

# Looking Closely at the Creative Process

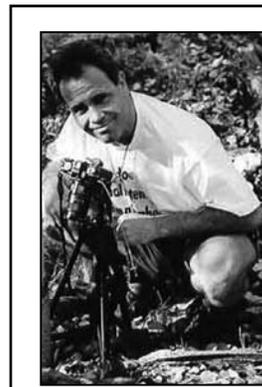
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My understanding of the analysis and creative processes focusing on picturebooks is informed from two distinct, yet complementary, perspectives. First, I am an Associate Professor of Literacy Education and Children's Literature, and second,

I am a nature photographer who writes and illustrates nonfiction nature books for children. My academic background allows me to investigate the theories and research that support the analysis and critique of the picturebook, while my photographic background allows me to appreciate the construction of picturebooks from an "insider's" perspective. As a writer, professor, and photo-illustrator, I am positioned to approach picturebooks in a variety of ways.

From my academic background, I recognize that the compound word "picturebook" has been used to connote the unified nature of the written text and visual images of this literary form (Kiefer, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). The picturebook is a unique literary experience, where meaning is generated simultaneously from written text and visual images. Each sign system, written language and visual image, transacts and transforms the other during the reading experience, allowing readers to oscillate back and forth between these two systems during their transactions with picturebooks (Sipe, 1998).

From my photographic background, I understand how to compose an image, how to juxtapose color, tonalities, and textures to create beautiful landscape images that are appealing to the eye, as well as to provide the necessary visual support for my written texts. As a photographer, I never worried about where the gutter would fall in one of my images or whether the snake's head should be on the left or right. However, as a picturebook photo-illustrator, these are things I



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had to take into consideration as I began submitting my images for publication.

The modes of written language and visual images are governed by distinct logics. In other words, written text is organized by the logic of time, structured into a temporal sequence that slowly unfolds. However, visual image is governed by the logic of spatiality. It is organized to be viewed as a whole or simultaneously (Kress, 2003). In addition, different things can be done with images when compared to what can be done with written text. I can do things with images that I can't do with written language and visa versa. When I want to show someone what an object or subject in nature looks like, I generally rely on a visual image to do so. When I want to explain something about a subject that may not be visible, I choose to write text. For example, if someone asks me what a starfish is, I would rather show them one of my images than try to describe what

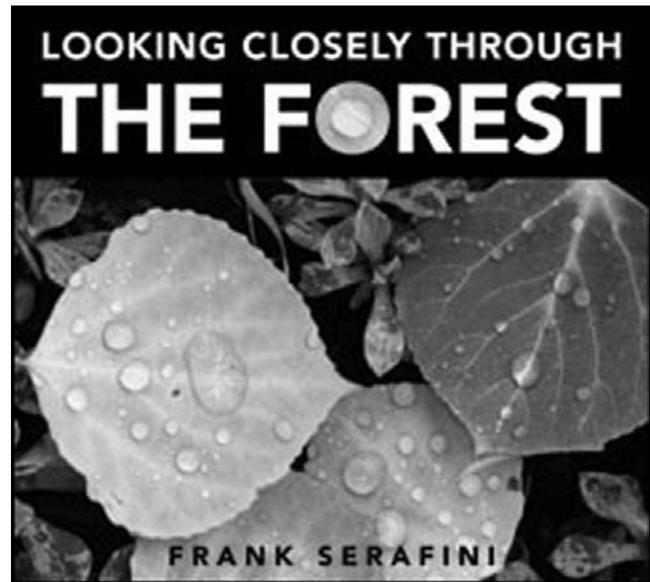
the white pinchers along the back of a five-armed echinoderm are using written language.

The process of creating picturebooks requires adopting one of three stances; writing text to go with images, creating images to go with text, or envisioning the two simultaneously. I have found with the Looking Closely series of nonfiction picturebooks that I am publishing with Kids Can Press in Toronto, I have to adopt the third stance, considering both text and images simultaneously, in order to achieve my desired results. The Looking Closely books are termed “crop and reveal” picturebooks, where a partial section of an image is shown and readers are asked to guess what the object may be. On the subsequent page, a full spread image is revealed with a section of written text detailing more about the subject of the image.

Each book in the Looking Closely series started out by me selecting a particular natural feature or theme, for example, desert or rainforest. After deciding on the theme, I created a list of potential images. I call these lists my “shot lists.” My shot lists are a wish list of images for each theme or natural feature I hope to capture or have already in my stock collection. In the field, I use this shot list as an observation and travel guide to help locate and focus on particular images.

Some images on the shot list were easier than others to capture. In fact, some images were already in my stock portfolio, in which case I wrote text to accompany them. A few images are easy to locate, while others require research, travel, some studio set up, or a little bit of luck. For example, I wanted an image of earthworms for *Looking Closely into the Garden*. You might think this would be rather easy. Unfortunately, I discovered there aren't many earthworms in Las Vegas. So on my trips to Nova Scotia and the coast of Maine, I wandered around several of the harbors asking tackle shops for earthworms. I didn't realize that most coastal fishermen use minnows, crawfish, and other fish as bait, and not worms. Eventually, I bought a box of earthworms and dumped them in my brother-in-law's garden and captured the image that I wanted for the book.

Another challenge was the format of the book which required me to include only horizontal images. That meant half of the images I had already collected, even if they contained the subject matter, would not work because they were vertical images. This requirement posed the biggest challenge for *Looking Closely through*



*the Forest* because most of my forest and tree images were vertical—that's the best alignment for photographing trees.

After I had captured as many images as possible from my shot list, I selected a number of them to send to Karen Li, my editor at Kids Can Press. She and the photo editors reviewed the images and selected the ones that they thought would work best. I then used the list of their selections as a place to begin my research and writing. It was interesting how their selections were often different from the ones that were my favorite images. They were looking at the images as children's book editors, and I saw them from the eyes of a nature photographer.

Writing the language of the “guess-what-it-is page” was a collaborative effort. Because I was familiar with every image that was selected, it was difficult to stand back and guess what the cropped images looked like. I asked my nieces and nephews what they thought the objects might be, and then we circulated the images around the offices of Kids Can Press to see what the employees thought. The final text for these pages was a conglomeration of all these efforts.

The text on the reveal page began as research into the subject and a search for unique language or phrases to describe each image. Trying to write for an audience of young readers (ages 3-8) requires a different mindset than I use when writing for an audience of educators. Up to this point, I had been more comfortable writing for classroom teachers through my educational publica-

tions than I had been writing for young children. I was nervous when Kids Can Press asked me for a writing sample to see if I could manage the written text for the books. I don't remember what I sent, but fortunately, they read something worth cultivating.

For these picturebooks I am limited to the amount of text I can use: somewhere between 75 and 90 words for each image. I usually "overwrite" each section, beginning with a 100-to-200 word text, and then editing it. I wanted to find interesting phrases, such as "toadstools are sometimes found in circular patterns known as fairy circles," that provided information while at the same time used language to engage the senses and the intellect of my young audience. I also needed to become somewhat of an expert on each of the natural features I was writing about. The desert was the easiest since I had been living and photographing within the Sonoran or Mojave Deserts for more than 23 years. The forest and shoreline themes were familiar to me as a photographer, but not as familiar as a naturalist. I used the internet, conversations with my photography friends, books, and some university experts to help me generate and confirm my research for these various themes. The garden book, which seemed like a familiar topic, required more research than I had assumed when beginning. Although I knew what an earthworm looked like, I did not have as much knowledge of them as needed to write the text. In the end, each image for the garden book required more research to find information than the other books.

Creating the images, or in some cases staging the subject, is probably the easiest part of the creative process. When I was given the right light for close-up photography (general mildly overcast skies), and a willing subject (millipedes that sit still for a moment),

I was able to create the images I needed. For example, the earthworms spent some time in my refrigerator, tightly sealed in plastic, so they would not move as much when I photographed them. It's amazing how much a snail can move when you are trying to get a close up picture!

Creating a series of picturebooks for Kids Can Press has been rewarding. Working with my editor has been a learning and enjoyable experience. While the quality of my photography caught the eye of the editors and publishers at Kids Can Press, writing for a younger audience has been a challenge. Every author and illustrator has a different method of creating and combining visual images and written text into a picturebook format and the Looking Closely series reflects mine.

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