

# EXPERIENCING THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS. A CREATIVE WAY TO ACCESS AND ELABORATE THE WORLD OF THE OTHER

Maria Giulia Panetta

Institute of Constructivist Psychology, Padua, Italy

*Abstract: This article stems from the workshop conducted during the 26th International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, held in Belgrade in 2025. Taking into account the peculiar characteristics of the picture books, this work aims to propose a theoretical framework that supports their ethical and professional use in psychotherapy. The Psychology of Personal Constructs will be the main lens, while constructive alternativism will be the underlying theme of the whole encounter with these particular books.*

*Keywords: Picture book, Psychotherapy, Storytelling, Metaphors, Personal Construct Psychology (PCP).*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article stems from the workshop conducted during the 26th International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, held in Belgrade in 2025. The workshop offered participants the opportunity to experience picture books first-hand, reflect on their personal impact, and co-construct a theoretical framework that supports their ethical and professional use in psychotherapy. The reflections and analyses that follow are grounded in that collective exploration. I am a psychologist and psychotherapist, currently training as a teacher at the Institute of Constructivist Psychology in Padua. In my daily practice, I mostly work with adults. So why, one might ask, am I interested in picture books—so often considered the realm of children's literature? As we shall see, picture books are not exclusively for children. They can serve as meaningful resources also for adults, especially in therapeutic contexts.

My interest in this field began with a particular book: *Mama, A World of Mothers and Motherhood*

(Delforge & Gréban, 2022). As I turned its pages, I encountered narratives in which I could recognize myself, as well as images that allowed me to sketch out aspects of my own lived experience. And I thought: *If this book could touch me so deeply, what kind of experience could it offer my clients, if I started to treat the picture book as a resource in my sessions?*

What follows is an attempt to build a theoretical framework that, from my perspective, illustrates the enormous possibilities that the use of a picture book can open within a therapeutic space.

## 2. A BRIEF LOOK AT THE LITERATURE

The use of narrative and visual materials as facilitators of therapeutic processes is supported by a broad, though theoretically heterogeneous, body of psychological literature. Early psychoanalytic contributions already framed psychological change as occurring through symbolic and indirect processes. Freud conceptualized dream work and symptom

formation as relying on displacement and condensation, mechanisms that are inherently metaphorical and imagistic (Freud, 1900/1953). Jung later expanded this view by emphasizing the transformative potential of symbolic images, arguing that therapeutic change emerges from sustained engagement with symbols capable of holding emotional tensions without being reduced to literal interpretation (Jung, 1964).

Developmental and relational perspectives further legitimated the clinical use of symbolic and narrative objects. Winnicott (1971) introduced the concept of transitional phenomena, describing an intermediate area of experience in which play, creativity, and meaning-making become possible. Within this framework, symbolic objects function as mediators between inner and outer reality—a role closely aligned with the use of picture books in psychotherapy. Parallel developments in bibliotherapy research have shown that fictional narratives can facilitate emotional expression, identification, and reflective processing across clinical and developmental settings (Rubin, 1978; Pardeck, 1994).

From a broader psychological perspective, additional support is given for understanding picture books as process facilitators. Bruner (1986) highlighted the centrality of narrative forms in the construction of psychological reality, while Lakoff and Johnson (1980) described how cognition itself is structured through embodied metaphors. Narrative therapy drew explicitly on these assumptions, treating metaphor-rich stories as tools for re-authoring personal meanings and identities (White & Epston, 1990). The integration of visual and verbal elements in picture books intensifies this metaphorical function, allowing therapeutic engagement even when verbal abstraction is limited.

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) offers a particularly coherent framework for conceptualizing picture books in clinical practice. Kelly's Fundamental Postulate states that a person's psychological processes are channelled by the ways in which they anticipate events (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 32). From this perspective, therapeutic change becomes possible when

personal construct systems can be explored, tested, and reorganized in the light of new experiences. Metaphor and narrative play a crucial role in this process by promoting loosening rather than tightening of construing, thereby enabling safe experimentation with alternative meanings (Bannister & Fransella, 1971; Winter, 1992). Picture books may be understood as structured yet open symbolic systems that invite such exploratory processes without directly challenging core constructs.

More recent clinical contributions have begun to address the use of picture books and illustrated narratives in psychotherapy, emphasizing their capacity to foster emotional attunement, reflective distance, and shared meaning-making within the therapeutic relationship (Nodelman, 1988; Moon, 2010; Wu et al., 2025). Although this literature remains dispersed, it converges on the view that picture books function not as interpretive tools but as relational and symbolic mediators.

Taken together, these contributions provide a solid theoretical basis for considering picture books as clinically relevant process facilitators, grounded in processes of symbolic, narrative, and metaphorical change.

### 3. FIRST OF ALL, AN EXPERIENCE

If I were to define what a picture book is to me, I would say that it is first and foremost an *experience*.

From a Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) perspective, meaning is not passively received but actively construed by the individual (Kelly, 1955/1991). A picture book does not deliver a fixed message; rather, it invites the reader to engage in a dynamic process of interpretation, where images and text serve as starting point for construing and testing personal constructs. In PCP terms, the encounter with a picture book can be seen as a clear example of the construing process itself: each reader interprets the narrative through their own unique system of anticipations and dichotomous constructs, selecting, amplifying, or ignoring elements in ways that resonate with

their experience. This is what we usually do in our daily life. But in picture books, the juxtaposition of words and images facilitates multiple perspectives, allowing for “as if” explorations in which the reader experiments with alternative meanings in a safe, symbolic space. Moreover, this experiential dimension aligns with Kelly’s emphasis on the active, participatory nature of meaning-making: “A person anticipates events by construing their replications” (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 35). In the context of picture books, the narrative and visual elements act as events to be construed.

### 3.1 Experiencing Through Picture books: The Workshop Framework

During the workshop, participants were invited to approach picture books directly. Divided into four groups, each group had five minutes to leaf through a book, observe its images, and notice what resonated with them - without the pressure to read every word. Afterward, the books rotated among groups until all had been explored. This structure was designed to foreground the experiential dimensions of picture books. The emphasis was not on comprehension or analysis, but on lived encounter: how meaning begins to take shape through images, pacing, emotional tone, and bodily-affective responses. In this sense, picture books were treated as events that unfold differently for each reader, inviting personal constructions rather than imposing predefined narratives.

Four picture books were deliberately selected for their diversity in genre, aesthetic language, and narrative structure, including one silent book:

- *Pezzettino*, by Leo Lionni (1975), a philosophical picture book exploring identity, belonging, and the question of wholeness through simple forms and colors;
- *Kintsugi* by Issa Watanabe (2023), a silent book inspired by the Japanese art of repairing broken objects, visually narrating loss, rupture, and transformation;
- *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1963), a classic exploration of emotional

turbulence, imagination, and return, balancing fantasy and containment;

- *The Heart and the Bottle* by Olive Jeffers (2010), a poetic narrative about emotional withdrawal and reconnection following loss, conveyed through minimalist text and imagery.

Once all participants had become familiar with the picture books, a set of open-ended prompts was introduced:

*Is there one picture book that felt like yours?*

*What stayed with you?*

*What story do you think it tells?*

*And what story does it tell about you?*

These questions opened a dialogue that continued throughout the workshop. The process evolved as a co-constructed inquiry, in which participants’ direct experiences with the picture books provided the experiential ground - in terms of anticipation - for exploring what can be done with picture books in therapeutic settings, as well as for situating the theoretical framework proposed.

## 4. WHAT IS A PICTURE BOOK?

A picture book can be more easily defined by what it is not. It is not (just) a book for children; its narratives and imagery can engage readers of any age, inviting reflection, storytelling, and emotional resonance. It is not simply illustrated text; the images do not merely replicate the words but enter into a dynamic dialogue with them, creating meaning through the interplay of visual and verbal elements (Sendak, 1988). It is not a passive reading experience; readers are active participants, construing meaning according to their unique personal constructs (Kelly, 1955/1991). It is not didactic; its purpose is not to instruct, moralize, or convey a fixed message. Finally, it is not an over-the-counter remedy; picture books are not a quick fix, but tools that require engagement, reflection, and relational attunement.

By defining picture books in terms of what they are not, we emphasize their role as a medium for active, imaginative, and relational experience. They function as a starting point inviting readers to explore alternative perspectives, reflect on their own experience, and co-construct meaning in a participatory process. In this sense, the picture book becomes a space where personal constructs can be tested, expanded, and reorganized, producing resonances that are unique for each reader. As Marcella Terrusi (2009) beautifully describes, a picture book is

*a bridge suspended between images and words, between what is explicit and what cannot be said, between what we can communicate and what we wish to communicate. It is a bridge capable of creating connections and a narrative space to go beyond defenses, fears, and walls that we have long built around ourselves. A bridge for meeting each other beyond right and wrong, and moving together in the realm of imagination and possibility, in the place of all hypotheses.*

## 5. METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE – ACTING 'AS IF'...

Reading a picture book can be seen as inhabiting an elaborate metaphor. The dialogue between text and image draws the reader into the realm of “as if.” Within this frame, metaphorical language serves an important psychological function: it modulates threat (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 361), enabling individuals to speak indirectly about themselves while addressing “something else.” The metaphorical logic allows “one to leave behind something familiar and approach something new without encountering experiences that are too threatening to one’s own structure of meaning” (Guerra, 2023).

This dynamic was evident in the group debriefing sessions, where participants often spoke about the books’ characters or imagery, but in doing so were also speaking about themselves. The metaphorical buffer created a safe distance, while still allowing for personal resonance.

Remaining within the metaphorical frame promotes safety and flexibility: clients may choose what to reveal, how much to share, and which images to use. This facilitates a creative reorganization of meaning and opens new pathways for action and understanding.

Metaphor exemplifies a delicate balance between loosening and tightening: loose enough to allow the entry of new, creative, and alternative elements, yet tight enough to preserve the original meaning and the shared message (Guerra, 2023).

## 6. THE CREATIVITY CYCLE OR A WAY OF EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES

As Jung (1964) and Winnicott (1971) each emphasized in different ways, symbolic and transitional phenomena support psychological transformation not when they are prematurely interpreted or fixed in meaning, but when they are emotionally contained, engaged with playfully, and allowed to remain partially indeterminate. In Jung’s view, symbols are transformative precisely because they cannot be exhausted by rational explanation and thus sustain a dialogue between conscious and unconscious processes. Similarly, Winnicott (1971) described transitional phenomena as occupying an intermediate space in which experience can be explored creatively, without the pressure to resolve ambiguity or collapse subjective and objective reality. When such phenomena are “held” within a reliable relational context and approached through play rather than interpretation, they foster the conditions under which new meanings and forms of experience can emerge.

“In our stories we extend ourselves towards becoming other than we are: we learn to experiment with possible futures as well as to gain perspective on where we have been”, said William Doty (1975). We can do this through creativity (1955/1991, p. 388), described by Kelly as an alternation of loosening and tightening. Picture books, by engaging both imagination and structure, can stimulate precisely this cycle.

Loosening occurs when the narrative or imagery invites uncertainty, ambiguity, or alternative interpretations, allowing the reader to suspend rigid constructs and explore possibilities. Loosening fosters permeability (ibidem, p. 55), allowing the person to consider new elements that had never been considered before. Tightening follows when the reader selectively organizes or integrates these new elements into their existing construct system, testing and refining personal meanings.

## 7. GIVING VOICE TO NON VERBAL CONSTRUCTS

The picture book could be a powerful tool for verbalizing those personal constructs that often have no words - to give shape to the implicit and the unspoken. This means translating lived experience into images, and then using those images as a bridge to find the words that make meaning possible. In this way, we move back and forth between what is felt, what is seen, and what can finally be said. In therapy, this process helps individuals articulate experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken, making them narratable within their own personal stories. As Kelly (1955/1991, p. 344) said, "Sometimes it is possible for the therapist to help the client to establish a verbal symbolic system to replace a part of his preverbal system".

Preverbal constructs (ibidem, p. 340), or better saying non-verbal constructs <sup>1</sup>, work as anticipations even though there are no consistent word symbols. The images, metaphors, and visual narratives in picture books provide a possibility for those constructs to emerge in a form that can be noticed, explored, and eventually verbalized. Through this process, clients increase their cognitive awareness (ibidem, p. 351) of underlying constructs, making them more manageable within personal narratives. Moreover,

the iterative movement between non-verbal experience and verbal articulation could promote the reorganization of the construct system, promoting permeability and so the possibility to integrate new experiences into a coherent personal worldview.

During the workshop, it was possible to directly observe this process. The dark-toned illustrations of *Kintsugi* (Watanabe, 2023) facilitated the emergence of immediate emotional resonances, often recognized by participants as the "gut feeling," prior to any possibility of verbal articulation. The images elicited non-verbal constructs related to polarities such as fracture/repair and vulnerability/protection, which manifested through silence, posture, and ways of engaging with the picture book, without requiring verbalization.

Through the picture book *Pezzettino*, participants were able to engage with experiences of incompleteness and wholeness, allowing non-verbal constructs to emerge and, for some, to be gradually articulated in words. Some other participants reported having been "deeply moved" by the images in *Pezzettino*, while being unable to articulate the reasons for this reaction. As the workshop was not oriented toward therapeutic work, such forms of sharing were welcomed without forcing verbal articulation; instead, attention was directed toward eliciting and describing the process as it was unfolding *in vivo*.

## 8. IDENTITY, SELF-LEGITIMATION AND SOCIALITY

Through the encounter with a picture book, a space opens up in which the personal world of the other can begin to take form and be expressed. This fosters a process of self-legitimation: the person begins to see their own experience as narratable, coherent, and meaningful. In PCP terms, we can say that a

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<sup>1</sup> George Kelly refers to preverbal constructs as those "It may or may not have been devised before the person had command of speech." (Kelly, 1955/1991, Vol. 2, p. 6) In his work, however, this term seems to describe the discriminations we make between events before acquiring language. *Non-verbal construing*, therefore, appears to me a more comprehensive way to refer to all those constructs that continue to operate and give shape to individuals' anticipations of their world, even when they lack a linguistic label for expression.

picture book could support the elaboration of personal constructs and promote a greater sense of continuity and agency in one's identity. Individuality (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 38) and Commonality (ibidem, p. 63) corollaries offer two key lenses for reading the picture book. Each reader brings their own unique constructs to the story (Individuality), while also connecting through shared human experiences evoked by universal themes, such as loss, wonder, fear, growth (Commonality). The picture book becomes a space where personal meaning and relational understanding can meet, promoting a sense of self-legitimation.

In therapeutic contexts, picture books not only foster self-awareness but also encourage the recognition of others' perspectives, supporting sociality (ibidem, p.66) and enhancing the co-construction of meaning. In a safe relational space, and within the playful frame of acting 'as if,' people may become willing to take the risk of construing the other's point of view. This imaginative effort can open the possibility for dialogue and mutual understanding, where different perspectives are not only tolerated, but explored and valued.

During the workshop, I presented a silent book that immediately captured the curiosity and attention of the participants. "*El arengue rojo*" (Trenor, 2012) supports us in the effort to imagine the lives of others and to promote sociality. As we turn the pages, we encounter a multitude of figures: the musician, the cyclist with a potted plant, the little girl absorbed in her blue balloon, the young woman meditating, the elderly lady with a cane, or the cloud raining over someone who hasn't yet decided whether to open her umbrella. Each element is an invitation to storytelling, a fragment from which a narrative can emerge. The book does not impose a single plot, but opens up a visual and symbolic space where the reader is free to project, invent, imagine - and perhaps even recognise themselves in others.

## 9. PICTURE BOOKS AS RELATIONAL EXPERIMENTS

Ultimately, reading a picture book is a relational experiment. Meaning is not only constructed individually, but also negotiated and reshaped in relation to others. For psychotherapy, this underlines the importance of a trusting relationship. When using picture books in relational or therapeutic contexts, the importance of a trusting relationship comes first. Without trust, no true encounter is possible. We invite the person into the shared space of the book. We do not impose meanings, nor can we force the person to embark on this journey with us - a journey that may result threatening, especially in light of the aspects we have previously discussed.

This requires a solid understanding of the Other's construct system: how they make sense of the world, what matters to them, and how they might resonate with certain images or themes. Picture books should not be used in the early stages of psychotherapy, when diagnostic hypotheses are not yet clear. The therapist needs to have a sufficiently good grasp of the patient's construct system in order to anticipate what kind of experience the book may evoke for the individual, and which processes it is likely to promote or channelize. This is why picture books constitute a powerful means of elaborating at a stage of the therapeutic process when diagnostic hypotheses have received sufficient validation and the therapeutic relationship can rest on a solid foundation of understanding and trust.

Picture book can also be used at the conclusion of a therapeutic process as an opportunity to review the journey undertaken, subject it to revision, and imagine future trajectories. They provide an effective means to subsume the therapeutic process and to consolidate the new emerging construct system, restoring the individual's centrality within the whole path and supporting their agency in future choices. Equally essential is for the therapist to have a deep familiarity with the picture book itself - its narrative, visual cues, and emotional undertones. This understanding is crucial for providing the

client with the opportunity to experiment widely and successfully through the use of the picture book. Only then can we navigate it together as a shared venture, where meaning is co-created, not delivered.

One of the questions that emerged during the workshop concerned how to introduce the proposal of sharing a picture book in therapy and who should be responsible for choosing it. From a PCP perspective, this question is not a technical one but an explicitly relational and epistemological issue, since the way in which the picture book is introduced contributes to defining the kind of experience the person is invited to *construe*. Proposing a picture book does not amount to introducing a neutral material; rather, it is a conversational act that may either expand or restrict the client's field of anticipations.

When, during the therapeutic process, the client chooses to share a picture book, this represents a particularly valuable opportunity to reflect on the relational experiment the client is conducting with the therapist. Like a song, a poem, a quotation, a book, or notes written at home and brought into the session, the picture book becomes a medium through which the therapist may gain a deeper understanding of the client's personal meanings, while the client tests their anticipations not only about the material itself but also about the therapeutic relationship.

Conversely, when the therapist proposes the use of a picture book, it is essential that the invitation be framed in an open, tentative, reversible, and non-prescriptive manner, so that it can function as an invitation to experiment within the therapeutic dialogue. In this way, the picture book is not positioned as carrying a predetermined meaning, but as a shared space for exploration.

The workshop discussion highlighted that the central issue is less about who selects the picture book than about how the proposal itself is narrated. Explicitly stating that there is no correct reading, that the book may prove unhelpful, and that the experience can be interrupted or modified at any moment helps create the conditions for an exploratory use of the material. From this perspective, sharing a picture book becomes an opportunity to co-construct a field

of possibilities, rather than a predetermined technical step.

## 10. LIMITS AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

As I said before, the use of picture books in psychotherapy must be understood as a context-sensitive practice, whose significance emerges from how the client construes both the material and the therapeutic relationship. Picture books do not function as inherently therapeutic tools; rather, they offer experiential conditions. A primary limitation, therefore, lies in the risk that the use of an illustrated narrative may inadvertently lead to a constriction (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 352), rather than a dilation, of the client's perceptual field - particularly when the book is introduced with implicit expectations or interpretive agendas. Several of these concerns emerged explicitly during the workshop discussions, where participants noted how quickly a picture book can shift from an invitation to explore to a perceived demand to "understand correctly," thereby reducing personal possibilities for construing.

Metaphorical and visual material is clinically useful only insofar as it supports exploratory construing and the tentative revision of anticipations. When clients experience the picture book as overly prescriptive, emotionally overwhelming, or insufficiently relevant to their current concerns, the result may be a tightening of construing and a constriction in order to minimize the apparent incompatibilities, resulting in defensiveness, disengagement, or literalization of meaning. Workshop discussions highlighted that this risk is particularly salient in early phases of therapy, when the client's construct system may be organized around maintaining predictability and control, and when tolerance for ambiguity is still limited.

A further limitation concerns clients whose construing is already severely disrupted or fragmented. From a PCP standpoint, individuals in what we can call acute psychotic states or dealing with anxiety (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 365) may lack the capacity to use metaphor as an experimental

“as if” frame. In such cases, picture books may be construed concretely rather than metaphorically, intensifying confusion rather than supporting reorganization.

These limits carry important clinical implications. First, the use of picture books requires careful attention to timing, relational safety, and the client's current construing of therapy itself. Second, therapists must remain vigilant to signs of tightening and constriction, such as rapid closure of meaning or withdrawal, and be prepared to abandon or modify the use of the book accordingly. Finally, the workshop discussions underscored the importance of treating picture books as conversational partners rather than a preemptive technique: their value lies in how they participate in the co-construction of meaning, not in any predefined symbolic content.

*“In psychotherapy we all know that we create and sustain (destroy and banish) possibilities of telling and hearing. [...] We create realities in the forms of relationship, or conversational practices, we undertake. To explore the possibilities of gentleness we have to be gentle with each other. If we are harsh we create only what is amongst the possibilities and realities of harshness” (p. 9).*

The workshop exemplified this principle, demonstrating how picture books, in the interplay of images and words, can cultivate spaces of understanding, narrative exploration, and relational creativity while allowing participants to recognize and articulate both individual and shared experiences.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the relational dimension of this journey - and extending these reflections to psychotherapy, where the practice originated and continues to evolve - the workshop offered a safe relational space in which participants could explore both the possibilities and the limits of picture books. In this setting, we were able to engage directly with the books, share our own responses, and reflect on how images and narratives resonate with personal experiences. This shared exploration allowed us to consider not only the stories themselves but also how our own perspectives, emotions, and constructs interact with the material, highlighting the co-constructed nature of meaning in both therapeutic and relational contexts.

Miller Mair's (1988) reflection seems to capture this dynamic precisely:

*“There are always listeners and tellers, and listeners within the tellers and listeners within the listeners. What is told and how it is told is shaped by the occasion, the conventions and the dangers of the moment” (p. 8).*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Maria Giulia Panetta is a psychologist and psychotherapist trained at the Institute of Constructivist Psychology (ICP), Padova, Italy. Alongside her clinical practice, she is engaged in supervision, teaching, and psychotherapy training. Her research and professional interests focus on relational processes and the construction of experience, with particular attention to embodiment, group settings—including those in sport—and the epistemological foundations of clinical practice.*

Contact: mariagiulia.panetta@gmail.com

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