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How Young Readers Comprehend Multilayered Diegetic Worlds: A Case Study of Cloudland

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ABSTRACT

Constructing multilayered worlds is a prevalent strategy employed in fiction, especially within the genres of fantasy and fairy tales. Various techniques establish different imaginary worlds, which are either sharply demarcated or subtly intertwined. The tradition of weaving multilayered worlds into stories, along with depicting the journey of young protagonists from mundane realities to enchanting realms, is a cornerstone of children's literature. This provides a fundamental method for fostering literary proficiency and cognitive growth among young readers. Viewing children's reading as a voyage through multilayered fantasy worlds and back to everyday reality, readers begin by following the footsteps of protagonists and deciphering the textual and visual components, while drawing upon their real-life experiences and generating cognitive ties between the diegetic story and non-diegetic reality. This study thus examines the visual fantasy in John Burningham's picturebook, *Cloudland* (1999/2017), with a particular emphasis on how young readers navigate multilayered diegetic worlds. Drawing primarily on Maria Nikolajeva's cognitive approaches to children's literature, this study incorporates an interview with a child in a critical stage of cognitive development. This involves a Drawing as Reflection section to validate the investigator's hypotheses in the Close Reading section: which elements influence young readers in discerning between fantasy and reality? By analyzing the participant's drawing and responses, this study demonstrates that real-world anchors and images play a decisive role when young readers engage with multilayered-worlds visual texts and explore the boundaries of different worlds.

KEYWORDS

Multilayered-worlds fantasy, picturebook, meaning-making, real-world anchors

1. Guideboard: Imaginary Worlds, Young Readers, and Literary Competence

Adopting differing terminology, scholars have extensively theorized the methods employed in the creation of imaginary worlds in literature. Some focus on the correlation between fictional narratives and the real world (also termed "real life", "actual world", "reality", "authentic world", and "ordinary world") of readers, such as Thomas G. Pavel's concept of "fictional worlds". In Pavel's view, the literary worlds created by artists exhibit a remarkable parallel relationship with our real world in terms of structure and operational logic (see Pavel, 1986, pp. 11-72). Peter Hunt's "alternative worlds" theories provide insights into differences between the actual world and literary worlds and reasons why readers across different age groups are drawn to fantasy narratives: "for an alternative world where motivations, actions, needs and gratifications are simpler and more direct than in the desperately complex and subtle real world" (2003, p. 4). Additionally, terms such as "subcreated worlds" (Tolkien, 1966), "other worlds" (Lewis, 1966; Pavlik, 2011), "possible worlds" (Nikolajeva, 2014, pp. 21-74), "constructed worlds", and "secondary worlds" are also widely used to refer to imaginary worlds in literature. As Mark J. P. Wolf concludes: "While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, each term emphasizes different aspects of the same phenomenon. [...] 'imaginary worlds' is perhaps the broadest and least technical term" (2012, pp. 13-14). In this essay, I interpret "imaginary worlds"

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using different terms, depending on the context.

This study concentrates on a unique type of fiction with imaginary worlds, namely the multilayered-worlds fantasy.[1] As the term suggests, "multilayered-worlds" indicates the construction of two or more imaginary worlds nested within fictional texts. A myriad of classic fantasies employs a multilayered-worlds design, with child protagonists acting as mediators traversing between different worlds. For instance, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), the world with the talkative White Rabbit, the Cat, the Hatter, and the Duchess that Alice falls down the rabbit-hole and stumbles into is vastly different from the world where her sister is waiting for her to wake up. Another example is *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950), where the four siblings leave the war-torn real world through the wardrobe, enter Narnia, a magic land dominated by the maleficent White Witch, and ally with Aslan in confronting the forces of evil. One of the best-known cases among visual texts is Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*; on the night when little Max has a conflict with his mother, a forest wondrously grows in his bedroom: "[it] grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around" (1963, p. 11). Then, Max sails to the land of the Wild Things and becomes their king. When he says farewell to the monsters and returns to his bedroom, he finds that his mother has prepared dinner for him. Nikolajeva classifies this story as "a typical secondary-world fantasy" and summarizes Max's experience as "escapes into an imaginary world" and "returns to his ordinary world" (2012, pp. 59-60). In her analysis, within the diegetic text the kingdom of Wild Things functions as an imagination-filled "secondary world" vividly contrasted with the "primary world" where the protagonist lives. The first-layered worlds in multilayered-worlds fantasy—such as Alice's time with her sister, Lucy at her country house, and Max's home—are typically portrayed as the diegetic real worlds and reflect the ordinary lives of protagonists. The first-layered worlds usually adhere to the operational rules of the real world outside text. Essentially, they are projections of reality and often subtly connected with the authentic world of readers.

Studying visual fantasies with a multilayered-worlds design harbors profound implications for the cognitive development of young readers. According to Nikolajeva, "Understanding fictionality is the key element of literary competence" (2010, p. 152), the foremost implication of research like this is to assist young readers in grasping fictionality and thus enhancing their comprehension, especially meaning-making. Uncovering the crevices between different worlds during reading is one of the major methods for meaning-making. Aidan Chambers, for instance, borrows the concept of "gaps" from the reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser to discuss how child readers participate in the process of filling gaps within some "not-plain" texts and consequently complete the meaning construction of them. He uses an example of an analysis of *Where the Wild Things Are* to underline that, understanding the Wild Things are Max's own creation is crucial for "children of four and five and six, who are the book's implied readers" to make meanings of the whole story and to "make such a significant contribution and discover such details only if they [readers ages four to six] give the book a willing attention of the same order as adults must give to filling the gaps in, say, Joyce's *Ulysses*" (1985, pp. 46-48).

Similarly, Nikolajeva adopts the term "cracks" to illuminate the potential deceptions in fiction that may distract young readers:

> A text may create and maintain an illusion of reality. It may equally subvert this illusion, producing

1 The term "portal fantasy" is commonly used to denote the fantasy type where characters enter the portal of a fantastic world and adventure. Nikki Gamble summarizes three typical forms of "high fantasy" with a secondary diegetic world, two of which, the types of "The alternative world is entered through a portal in the primary world" and "The alternative world is a world-within-a-world, marked off by physical boundaries" (2013, pp. 159-160), are what this study relates to. Considering that this study focuses on the boundaries between different worlds instead of the ways how characters enter a new world, I utilize the concept of "multilayered-worlds fantasy" to refer to the sub-genre and highlight the feature of multi-layers within the diegetic text. For more information about "portal fantasy", please read the chapter "11. Are We Posthuman Yet?: Fantasy and Speculative Fiction" in *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Coats, 2018) and the monograph *Building Secondary Worlds in Portal-Quest Fantasy Fiction* (Conkan, 2020).

> cracks to remind readers of fictionality. It may oscillate between the two strategies, deliberately or unintentionally. It may depict a world with a different set of natural laws and human practices. Such imaginary worlds enhance understanding of fictionality since readers lack experience of them, unlike everyday worlds similar to that we encounter in real life. (2010, p. 152)

Ultimately, both the theories illustrate the complexity of children's literature and the uniqueness of young readers, particularly beginning readers who are in a critical period of meaning-making cultivation. These inexperienced readers need to first understand the author's presuppositions and then carefully explore the "gaps" and "cracks" in the text. In some exquisitely-designed stories with a conspicuous second-layered fantasy world and first-layered everyday world, the paramount premise is their fictionality—or, more precisely, the boundaries between different diegetic worlds, where cracks and gaps abound. Deciphering textual elements is the specific measure for child readers' discovery. While contemplating the question of "what is real/fantasy", readers naturally engage in the process of decoding the text by interpreting the textual and visual cues. For texts that are visually rich and highly deceptive, such as the picturebook *Cloudland* selected for this study, readers' reactions and decoding processes become even more nuanced and meaningful.

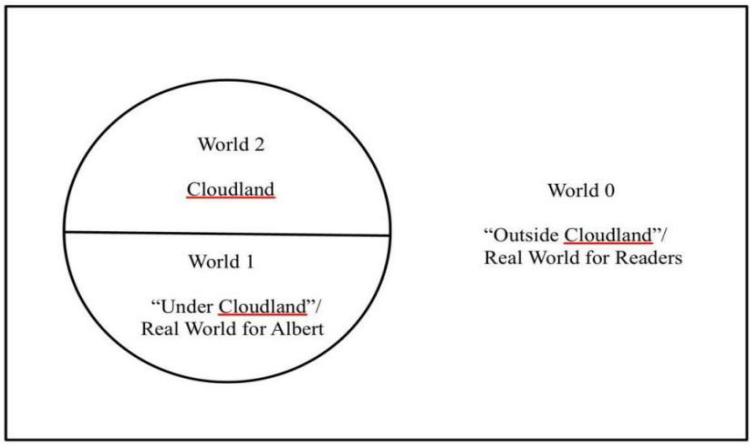
Based on the discussions of multilayered-worlds fantasy and children's literary competence development, this study focuses on how young readers comprehend multilayered diegetic worlds in fantasy, explore the boundaries, and finally approach the fictional nature of the story. This essay is therefore broadly divided into two sections. In the Close Reading section, I consider that textual and visual elements may influence the cognitive processes of young readers, especially in their understanding of fictionality. I then conduct a one-on-one interview to observe whether the reading experience of a 7-year-old validates my assumptions. The young subject had experience reading picturebooks and understood the surface-level plot of Cloudland when co-reading with his mother. However, as he was still in the early stages of cognitive skills development, he required more time and thought compared to more experienced readers to engage in meaning-making and ultimately determine whether different worlds are fictional or real. In the interview, the boy's hesitation, self-correction, and repeated reassurances reflect his attempt to explore the gaps and cracks in the narrative. This process justifies my choice of focusing on a child of this age group to discover how young readers navigate complex diegetic worlds and distinguish between fictionality and reality. I also discuss how the boy has built cognitive connections between his real life and the diegetic worlds, and present my findings in the Empirical Study section.

2. Close Reading of Cloudland: Fantastic Designs and Realistic Factors

Cloudland is a fantasy story featuring multilayered imaginary worlds. A boy, Albert, goes hiking with his parents and inadvertently falls off a cliff. While his parents are calling for their son, Albert is lucky in that he is saved by children living in the clouds. Albert plays with the Cloud Children, meets their Queen, and enjoys his time in Cloudland. When he misses his parents, he is sent back home by his friends and finds himself in his bed. In this contemporary fantasy, the protagonist experiences a joyful journey before returning to his everyday life; he serves as a mediator, bridging the two worlds and leading readers to explore them.

While the plot appears to be simple and coherent, the artist employs various fantastic designs that blur the boundaries between the two layers of the diegetic world, endowing the story with a feeling of oscillating between reality and the imaginary. At the end of the story, the artist uses a pun, "He always did have his head in the clouds" (Burningham, 1999, p. 45), highlighting the protagonist's lingering attachment to Cloudland, while leaving readers puzzled about whether Cloudland is a real place. In the following analysis, I discuss which parts of the fictional narrative may engender cognitive ambiguity for young readers, as well as which clues left by the artist may help his readers distinguish between multilayered worlds. I differentiate between the two diegetic worlds by naming them "Cloudland" and "Under Cloudland", and I use "Outside Cloudland" to refer to the readers' real world (Figure 1):

Figure 1
Three Different Worlds



The following close-reading section is based on the major premise that the first-layered diegetic world, Under Cloudland, is a projection of the authentic world, and it follows real-life operation logic as Pavel (1986) concludes, whereas the second-layered fantasy world Cloudland shows a further distance from our real life, which is easier for child readers to discern its fictionality. I select the creation of Cloud Language and the design of photographic collages as evidence of the artist's intentional establishment of gaps and cracks.

2.1 Impossible Creation of Cloud Language: A Representation of Gaps and Cracks

Many scholars have argued that the creations of fantasy arise from the psychological desire to escape the constraints of the real world. As Kathryn Hume claims that fantasy embodies "the desire to change givens and alter reality—out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience's verbal defenses" (1984, p. 20). In the case of Cloudland, I recognize the creation of Cloud Language, a playful nonsense language invented by the artist, as a prime example of impossibilities in fantasy. As Nikolajeva suggests: "a fictional world does not have to follow any recognisable rules, occasionally not even rules of vocabulary and grammar" (2014, p. 27), I regard Cloud Language as a representation of explicit gaps and cracks between the core fantasy world and the two real worlds of both Albert and readers that can be diversely interpreted.

Cloud Language is the daily language used by Cloud Children,[2] although they communicate with outsiders like Albert in Standard English. Cloud Language is composed of sounds similar to different English words, primarily that consisting of two syllables with a waggish pronunciation (e.g., "goggle" and "fiddle"), as well as some onomatopoeic expressions. The English words the artist selects appear to be associated with children's everyday behavior, brimming with implications of mischief or activities outside the norm (e.g., "fumble" and "giggle"). While the meanings of the sentences may be confusing, the language itself shows a whimsical state phonetically.

In the design of Cloud Language, the artist makes a clear distinction between Cloud Language and the normal English language used in Under Cloudland and Outside Cloudland. The intriguing Cloud Language denotes that Cloud Children are free-spirited in their thinking, carefree in their behavior, and lead lives filled with joy. The world they live in is one of freedom and fantasy.

Not only does Cloud Language represent the existence of Cloudland, but it also confounds the boundaries between the worlds and invites readers to question: Does this language truly exist? In other words, are Albert's experiences and memories *real*? On the last page of *Cloudland*, when Albert returns to Under Cloudland and goes back to school, he remains captivated by Cloud Language and tries to recall it:

2 Burningham uses "magic words" to refer to it while I presume it to be "Cloud Language".

"but he can never get it quite right" (Burningham, 1999, p. 45). The existence of Cloud Language encourages disparate interpretations of the story's ending. Perhaps all of this has happened, and the fragmented language in Albert's memory, which serves as evidence, is a gift from Cloud Children; or considering the preceding page, where Albert wakes up from a dream and finds himself in his bed with his parents around, it could all be a dream; or after Albert's fall from the cliff, everything may be fictional, including this disordered language. Cloud Language clearly contains multiple meanings and non-uniform interpretations.

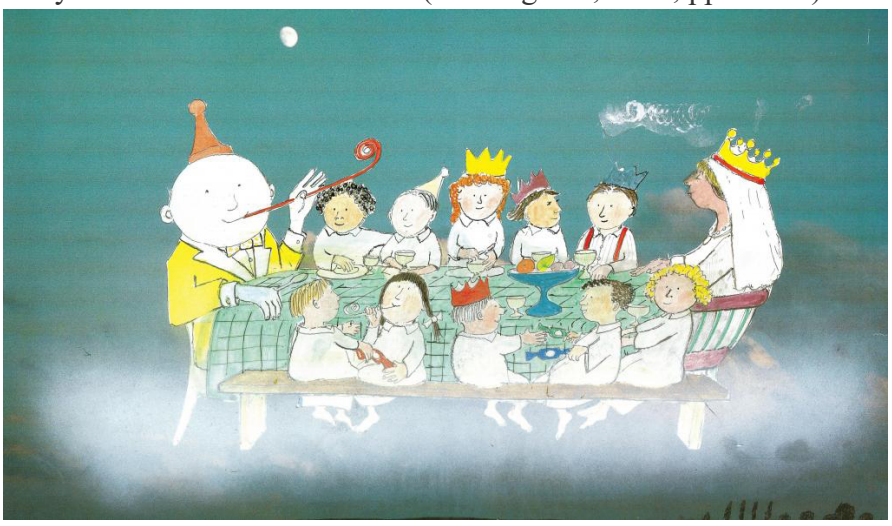
2.2 Verisimilitude of Photographic Backgrounds: A Bridge Between Reality and Fantasy

Burningham employs an experimental design of photographic collages in *Cloudland*, where the photos of white fluffy clouds and skies in different colors form the cover of the book and the setting of the story with clip paintings of different characters on them. In terms of the visual designs in *Cloudland*, the photographic backgrounds play an important role as an emblem for Outside Cloudland and connecting it with the diegetic text, which implies that the story's setting is real, but the painted story may not be.

Photography has an intrinsic connection to the real world. When discussing the relationship between photos and the real world, Susan Sontag declares: "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so such as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (2005, p. 2). From a material perspective, she compares it with the painting and accentuates that a photograph is a trace d irectly imprinted from the real, "a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be" (2005, p. 120). Since photographs are traces from reality, they can provide readers with a sense of "realness" psychologically, unless the photos have been obviously altered. Nikolajeva points out a paradoxical relationship when analyzing the fiction *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) by Ransom Riggs with a floating girl in the air on its cover:

> The image [of its cover] sets ambivalent expectations. Photography is an art form and communication means to which we ascribe a *high degree of truth*, even though we know that photos can be manipulated. The phenomenon we see in the photos contradicts our knowledge of the perceptible world, in which people cannot levitate. (2014, p. 67, emphasis added)

Figure 2
Party with the Man in the Moon (Burningham, 2017, pp. 39-40)



In the case of *Cloudland*, the photos themselves are mostly not altered by digital techniques,[3] such as Photoshop, although there is a distinction in the nature of reality and fantasy between the backgrounds and

3 In some cases, such as the pages of the photographic airplane (pp. 29-30), for instance, the white trails left by the plane are seemingly added by the artist. However, it seems that Steve didn't notice such digital alternations.

the collaged drawings. The photographic collages thus point to an essential question: whether painted Cloud Children truly exist in the real clouds. Interestingly, on the page where Albert participates in the party with Man in the Moon dressed in a shiny yellow suit (the left side of Figure 2), the photographic background also captures a moon at its margin—a small, real moon. Perhaps the real tiny moon is intended to contrast with the colossal Man in the Moon to suggest the fictional nature of Cloudland. In any case, there are plentiful visual gaps and cracks in *Cloudland* waiting for young readers to explore.

In summary, the Cloud Language and photographic collages function as techniques not only to construct alternative worlds, but also to blur boundaries and bridge worlds. In my opinion, the photographs, on the one hand, symbolize the eternal real world as Outside Cloudland, since the photographs come from real life; on the other hand, they also constitute a distinct "above world" which is different from Under Cloudland, providing inclusive backgrounds capable of accommodating all fantasies. Whether young readers would agree with my propositions requires further empirical study.

Empirical Study

3.1 Methods, Participants, and Ethical Considerations

In order to observe how children comprehend multilayered fantasy worlds, I invited a 7-year-old Chinese boy as a case study. The principal method of the study is a one-hour semi-structured interview on Tencent Meeting, an online meeting platform similar to Zoom, which is common in China. Considering both the young participant and the investigator are Chinese, the text used in the interview is the Chinese version of *Cloudland* (云上的孩子) and the interview was also conducted in Chinese. In the first half-hour, the boy and I re-read *Cloudland* together and completed a Q&A section. Then, I started the Drawing as Reflection section by asking him to spend the next twenty minutes painting "what you think is really existing/happening in the story". In the remaining ten minutes, I engaged in a discussion with him, based on the drawing he created.

Before the interview, I communicated with the boy's mother, a Chinese literature teacher in a middle school, who was also my middle school teacher, to confirm the boy's level of literacy. Upon learning that the child is still at an initial stage of learning to read and could not read the entire book independently, I determined the preliminary preparation by asking the mother to read the picturebook aloud for the child in advance. As I had provided the mother with the Chinese version of the approved "Experiment Introduction and Parental Consent Form" and the "Interview Question List" of the rigorous ethical review by the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge,[4] she was familiar with the research topic and its details. To prevent the child participant from being primed by his professional mother and to obtain his authentic understanding of the book, I explained my intentions to the mother and asked her not to question the child while reading together, a request to which she agreed.

The interview was initially designed as one-on-one, but when it began, I observed the boy showed an obvious emotional attachment to his mother and that perhaps a one-on-one conversation with an unfamiliar adult for an hour would cause him stress. I adapted the plan to involve both the child and his mother, while again reminding her not to intervene in the child's responses as a co-reader. The adjustment proved to be highly effective because the boy remained relaxed throughout the interview, and his mother faithfully upheld her promise, refraining from any interference or prompting of her son, even when he sought her help.

In addition to the ethical considerations , I also confirmed with the two participants that the interview would be recorded, with the assurance that the recording would not be uploaded to the internet and would solely be used by myself for writing this essay. Since the mother was completely inclusive regarding her pseudonym in the essay, I used the title "Miss Chen" to refer to her, while her son picked "Steve" as his for

4 During this study, the researcher and author of the essay, Xiao, was a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. The entire empirical study was conducted under the supervision of the faculty.

he recently became obsessed with a game called Minecraft.[5] To create a free interview environment, I took into account my relationship with the child. First, there is no direct power dynamic between us, since I am not his teacher. Therefore, the likelihood of him trying to please me by thinking hard about "correct answers" is relatively low. Second, I am over ten years older than my participant, though, within the Chinese cultural context, our generational status (辈分) is equivalent to students being one generation below teachers and sons one generation below mothers. This parity in generations implies that we could converse freely without the use of formal language or extra honorifics.

In fact, at the beginning of the interview, even before I had the chance to introduce myself, Miss Chen informed her child that he should "Say 'sister' (姐姐), Steve, be polite." The boy then laughed and loudly called out "sis" instead of a more formal title, such as "Miss Xiao", which might elicit more distance. I believe that the decision of title laid the foundation for an equitable interview. Finally, both in the introduction section of the Interview Question List and at the beginning of the interview, I accentuated to the two participants that the majority of the questions were open-ended and had no right or wrong answers. I assured the boy that it was okay if he couldn't answer some questions, as "some questions may be too difficult or boring to bother with, so we can just pass over them". Through these strategies, I tried minimizing the potential interfering factors.

3.2 Data Analysis

Through the interview, I have arrived at the core conclusions that, first, as anticipated, the 7-year-old could clearly identify the fictionality of Cloudland within the diegetic text, and he based his judgment of "what is real" primarily by comparing textual and visual elements with his real-life knowledge. Second, various designs within the book aided the boy in distinguishing between different worlds, with the verisimilitude of the photos playing a crucial role. Overall, visual elements had a much greater impact on the boy than textual elements, although the existence of Cloud Language did cause some disruptions to Steve's coherent understanding of the story. Third, Steve developed a clear resonance with the protagonist Albert, and he successfully understood the story and built connections between the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds.

3.2.1 The Decisive Factor to Approach Fictionality: "Real-world Anchors"

Reading fiction based on real-life knowledge and experience reflects a natural reading habit and strategy. Nikolajeva argues the relationship between reading fiction and absorbing/utilizing real-life knowledge:

> Expert readers approach fiction with their knowledge and understanding of the actual world; they can match fiction against reality, and thus potentially gain insights about the actual world from fictional worlds, which may highlight and reiterate aspects of reality that would be otherwise neglected. (2014, p. 25)

She then considers cognitive engagement with fiction to be a "dynamic system", a "two-way process": "We use our real-life experience to understand fiction, and we gain experience from fiction to explain and understand the real world" (2014, p. 25). However, Nikolajeva believes that this cognitive process is exclusive to "expert readers" and beyond the capabilities of "novice readers"[6]. In the case of Steve's reading of *Cloudland*, it is clear that Steve meets the definition of a novice reader in many aspects, although his use of

5 Steve is the main character in *Minecraft* as the boy fervently introduced during our interview.

6 In the introductory chapter of her *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature* (2014), Nikolajeva adopts the concept of "novice readers" and expatiates its definition, underlining that the term is "irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and other variables" (p. 16) and more about the different kinds of limited knowledge, experience, and capacity. Read pages 15 to 20 of *Reading for Learning* for more information about novice readers.

real-life knowledge mirrors that of expert readers, which results in accurate judgments regarding the nature of the second-layered fantasy world.

During the interview, Steve firstly confirmed what existed in reality, then compared this with narratives in the text, and finally made judgments of "reality vs. fantasy" by discerning differences. In terms of "whether Couldland is real or not", Steve and I had an informative Q&A:

> **Researcher:** [...] Do you think this world in the clouds is real or not real? And why?
> **Steve:** [shaking his head, and trying to find pages 29 to 30 where the airplane's across] Because when the plane passes through the clouds... when the plane comes back... when the plane's wings pass through the clouds, the clouds all fly away, they *all away*.

Figure 3
The Airplane and Albert (Burningham, 2017, pp. 29-30)

In the following conversation, Steve stated that "the plane is real", and he astutely noticed the white trails left by the plane passing through in the photo (Figure 3)—in his drawing, he added similar trails, emphasizing the authenticity of the plane. Remarkably, Steve pointed out a truth that most adults might overlook: Cloudland is, and must be, made of clouds. When the real plane passes through, apart from the only cloud where Albert is located, all other clouds and the children on them vanish from the picture. Next, Steve observed the properties of clouds:

> **Researcher:** So, what else do you think that why Cloudland is not real?
> **Steve:** [gesturing] If someone is thrown out of the plane, he will make a hole.
> **Researcher:** You mean?
> **Steve:** *Cloud is gas.* How can you stand on the gas? *How?*

Steve even didn't use more vague expressions such as "cloud is light, but people are heavy" but rather accurately grasped their nature. He could discern the fictionality of Cloudland with precision—as any expert reader of fiction might—because of his knowledge of physics.[7]

7 Although a 7-year-old might know the fact that "Cloud is gas", I still confirmed it with Steve in the later questioning. "How impressive... 'Cloud is gas' is quite difficult physics knowledge. Who taught you about this?" Steve hesitated at this follow-up question, and his silence even lasted longer than when answering more challenging questions. Finally, he said, "Mom taught me, Dad taught me. I remember." It seems that he actually didn't remember the specific source of this knowledge. However, in a later conversation with his mother, I learned that he likes reading popular science, and his father is a PhD in a STEM field. These backgrounds somewhat shed light on his accurate answer.

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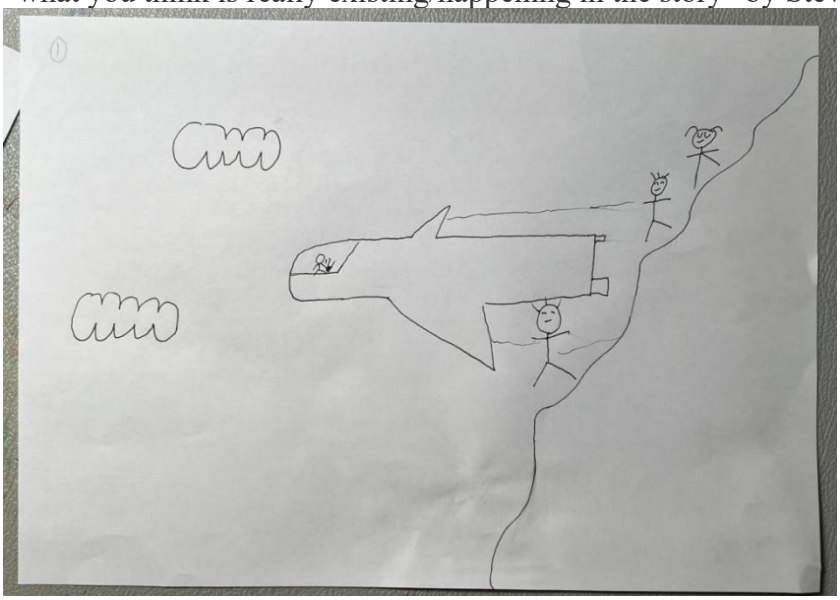
In Steve's answers and drawing reflection, I utilize the phrase "real-world anchors" to symbolize the elements from our real world that have influenced Steve's judgment, just like anchors decide where ships stop. All the elements (Figure 4), except the three big stick figures with different hairstyles ("They are Albert and his parents," answered Steve), are from the photos. Steve even added a pilot in the plane's cabin because every plane on-air needs a pilot. The only exception of Albert's family is because, in his understanding, the first-layered Under Cloudland, where Albert and his parents live, is the characters' real world. Therefore, the family's trip to the mountain is really happening and was depicted in his drawing. Thus, the foremost real-world anchors are photos in the picturebook.

Figure 4

"what you think is really existing/happening in the story" by Steve



3.2.2 Visual Cues vs. Textual Implications

The artistic style of this picturebook has also influenced Steve's discerning of different worlds; however, unlike my detailed analysis and comparison of the photographic and painted elements in the previous section, Steve's perception of the visual designs was rather general.[8] When asked about his feelings about the photographic background design of the book, Steve hesitated, saying, "I like it... I don't like it, sometimes." Questioned about the reason, he explained, "Because of the background, it feels *real*. But the pictures [of Cloud Children and painted clouds] are messy... They look like they are cut out and pasted on." Steve stumbled upon the technique of collage unintentionally. Although he could not articulate his discovery in professional terms, he undoubtedly grasped its essence. Since the question design included content related to collage, I took the opportunity to introduce him to it and asked for his feelings about this technique. "I don't like it," he said, and elaborated on his reasons upon further inquiry, "Because it feels *fake*... These [pasted characters and clouds] look *flat.* Very flat." In answering other questions related to visual design, he repeatedly emphasized that the pasted-on artworks looked "flat", "fake", and "not beautiful". Steve's responses perhaps reflect his inability to fully appreciate Burningham's artistic style, or collage is not his cup of tea. However, it can also be inferred that the inconsistency of different juxtaposed materials visually impacted him. Such an impact was likely to subconsciously influence his judgment regarding reality and fantasy.

In comparison to visual design, the textual elements in *Cloudland* appeared to not have a decisive impact on Steve's judgment of different worlds. When faced with the question "Why does Albert still

8 It is understandable that Steve's responses were affected by his limited oral expression abilities including his vocabulary and sentence-making ability, which was also one of the reasons why I designed the Drawing as Reflection section. Drawing is a more intuitive and straightforward way to express oneself when his oral communication skills are still developing.

remember Cloud Language, but can never get it right?", Steve fell silent for a long period and looked to his mother for assistance. In the end, his response was: "Because they [Cloud Children] spoke the magic words so fast that he [Albert] couldn't follow." Here, Steve appeared to overturn his previous firm conclusion that "Cloudland is fake" and believed in the existence of children in the clouds. Therefore, I confirmed this point with him again and presented options, such as "Cloud Children are real", "Albert dreamed about them", "Albert daydreamed and imagined them", and "You're not sure". This time, Steve chose the option "daydream" without hesitation, and his reasoning returned to the beginning of the story:

> Because they [Albert and his parents] couldn't climb up to such a high mountain, even if the mountain was very, very steep... Every time my mom climbed Yuelu Mountain,[9] she was like... [imitating being out of breath with his hands up, and laughing].

Steve used real-world anchors as a basis for his judgment again: first, regular mountains would not be tall enough to reach into the clouds; second, mountains reaching into the clouds would be difficult to climb, so normal people like Steve's mother would not be able to summit it. By frequently drawing upon his personal experiences when decoding the text, whether it's factual knowledge (physics knowledge and common sense of life) or personal experiences ("Every time my mom climbed Yuelu Mountain"), Steve has established a strong connection between the text and reality.

Conclusions and Prospects

The laughter-filled Cloudland captivates the young protagonist, Albert, while readers, following in Albert's footsteps, also exercise their cognitive skills as they explore the gaps and cracks designed by the author and illustrator. This study has discussed the reading experience of a primary school aged child. I have explored and validated the hypothesis that young readers, like seven-year-old Steve, can recognize the fictionality of the core fantasy world in multi-layered narrative texts. Although Steve's judgments were not always confident, it is precisely these moments of hesitation that reflect his thinking, indicating that Steve completed the process of meaning-making through reflection.

The results of the empirical study demonstrate that if the first-layered fictional world is projected from the real world in the author's setting, young readers may follow the setting and connect it to their own real-world lives. Besides, in the case of *Cloudland*, the power of images is far greater than that of words for the participant. Although Steve's different attitudes toward photographs and paintings might be influenced by his personal artistic preferences, his responses validate Sontag's assertion that a photograph is a "material vestige" of the real world (2005, p. 120), whereas paintings are not, and thus lack the function of providing a sense of reality. With real-world anchors and meaning-rich images as guides, young readers can navigate through different imaginary worlds without worrying about losing their direction.

Cloudland is a profound picturebook with a clear and accessible surface story, as well as deceptive and challenging undertones that test the readers' abilities. For this reason, this picturebook is highly suitable as an educational tool for assessing children's reading abilities and cognitive skills development. This study offers a model for discussing how children in the lower grades of primary school perform in terms of meaning-making and understanding fictionality. Other cognitive skills, such as the ability to engage in critical thinking ("Please provide several reasons to support whether Cloudland is real or fictional") and memory development (retelling Albert's experiences in Cloudland), can also be assessed using *Cloudland* as a tool. As Jessica S. Horst and Carmel Houston-Price suggest, "books are a powerful and somewhat unharnessed resource that could be employed to a much greater extent to help children engage with and make sense of the world around

9 Yuelu Mountain (岳麓山) is a famous local mountain in Steve's hometown and a well-known scenic spot in China. Its elevation is not high, only about 300 meters, more akin to a small hill. The main attractions for tourists are the Taoist and Buddhist temples in the area, as well as the beautiful subtropical vegetation. Typically, adults can reach the mountaintop in less than an hour.

them" (2015, p. 4). Visual fantasies with multilayered diegetic worlds similar to *Cloudland* merit further exploration and application across different fields.

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