RESTORING THE LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER KING
- VISUAL AND VERBAL COMPLEXITY OF NONFICTION
PICTURE BOOK BIOGRAPHIES

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W NOWYM WYDANIU – WIZUALNA I WERBALNA
ZŁOŻONOŚĆ GATUNKU ILLUSTROWANEJ BIOGRAFII
W OBRĘBIE LITERATURY FAKTU

Abstract: The article is devoted to the genre of nonfiction picture book biography as a new publishing phenomenon within the area of children’s literature. The aim of the article is to analyze the ways of transmitting knowledge by combining visual codes and unconventional verbal narratives in three nonfiction picture book biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2007), I Have a Dream (2012), and Be A King: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Dream and You (2018). It examines how the selected books invite the readers to participate in the process of meaning making and redefining reality. It also discusses the strategies of counterstorytelling and counter-visuality employed by the creators of the books.

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł zawiera rozważania nad nowym zjawiskiem wydawniczym w obszarze literatury dziecięcej, jakim jest gatunek ilustrowanej biografii należącej do literatury faktu. Celem artykułu jest analiza sposobów przekazywania wiedzy poprzez połączenie kodów wizualnych z niekonwencjonalnymi narracjami werbalnymi w trzech pozycjach biograficznych dla dzieci: Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2007), I Have a Dream (2012), oraz Be A King: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Dream and You (2018). Artykuł wskazuje, w jaki sposób wybrane książki zachęcają czytelnika do uczestnictwa w procesie odkrywania nowych znaczeń i redefiniowania rzeczywistości. Omawia również strategie sprzeciwu zastosowane w narracjach werbalnych i wizualnych.

Keywords: nonfiction, picture book, biography, counternarrative, visuality.
Given the growing number of nonfiction picture books published in the United States and in Europe over the last several decades, there is limited research on the development of the genre or its cognitive and affective impact on contemporary readers. The fact that scholars of children’s literature are more interested in verbal narratives than its visual rhetoric is one of the reasons for the lack of studies in this area. Another problem seems to be the general ignorance of nonfiction illustrated books as literary works deserving critical attention. One of the few studies treating nonfiction picture books as worthy objects of study is a collection of essays *Verbal and Visual Strategies in Nonfiction Picturebooks* (2021) edited by Nina Goga, Sarah Hoem Iversen, and Anne-Stefi Teigland, published after the 7th International Conference of the European Network of Picturebook Research, which took place in September 2019 at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences in Bergen. The book offers new theoretical and analytical approaches to picture books, which will be referred to in this article. It discusses a variety of genres of nonfiction children’s books, as well as the impact of the illustrators’ stylistic choices on the perception of the publications. However, as it mostly focuses on European children’s literature, it gives little attention to one specific genre – a nonfiction picture book biography which has experienced a resurgence in American publishing houses within the last few years, yet has received marginal scholarly attention. The aim of the article is to analyze the interplay of text and illustrations in three nonfiction picture books about the life and activism of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as to work out how aesthetic aspects of the books invite the readers to participate in the process meaning making and reinterpreting reality.

**Categorizing nonfiction picturebooks**

Nonfiction picturebooks, frequently referred to as nonnarrative texts (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001: 12), entail a large corpus of genres, such as concept books, topic books, reference books, picture dictionaries or illustrated poem books. However, many nonfiction picturebooks include elements of a real story, based on historical accounts and featuring real characters; thus they can also be called “narrative” nonfiction picture books. These can be biographies or historical informative books, or even concept books promoting certain values with exemplary real life stories. As Joe S. Sanders points out, unlike their nonnarrative counterparts, such books are dialogic rather than based on finished knowledge (Sanders 2018: 18). They inspire the readers to go beyond given facts and create their own meaning of the story. To use the words of Smiljana Kovac, nonnarrative picturebooks are marked with characteristic discourses of freedom and ambiguity (Kovac 2020: 38). They allow for multiple interpretations, as well as questioning.
accepted concepts and definitions. Added to this, as Sanders concludes, the more freedom the book gives the reader, the more aesthetic it becomes (Sanders 2018).

Giorgia Grilli uses the term “artistic nonfiction picture books” to refer to the expanding genre of visually and conceptually sophisticated picture books (Grilli 2020). Among others, these are poem books illustrated by well-known artists who adapt existing works of art into illustrations or produce new visuals in their signature styles. Such publications, offering more content in the visual form, are subject to multiple interpretations. Unlike most nonfiction books, this type of literature does not provide specific facts or fixed definitions. Instead, as Sanders proposes, this is “a literature of questions,” which is not the same as the literature of facts (Sanders 2018, 34). Consequently, nonfiction picture books cannot be assessed according to such criteria as objectivity, authenticity, or accuracy. Instead, we should consider the genre in terms of its potential to open debates, question fixed answers and revise the existing knowledge.

Picturebook biographies are another new publishing phenomenon. They reflect a general interest in the lives of outstanding individuals who are brought to children’s literature as role models. They are based on former biographical studies or other available resources, which are usually enlisted at the end of the books or in the authors’ notes. Most of the picture books contain sparse text, and the story is mainly told by the illustrations. As Michael Benton observes, biography is a hybrid genre on different levels. It combines history and fiction, can be both narrative and nonnarrative, and can be conveyed by means of verbal and visual strategies (Benton 2011: 68). So far there have been no scholarly publications on the interplay of images and text in children’s picturebook biographies. Hence, there is a need to study the rhetoric of this genre, as well as its aesthetic and affective impact on potential readers.

Social justice literature and counterstorytelling

Many of the recent children’s picturebook biographies have been published in the U.S. in response to pressing social and political issues of the day. They address the readers with a proposal for change or with a series of guiding principles based on what worked in the past. The books promote social justice, that is “a world in which the distribution of resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure, recognized, and treated with respect” (Bell 2016: 2). Nonfiction texts offer space for discussing a variety of social justice issues. They often feature people taking action in order to make a difference in the world, or, as Ann Berger-Knorr and Mary Napoli note, the books “situate the examination of power and injustice within a broader conversation of what it means to live and participate in a democratic society as engaged and informed citizens” (Berger-Knorr and Napoli 2018: 42).

In the face of growing racial tensions in the United States and the resulting protests and demonstrations, more and more children’s authors and illustrators
are trying to address those issues and get engaged in social action through the writing process. They revive the stories of historical heroes connected with African American history and try to adapt them to current circumstances. The recent illustrated life accounts of Martin Luther King, Jr., the main leader of the Civil Rights Movement, are perfect examples of social justice literature aimed at young readers in America. Frequently published for the Martin Luther King’s Day, celebrated on the third Monday in January throughout the United States, they commemorate the legacy of the hero as well as talk about the values King promoted throughout his life.

According to *Colors of Us*, a website promoting multicultural children’s literature, there are over twenty picture books about Martin Luther King, Jr. published within the last two decades, which are reliable resources promoting social justice issues. The following sections analyze three nonfiction picturebook biographies: *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2007), written by Doreen Rappaport and illustrated by Bryan Collier, *I Have a Dream* (2012), including excerpts from King’s most famous speeches, with the illustrations by Kadir Nelson, and *Be A King: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Dream and You* (2018), written by Carole Boston Weatherford and illustrated by James E. Ransome. All of the books are created by representatives of the Black culture, bringing to the stories their own experiences and heritage. The books have already been recognized for their innovative ways of presenting the stories of Black activism and empowerment. *Martin’s Big Words* and *I Have a Dream* have been granted Coretta Scott King Award for Illustrators, and marked with high sales figures over the last couple of years.

Although the books are part of a long tradition of African American children’s literature offering heroic portraits of Black leaders (Bishop 2007), their rendering of King’s story is far from conventional biographical writing. Their verbal texts are either based on quotes from King’s speeches or they are limited to selected episodes from his life. When combined with diverse illustrations, the same words can be reinterpreted and ascribed totally new meanings. The books recontextualize the story, making it more relevant to contemporary readers and offering new insights into the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement by stressing the continuity of Black struggle. Rather than focusing on the hardships of Black life, they offer an optimistic picture of race relations in America. Thus, they can be analyzed within the theoretical framework of “restorying,” defined by Ebony Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo as “a process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse” (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016: 313). Also, on the visual level, the illustrators revise standard representations of Blackness by means of their stylistic choices, “the purposeful contortion of subjects and objects to convey certain sentiments, intrinsic characteristics, conditions, or ideologies,” to which Roberta Gardner refers as “counter-visuality” (Gardner 2017: 126).
Martin’ Big Words

There are two narrative levels in Martin’s Big Words – one presents the rules of the segregation system and the main events of the Civil Rights Movement, while the other one comprises the “Big Words,” that is the quotes from King’s speeches as well as quote phrases from his mother, father, who was also a preacher, or other members of his family. Both of the verbal narratives are accompanied with Bryan Collier’s evocative watercolor and cut-paper-collage illustrations, which have a large impact on the readers’ understanding of the message. The first double-spread presents a picture of young Martin walking round his hometown together with his mother. The boy points to the “White Only” sign in front of a public building. From the verbal text we learn that “Every time Martin read the words, he felt bad,” but then we are confronted with his mother’s words: “You are as good as anyone,” which offer an alternative perspective on the segregation issue. The following double-page spreads depict young Martin while praying in the church and then Martin as a minister preaching in the same place. The verbal passages placed on these pages are based on contrasting ideas, a strategy that King frequently applied in his speeches:

- Martin said “love,” when others said “hate.” (Rappaport 2007: 7)
- He said “together” when others said “separate.”
- He said “peace” when others said “war.” (Rappaport 2007: 9)

It seems to be a rule in the book that such descriptive phrases are followed with King’s famous quotes, for instance, “Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that,” or “Love is the key to the problems of the world,” which can be easily reinterpreted and applied to contemporary circumstances. The visual dominance of the “Big Words” indicates the importance of these principles in King’s life, as well as their relevance in modern times. The words are usually larger than the font of the main text, and the colors range from brown to blue to green. The graphic design of the quotes definitely draws the attention of the readers. The quotes in bold type contrasting with smaller print of the historical narrative might be the first thing one can notice on the double-spread.

Rappaport’s “restorying” of King’s life in the nonfiction picture book format reveals a number of facts that are rarely mentioned in standard factual accounts. With her digressions and comments hidden between the lines, the author conveys the belief that the Civil Rights Movement has a strong spiritual component. She focuses on the transformative power of religious beliefs in the careers of political leaders, or, as Patricia Crawford writes, “the concepts of faith in action, and as action” (Crawford 2011: 51). The idea is reinforced by the interjection of King’s words: “Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not be stopped, because God is with this movement” (Rappaport 2007: 20). Other phrases indicate a correlation between King’s religious beliefs and political activism. The final passage focusing on real events of the Civil Rights Movement describes Martin
as the one who went to help garbage collectors in Memphis, Tennessee, and, among doing other things, “he prayed with them” (Rappaport 2007: 25).

King’s religiosity and spirituality are also expressed visually. The book’s final illustration shows Martin’s face on a stained-glass window, looking directly at the reader. Depicting King in the frame of a stained glass, with monochromatic colors, expresses the illustrator’s belief that the character’s message is timeless and his legacy must be preserved. As stained glass windows were originally intended to depict saints of the church, King is raised to the status of sainthood. He becomes a role model whose life is a good lesson to consider and apply in everyday life. According to Kelsey Dallas, stained glass windows make a special impression on the viewers: “There’s something really magnificent about the idea of creating an image where light makes it come alive” (Dallas 2016). The shifting light that goes through the stained glass window illuminates the image of King, thus emphasizing his achievements and spreading his message far beyond the local communities. The recreations of stained glass windows also appear in some background scenes. As Collier explains in an introductory note, he had a special reason to use the stained glass imagery. He writes: “the multicolors symbolize multi races. Stained-glass windows are also a vehicle to tell the story of Jesus. And, whether you’re on the inside or the outside, windows allow you to look past where you are” (Rappaport, Illustrator’s Note). Thus, stained glass is not only a metaphor of King’s life but also the impact of past experiences on people’s lives today.

The collage technique that Collier uses throughout the book allows for more creativity in presenting the story. Combining different elements that have no relationship to each other until they are put together to form a oneness is, according to the illustrator, a perfect medium to bring more emotions to the story. As he writes, “I tried to push to an emotional level that allows the reader to bring his or her experience with it, without actually losing the intensity or the intention of the story” (Rappaport, Illustrator’s Note). Incorporating the image of the flag into the collage illustrations is one example of how Collier engages the reader in analyzing the story within the context of such ideas as freedom and equality. Images of the flag are stuck amongst the protestors or somewhere in the streets, not far from the “Whites Only” signs. One illustration is especially powerful - it is a picture of a Black girl placed in front of the collaged flag made of colorful pieces of paper that reflect American diversity. The figure of the girl seems to be perfectly composed within the overall image of the flag. Parts of her body are made of the same paper cuts that are used for specific components of the flag. She is part of the flag, and part of the nation consisting of people of different races. The picture is accompanied with the following words: “King cared about all Americans,” which directly pertains to the concept of equality of races. At the same time, it is alarming as the picture of the flag is far from ideal. The stars and stripes are rugged rather than straight and clear, which can be interpreted as a warning that even today one needs to struggle for equal rights.
Be A King

Carole Boston Weatherford’s picture book Be A King is another example of a “restoryed” version of Martin Luther King’s life and ideals. The book is a combination of two different narratives, which can be distinguished with the style of the illustrations. One tells the story of King’s life and activism. A set of nine full-page watercolor illustrations maintained in a serious tone depict young Martin in his family home, at a picnic of a Black community, or as a student at Morehouse College, as well as a number of locations connected with the Civil Rights Movement, such as the sites of boycotts and protests - the Montgomery Bus, Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the March for Washington protest in front of Lincoln Memorial. Another set of pictures, child-like drawings in colored pencils on a white background, interspersed amongst the other illustrations, depict a group of young students preparing a mural, called the “Wall of Justice,” on the premises of their school. Interestingly, it is a racially diverse group of boys and girls, with one disabled child, who collaborate in the common project. They paint the portrait of Martin Luther King in the center of the space, which is surrounded with powerful slogans like “Equal rights for all,” or “Stop police brutality.” The final illustration depicts the whole group of students marching and holding posters with even more slogans referring to a variety of social justice issues: “Disability right,” “Buy local,” “Workers’ rights,” or “End war.”

The verbal text of both stories is constructed in exactly the same way. The author places the phrase “You can be a King” on every double-spread, which is followed with two lines of advice on how to act properly. The author uses the name “King” as a metaphor of a range of positive values and attitudes. It implies that you can be given a status of a hero if you, for instance, “say sorry if you did something wrong,” “stand for peace,” “band together against bullies,” “answer your critics,” or generally “do your very best at whatever you do.” Some of the instructions directly refer to what Martin Luther King did before he earned the reputation of a national hero: “break the chains of ignorance,” “sing a song of freedom,” “put your foot down and walk tall,” or “lift up less fortunate,” issues that are still relevant and necessary to make “the dividing walls come down.”

The book offers advice to a young generation of readers who want to change the world. The refrain “You can be a King” encourages the readers to continue King’s legacy and march for freedom and equality, which are still denied to some social groups in America. Rather than a historical informative material, the book is a perfect primer on how to take action on social justice, as well as an empowering resource for readers of all ages on how to reenact King’s ideas in the contemporary world. The initiative of the children to prepare the mural is an example of a lesson in civic responsibility.

The overall concept promoted in the book is service. The life story of Martin Luther King is supposed to be an inspiration for contemporary youth of how they
can also serve others in their society. Weatherford opens the book with a quote from King’s speech given two months before he was killed:

Everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.

The primary aim of the picture book is not to teach about history but promote specific attitudes and patterns of behavior, which are the outcome of King’s ideology. The story of the Civil Rights Movement, as it is presented in the book, is not just about struggle for racial equality but it is about social service for a number of different causes, be it racial discrimination, unemployment, or the rights of the disabled.

**I Have a Dream**

Kadir Nelson’s picture book *I Have a Dream* is a visual interpretation of the last part of King’s speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. In fact, it was published on the fiftieth anniversary of the event in commemoration of King’s ideals and teaching. Selected passages from King’s speech are placed on double-spread illustrations, which expand the meaning of the words. The colorful oil paintings focus either on people or places, indicating that the issue of racial equality is both a spatial and personal matter. Martin’s dream of freedom for all races is expressed by means of several symbolic images in close-up. Among others, a Black man and a white man are facing each other on a white background. With no other elements in the picture, it implies the men have access to equal opportunities and are eager to cooperate with each other, while the text suggests they used to be “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners.” Another telling picture shows a pair of black and white hands joined together, which refers to King’s dream that “we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together.” Crowds of people of different races protesting together or black and white children playing together dominate the other double spreads. Contrary to dominant discourses, the pictures suggest that racial equality can be achieved only if people of different races look up to each other. Finally, there is a series of pictures of U.S. geographical regions which, according to King, will be reached by freedom as long as racial segregation comes to an end. These include the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire, heightening Alleghenies.
of Pennsylvania, snowcapped Rockies of Colorado, or curvaceous slopes of California. While most stories of King’s life are limited to the American South, Nelson’s interpretation indicates the extent of the message is much wider. The beautiful vistas of the country are the symbols of the world King was dreaming of. Although the text of the “I have a dream” speech is well-known in the U.S. and abroad, Nelson's striking full-color paintings offer a new insight into the words, emphasizing the universal truth and lasting impact of King’s message. The accompanying illustrations depicting crowds of protestors stress the idea of equality. It is hard to differentiate between the people and specify their race or ethnicity, and with the text placed above the picture, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” the image becomes universal in meaning. Another truth presented by means of the illustrations is the cooperation of the nation as a guarantee of future success. The image showing faces of several children of different races all looking in one direction is a visual interpretation of what King predicted during his lifetime.

“I have a dream,” perceived as the most notable speech of the twentieth century, is given a new meaning in its visual form. Given the growing racial conflicts in the United States, the text of King’s speech is empowering for contemporary readers. With the metaphor of the dream the book offers the reader a positive message of hope. The image of white doves on the final illustration, accompanied with King’s concluding words: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!,” quoted from a popular Negro spiritual, indicates the universality of the concept of freedom. From slavery times to the Civil Rights Movement to the current times of the Black Lives Matter Movement, freedom, unlimited by social and political divisions, is a value of upmost importance not only to African Americans but all races and ethnicities living in the U.S. Without the accompanying illustrations the text of King’s speech would not sound relevant to the current situation of African American people. The visual narrative emphasizes the continuity of Black struggle, the need to protest and collaborate with other races in order to achieve peace and freedom.

**Ideological projections**

None of the selected picture books are ideologically neutral. The verbal and visual narratives are projections of the authors’ beliefs and expectations. As Kim and Short argue, though rarely analyzed in the context of political ideologies, picture books are discursive practice sand cultural artefacts (Kim and Short 2019: 262). The embedded ideology in the discourse of picture books on the life and activism of Martin Luther King is the importance of keeping racial harmony through the interaction of diverse groups of people. The books stress the necessity for every citizen to think about social justice issues and contribute to the well-being of the society.

The visual narratives seem to engage the readers more than the written texts. One of the rhetorical strategies which invites the reader into the story
is focalization, that is the way the depicted person is gazing at the viewer (Painter et al. 2014: 29). The full-page portraits of Martin Luther King included in all of the selected picture books have a lot of visual weight in terms of ideological content, and thus encourage interactive viewing. In *Martin's Big Words*, the figure of the preacher placed on the stained glass looks directly at the viewer, as does the character on the cover illustrations of *Be A King* and *I Have a Dream*. As Kress and van Leeuwen argue, “the gaze of represented participants directly addresses the viewers and so establishes an imaginary relation with them, while more schematic analytical pictures invite impersonal, detached scrutiny” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020: 89). The viewers of the selected picture books enter into some kind of imaginary relation with Martin Luther King, and are easily convinced to follow his example. Another form of relation can be signified by means of the facial expression or gestures. A smile may suggest a relation of social affinity while a hand pointing at the viewer may invite the viewer to come closer and participate in the social or political activism of the depicted hero (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020: 118).

The represented discourses of the three picture books differ from the popular image of the Civil Rights Movement, dominated with protests and mistreatment of African Americans. Instead, the books contain visions of a dream world in which people of different races work together in the belief that change is possible. As Kim and Short argue, “This functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, called an ideological complex, is coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of the former’s own distinctive interests, or subversively offered by another social group in an attempt at resistance in its own interest” (Kim and Short 2019: 262). The creators of the picture books, representing their own racial group, provide subversive stories of the Black struggle, but their rhetoric is far from favoring one race over another. Instead, by raising King to the status of a universal leader, they propose cooperation of races as the only option in a racially divided society. The new versions of King’s life story are not dominated with the black or white perspective. The discourse of neutrality and the message of the unity of races are the contexts through which nonfiction picture book biographies of Martin Luther King should be read.

**Final remarks**

By experimenting with the verbal and the visual format, nonfiction picture book biographies have challenged traditional ways of transmitting knowledge of well-known figures. Historical facts are no longer presented as unquestionable details. The readers are invited to make meaning of the new narratives and bring their own experience to the story. Simultaneously, the narratives are transmitters of values and ideals, which make the books relevant and responsive to social issues that impact present-day American society. Single words or statements quoted from the characters’ public talks become the main narrative, which is open to a variety of interpretations.
The visual codes are part of the far-reaching experimentation. The skillfully designed illustrations do not mirror the verbal text but expand the story with new ideas. By mixing different artistic styles, the illustrators present a variety of perspectives and involve the readers in reinterpreting the images any time they open the books. Consequently, the picture books elicit aesthetic and emotional responses, as well as generate critical conversations. But they would not have such an extensive impact on their audience of readers if it was not for the interplay of the two narrative modes, which, with the participation of the readers and the viewers, brings the final result—a restoryed version of the past.

References


