

Mashup: Superheroes and Children's Literature

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In this article, Burgess analyzes the genre of superhero picture books in a unique way by researching both primary text examples and secondary sources. She looks at the many uses of superheroes and the genre of picture books by not only examining scholarly sources, but multiple examples of the genres as well. In doing so, she comes to learn that genre research can include many different approaches.

I first became interested in the production of children's books my junior year of high school when I took a class called Educating Young Children (or EYC). This class was for students interested in teaching and working with children. Throughout the school year, we would run a preschool program. We spent the whole year focused on lesson plans, snacks and everything else that comes with preschool. So, when it came to the time for finals, there really was not anything we could be tested on. Therefore, my teacher decided to have us write and illustrate a picture book that we could share with our class. I started my book thinking that this would be an easy, fun project, but I soon realized there was a lot more to creating a children's book.

The first thing I noticed when creating a picture book as an assignment was how different the writing situation was for me than it would be for an author hoping to publish such a book. Since I was not writing my book for publication, I went with a different approach to producing my book. I was mainly experimenting with writing in the children's book genre to learn more about this kind of writing, and the book I made was a way to test out what I learned. I first began by focusing on the actual genres I was writing in.

Learning more about this kind of writing was very important, since I did not have very much experience with it before. I decided that I wanted my children's book to have a theme. Thinking back to the books I read to my EYC students, I remembered how much all the kids loved superheroes; so, I decided to write a children's superhero themed book. But, I did not really know what that entailed. I knew that there were superhero stories, but I usually found them in the forms of movies or comic books. So, I thought that I should look more into the different types of genres that use these characters as well as the kinds of media used with these genres to see what similarities there were between them.

I tried going about finding research by searching words like "picture books," "superheroes," and "children's books" into Milner Library's search bar and found multiple hits. The first thing I noticed was that there were no critical sources specifically about superhero children's books, probably because it is such a specific genre. After noticing this, I realized finding sources was going to be a lot harder than I thought, and I might need to do more than one kind of research—library research and other kinds of genre research too. I also decided to just look at the two genres separately, one being superhero stories and the other being picture books.

By splitting up my research into a study of two separate genres, I was able to find much more: both scholarly sources on my genres as well as examples of them that I could study and analyze. There are lots of ways to learn about a genre, but I found it very beneficial to look at not only examples, but scholarly sources as well. Examples can offer a visual representation of what the genre is. By looking at multiple examples, I was able to compare them and see similarities, and then I was able to make a list of requirements for that genre. Scholarly sources give readers an insight that they might not be able to see from just looking at an example. By looking at what other experts have said about a genre, I was able to see things that I may have not have on my own. Reading what others have to say gave me new insights and knowledge into what I was creating—a picture book that featured superheroes. This was very important to me, so I made sure that along with my multiple examples of picture books, I also had scholarly sources on both picture books and how superheroes are used in all sorts of genres.

There were definitely a lot more scholarly sources about children books, because children's literature is so complex and has been written about critically so many times. Superhero stories, however, were different. I believe this might be because the superhero genre is not really a specific genre. Superhero stories can be told in so many different ways that they are not limited to one type, making the genre very flexible. For example, they can

be told through literature, comic books, television shows, movies, and so on. After finding articles written by scholars about texts that featured superheroes and then reading what the authors had to say, I remembered that I was looking for similarities so I could connect the two ideas and write a picture book featuring superheroes, in essence drawing on several genres to produce something unique. So the next step in my research was to find similarities in the characteristics common to picture books and genres with superheroes. Both, for example, emphasize the values of good morals. But trying to figure out what combining genres would look like and trying to describe it was a lot more complicated than I thought it would be. Before I could put my scholarly research to use, I realized that I needed to build my context by gathering more examples.

Two Genres in One

First off, I began to realize that I needed to ask the question of what even is a superhero picture book, but even this seemed overwhelming because there are so many different stories about so many different superheroes with different superpowers. They all have one thing in common though; they are picture books that feature a superhero or superheroes. The superheroes are not all exactly the same, but in children's literature, they are usually good and have positive values that they stand for. Since there are so many different forms of superhero picture books, I figured I should find a couple of good examples and go from there. Also, by choosing superhero picture books, I would have examples that fit both superhero stories and picture books, but were also examples of what I was actually creating.

I went about finding my examples by going to the Normal Public Library and searching the term "superhero" in their catalog with the restriction of "juvenile book" under specific item type. There were two books I found that seemed most like what I wanted to create, so I used them as my two main examples. One was written by Anne Cottringer, called *Eliot Jones, Midnight Superhero* (2009) and the other was *The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man* (2011) by Michael Choban. I found them both to be good examples because they fit the superhero picture book genre, but each was also unique, and there were differences between the two of them. I also felt that the best way to learn about the genre I was writing was to look at what I wanted to write. Now that I had these two different examples of a superhero picture book, I was able to reference them while using scholarly research to learn about the two genres separately. So, I began with looking at the superhero genre with my two examples by my side.

Superheroes Throughout the Years

As I mentioned before, I found it important to look at what other authors had said about the genre as well as looking at examples. The two picture books that I was using as examples were useful, but I also wanted to learn more about the context of these stories. I decided to start at the beginning of superhero stories and look at their history of them in literature and popular media. In order to understand the use of superheroes in picture books, it is helpful to know how they have been used in other genres over the years. I was surprised to see that the superhero phenomenon has been around for quite some time and has evolved tremendously throughout its years. I found a lot about the history of superheroes from a book written by Alex S. Romagnoli and others: *Enter The Superheroes: American Values, Culture, And The Canon Of Superhero Literature* (2013). I learned that the first superheroes can be traced back to comic books. Also, these stories started becoming popular around the time of the Great Depression because newspaper comics were about all one could afford for entertainment. In fact, “the original intention of comic books was to entertain children and adolescents with fanciful stories cheaply produced on flimsy paper and covered with a glossy front” (Romagnoli 125). In the 1930s when these stories did become available to the public, “the country had never seen anything like it” (Romagnoli 9). I came to understand that not only did children love them, but adults did as well. I saw that parents not only loved superhero comics because of the fun adventures to read about, but for their educational value. Parents found that superhero stories were “a way to help the children learn about values and morals [parents] deem important” (Romagnoli 126). This seemed like a really important point in my research because a picture book with superheroes would probably play a similar role.

Now, superhero stories are maybe even more popular today than they were seventy years ago. There are toys, movies (and sequels), books, clothing, and even roller coasters based off of these characters. At almost every store I go to, I see a new product with some superhero on it. Part of the reason for these stories’ success is that their “longevity can be attributed to their universality and reliability” (Romagnoli 15). What started out as an affordable form of entertainment in the Great Depression has become worth way more than a cheap newspaper comic today. After learning about the history, I had a much better understanding of superhero stories. After all, where and how something begins shapes it into what it is. Knowing all of this helped with making my own superhero story because the context of superheroes in comics impacts every genre that uses superheroes. By learning about the history, I was able to see that one of the reasons these stories are so popular

and loved is because of how they focus on positive morals and values. With this knowledge, I knew that I had to include good values and morals in my own story because the audience would expect it.

What Makes Up a Superhero Story?

The main important factor of a superhero story is, of course, the superhero, but what even makes a superhero a superhero? This was the next question I needed to answer to create my picture book, but it wasn't something that I could figure out in my scholarly research. Thus, to answer this question, I simply looked at the two examples of picture books that I mentioned earlier. In both stories, the superhero used a special ability to save the day and fight something/someone bad. In Choban's book, the main character was the superhero named Awesome Man, and he had these awesome powers like flying, super strength, and super grip. However, the main difference was that in Cottringer's book, the superhero, Eliot, did not have a supernatural power. He was just a normal kid, yet he was still a superhero. He still saved the day, but he used his mind to outsmart the bad guy. So, my question became whether a super power is a necessary element in a superhero story. I do not think so, but I do think they are a common element within the many different types of superhero stories. But the main element is having a "good" character that fights the "bad" and saves the world; after all, every superhero needs their villain. There is always the idea of good versus bad in children's stories, but it can be very complicated. In my examples, both Eliot and Awesome Man would save people from evil.

There is also another quality that superheroes usually have in common as well: their values. Values seem to be more important in the superhero genre than actual super powers. Even my scholarly research backed this up, because Romagnoli writes that "superheroes represent a set of timeless values; their motivation to do good, their passion for justice, and their opposition to evil are ageless" (18). These are all values that most Americans seem to strive for and want to be known for. In both my examples, each character wanted to be the good guy and save the town. Values seem to be the main component in the framework of this genre, not the actual super power, which seems to be a common misinterpretation. The values are what make superheroes so admirable to not only adults, but children too, and it was a combination of my scholarly research and analysis of examples that helped me understand this. Now that I had obtained a better understanding of some of the many parts of one side of my mashup of genres, it was time to do the same for picture books.

What Makes Up a Picture Book?

Again, my first step was to read what scholars say about the picture book genre. According to an expert in picture books, Perry Nodelman, the actual definition of a picture book is “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” (vii). When I was trying to find scholarly sources on picture books, I asked an instructor of a children’s literature course that I was taking what book to look at. I wanted to find the best book about picture books, so I figured that the best person to ask would be someone who knew a lot about picture books. She recommended a book written by Perry Nodelman, *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art Of Children’s Picture Books* (1988). I realized that the main difference between a picture book and all other types of children’s literature is the actual pictures. The pictures are very important, maybe even more important than the actual story. They “take up most of the space and bear the burden of conveying most of the information” (Nodelman viii).

To better understand this, I looked again at examples—this time at a couple of picture books that I just found from my mother’s collection. One example that helped me understand how important pictures can be was Hervé Tullet’s *Press Here* (2011). In this book, I noticed how the illustrations are “interactive,” and without the illustrations, the text would make no sense. This was also true for my two superhero picture book examples. In each book, there were pictures that helped you truly understand the story and without them, you would be missing out. This proves that illustrations are critical to the actually stories told in picture books.

Another feature I noticed that makes picture books different is that children are often able to “read” them without actually reading the text. This means children who cannot even read would be able to enjoy these books without the help of an adult reader. By just looking at the pictures, they are able to make up stories in their mind that go along with the illustrations. Although it might not be the exact story that the author is telling, it is still a story. Also, it is a great way for children to use their imaginations. Again, this was something that Perry Nodelman wrote about, but it was something I could see in my examples as well and could remember from my EYC days of watching preschoolers with picture books. In this case, my research was a combination of scholarly sources, example analysis, and first hand observation of the genre. After all of my research, I knew that I needed to apply these ideas to my picture

book as well. Since pictures were just as important as the words, maybe even more important, I knew that I needed to focus on my illustrations. I wanted anyone to be able to enjoy my book, even those who did not know how read. Knowing this, I thought my next step would be to gain a better understanding of what illustrations are.

Illustrations

Illustrations are an important part of the format and layout of a picture book. From looking at all the picture books I personally collected, I realized that illustrations come in all different forms. They can be realistic, cartoons, stick figures, real pictures, or pretty much anything. They can also be colorful, not colorful, black and white; the list goes on and on. It all just depends on what the author or illustrator wants. Two examples of different types of illustrations from my own picture books are Robert McCloskey's *Make Way For Ducklings* (1996) and Eric Litwin and James Dean's *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons* (2012). In *Make Way For Ducklings* the drawings seem more realistic and are not colorful; they are all actually only one color, brown. In *Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons*, the pictures are colorful and more cartoon-like. In my superhero picture book examples, I feel as though Eliot was a little more cartoonish in *Eliot Jones, Midnight Superhero*, and in *The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man*, Awesome Man was more realistic. There really is no limitation in the illustrations of not only picture books, but superhero picture books as well. As long as they are fun to look at and fit the story, a child will be able to picture what the characters look like and see the story come to life. There is so much flexibility with illustrations, which gave me a lot of freedom with how I wanted to create my book. I really liked this part of creating a picture book because there are so many different choices. My pictures could be black and white or colorful; the decision was up to me.

Writing My Own Superhero Picture Book

After finishing all my research on what I was actually creating, I could finally begin my own children's superhero book. I decided to start just creating my book step by step. I figured that this would help me organize my thoughts better if I did not try to do everything at once. So, I made step one creating my character; after all, that is who my book is about.

Step One: The Characters

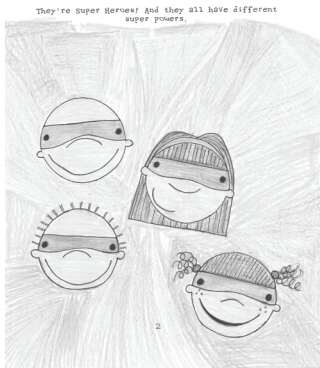


Figure 1: Superhero Family Illustration

After reading so much about superhero stories, I saw how important the characters really were, so the first thing I did was create my main character. Since my book was for kids, I wanted my main character to be a kid, whom I named Sammy. Sammy wasn't the only character though; I made a whole family of superheroes, just like the family from the movie *The Incredibles* (2004). My family was very similar to them because each family member had their own unique super power. I decided to do this because I really liked the movie, *The Incredibles*, and thought it would be fun to have

more than one superhero in my story. Also, since my research showed me how important values and morals were to superhero stories and picture books, I thought that a family would be a good way to incorporate them. Ideal families are good examples of loving behavior and caring for others. Also, by having parents as characters in my story, I was able to have role model figures, especially for Sammy in the story. The parents were able to share their wisdom, and my readers were then able to learn the same lessons as Sammy by just reading the story. Now that I had my characters, I could begin writing my actual story.

Step Two: The Story



Figure 2: Sammy the Superhero Cover

The main guideline I kept in mind while writing was what I was going to teach my audience, since I learned from my research that morals are an important part of a children's book and good values are important to superhero stories. Since I was creating a superhero picture book and morals and good values were important to both picture books and superhero stories, I made sure to focus on that while writing my story. So, I made sure that Sammy learned something by the end of the book. After Sammy tries to fight the bad guys by himself, he realizes that it is always okay to ask for help. Although this lesson is very simple, it is a good moral for children to learn.

Step Three: The Illustrations

After I finally finished writing my actual story, I broke up the texts into different pages and left a space for illustrations. Then it was time to bring the words to life with pictures. Since I am not that great of an artist, I asked my sister, Kara, to illustrate the book for me. The main purpose of illustrations is to help tell the story, as I mentioned before in my research. It was a very interesting experience working with my sister. First of all, I was giving her a lot of freedom; I did not give her many guidelines or restrictions. The only thing I told her was that I did want the characters to be more cartoon-like than realistic. A lot of the picture books I looked at as examples during my research had cartoon images, and I liked that. After growing up seeing her art all around the house, I trusted her with my book. I gave her my story and for each page she drew a sketch of what she would like to create. Once I saw all of her sketches, made changes, and approved it, she then drew and colored the final pictures. Since a good amount of authors have a different person illustrate their book for them, I am assuming my experience was pretty similar. It is interesting seeing the pictures of your characters you had in your head come to life, especially when someone else is creating them. Once my illustrations were done, it was time to share my book.

Step Four: Sharing My Book

As part of our class project, we had to actually share our story with our class at an open mic night. Although my book is for a children's audience, not a group of college kids, I still read it like a children's book. I made sure to show the pictures, just like I would if I were to share the story with a group of children. Now that I have a finished children's book, I have so many different possibilities for what I could do with it. For now, I just want to share it with people I know and my community. I could read it at the library, share it with the children at my church, read it in a classroom here in town, or even go back to EYC in high school and leave it in the bookshelf there. There are so many options for where this book could go, but the important thing was that I did not just let it sit there. After all the hard work I put into *Sammy the Superhero*, I want people to get to read it and experience it.

The Aftermath

Who knew that one final from high school would become a much bigger idea and project in college, but I now feel as though I have a better understanding of the superhero themed picture book genre. I learned that

not only is producing a superhero story in a picture book complex, but there is so much more to both superhero stories and picture books than I thought. I also realized that in order to try a new kind of writing, it requires all sorts of research—in my case, combining scholarly sources to learn about how experts view the genre with my own examination into examples. I would not consider myself a children’s author, but writing my own picture book was a fun experience, and I am pretty proud of it. Maybe someday I will actually try to publish my book or write a new one for my future classroom when I am a teacher. But for now, I am just going to continue my interest in children’s literature and try to actually complete my elementary education degree. Maybe a few years from now I will bring out *Sammy the Superhero* and be able to actually use it in my own classroom. Now, like most pictures books finish...

The End

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