem) in Troisdorf, Germany. As Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer points out in her helpful introduction, she and her co-authors were inspired by a flurry of recent scholarship on picture books and constructions of literacy. However, they seek primarily to redress a *lack* of attention to so-called “baby books” and the introductions to them that help shape, constrain, and cultivate literacy’s forms. Explanations for the exclusions range from the accidental to the practical. In the case of the former, “these books lack written text” and thus “academics working in the field of children’s literature do not consider [them] as an essential part of their field of study” (2). In the case of the latter, pre-reading experiences typically take place outside easily-observed school settings, or there was no prior evidence that they were actually connected to the development of literacy skills (e.g., probing books’ uses by chewing on them). The first essay, by Lesley Lancaster, serves as a fitting emblem of the whole with its interdisciplinary approach and flexible understanding

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of literacy. She examines "Textual representations of fictional and everyday events by children under three" produced as part of the "Mark Making Project" sponsored by the United Kingdom's Education and Social Research Council. In describing her attempt to figure out what marks on paper might mean when their makers are too young to articulate a verbal correlative, Lancaster states a general presumption shared by the succeeding essays: "all meaning-making resources available within a culture need to be considered as having equal value . . . rather than a hierarchical one with language as the prime mode" (22).

As the preceding might suggest, the resulting collection is eclectic. For instance, Martin Roman Deppner's essay on "Parallel receptions of the fundamental: Basic designs in picturebooks and modern art," and Cornelia Rémi's on "Reading as playing: the cognitive challenge of the wimmelbook" share an emphasis on formal analysis and textual comparisons. Based primarily on close reading and suppositions about interpretation, their approach stands in contrast with the focus on observations of readerly behavior that characterizes Annette Werner's "Color perception in infants and young children: The significance of color in picturebooks" and "'This is me': Developing literacy and a sense of self through play, talk and stories" by Janet Evans. Beyond the introduction, it is unlikely that any particular chapter will engage every member of the broad audience that the volume attracts in the aggregate. That was probably inevitable, given its self-proclaimed status as "the first serious, sustained examination of the study of children's books for children aged from 0 to 3" (Kümmerling-Meibauer 9). Quantitative studies from linguists and behavioral psychologists are interspersed, without apparent prejudice, among more anecdotal and humanistic approaches to semiotics. An essay on "Toilet training picturebooks in Japan," by Kyoko Takashi and Douglas Wilkerson, was engaging in its own right, and valuable because it represented the concept of scientific literacy in a volume otherwise largely preoccupied with visual literacy. At the same time, that chapter reflects the editor's tendency to value an essay's intrinsic interest over rigorous thematic coherence. However, there is some imposed structure; the book as a whole is divided into three sections: "Premises of Early Literacy," "Picturebooks for Children under Three," and "Child-book Interactions: Case Studies." These groupings construct a loose progression from interrogating assumptions about what "emergent literacy" looks like, to detailing its features and the often-idiosyncratic practices of children or baby book designers, to finally concluding with four case

studies that effectively reiterate the appeal of more work in this rich vein.

This last group of “case studies” demonstrates the variability in individual experiences of emerging into literacy particularly well. For instance, the essay from Kerstin Nachtigäller and Katharina J. Rohlfing discusses a study of “Mothers’ talking about early object and action concepts during picturebook reading.” They repeatedly observed a group of caregiver–child dyads in the act of reading a concept book together, and concluded that “a good storyteller is able to elaborate on any book content” (Nachtigäller and Rohlfing 206). They also made tentative attempts to describe how variables like parents’ education or income level can affect the *character* of a child’s earliest pre-reading experiences. This was in keeping with the book’s general attempt to move beyond investigating the developmental impact(s) of the simple presence or absence of early co-reading experiences and/or book access. Sociologists have already covered that ground, as multiple studies have effectively taken a census of books in the home, and established a correlation between home libraries and educational success. The most important work in this vein is the massive longitudinal study that first appeared in *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, “Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations” (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, and Treiman: 2010). In *Emergent Literacy*, Janet Evans also provides a helpful bibliography of “research looking at pre-school children’s ability to interact with and make sense of print,” which has established the value of “literate home backgrounds” to children’s success in that respect (239). However, a more personal essay by Evelyn Arizpe and Jane Blatt on bilingual children’s response to picturebooks added a similarly useful opportunity to consider how race and ethnicity affect emerging literacy. Along with Kümmerling-Meibauer’s own contribution – “Early-concept books: Acquiring nominal and verbal concepts,” with Jörg Meibauer – this group of case studies clearly reflects the volume’s preoccupation with carving out its own niche by blending the insights of the humanities with those of the social sciences.

Indeed, the interdisciplinary scope of this collection becomes most apparent when its authors elaborate on proposed terms like “early-concept book,” offered as a subset of the too-general “baby book” (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer 92); or misunderstood terms like “wimmelbook,” which Rémi distinguishes from “puzzle” or “game” books (117). Even the usage of a familiar

term like “metaphor” is subjected to cogent analysis (Rau 143). Similarly, the collection reveals the tensions and trade-offs between choosing to focus on texts rather than users (or population subsets), and vice versa: the “transaction” between reader and text famously described by Louise Rosenblatt (1978) can sometimes be lost between the literary critic and the developmental psychologist, and integration is sincerely attempted here. But *Emergent Literacy’s* bibliography, especially that of Kümmerling-Meibauer’s introduction, also respects what a given discipline has to offer on its own terms, and functions as an excellent guide to the current literature on picture books and early literacy studies. Overall, it has succeeded admirably in its efforts to expose “a gap” in the field of literacy studies (Kümmerling-Meibauer 9), and to promote further research in this challenging sub-field, in addition to working toward bridging sub-fields.

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