



Jazzy Picture Books: Ragtime Tumpie, Ben's Trumpet & Hip Cat

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Music and dance are art forms that do not lend themselves particularly well to being expressed on paper. The musical notes can be written down and the dance steps explained and diagrammed, but music and dance are meant to be auditory and visual experiences. Typically, books on these subjects tell us about them rather than attempting to give us a direct experience of them, or present us with still portraits of dancers and players. However, certain picture books provide remarkable proof that an insightful blend of words and illustration can combine to give one a virtual experience, in the book related sense, of music and dance on paper. Although the experience of dance and music is quite different in *Ragtime Tumpie*, *Ben's Trumpet* and *Hip Cat*, all three books convey the excitement of different periods of the jazz era as a result of the interdependence between words and illustration. All three books are true picture books and their structure and style mirror the structure and style of the music they represent.

Jazz and picture books have a few things in common, notably improvisation and variation. One can understand the common ground between the two by comparing the difference between jazz and classical music and the picture book and the illustrated book. Hugue Panassié valiantly attempts to differentiate between jazz and classical music in the first chapter of *Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music* (trans. 1936). His description, though he certainly didn't intend it to, also helps to distinguish the difference between the picture book and the illustrated book though surely such a distinction doesn't come as news to most of you. Panassié says:

Jazz differs from other musical forms this way: in most music the composer creates the musical idea, and the performers re-create these ideas as nearly as possible as the composer conceived them. This puts the performer in a secondary role, for the execution of these musical ideas is simply a way of making the composer's musical thought available to the listener. (1)

I interrupt Panassié at this point to draw the parallel between composer and author and performer and illustrator. In an illustrated book it is up to the illustrator to do his or her best to illustrate in picture form the ideas conveyed by the author's text as Michele Lemieux does with Prokofiev's text. Panassié continues:

In jazz, however, the performer appears in a more important capacity. He begins with a melody, often banal, and proceeds to transform it, perhaps by improvising around it, or perhaps by "arranging" it--that is to say, by writing an "arrangement" of the tune (an orchestration) to be played by an orchestra. ..let me try only to make it clear that in jazz the performer does not simply transmit to the listener what was original with the composer; he, himself, creates the musical substance he lets us hear. . . The beauty of the music we hear depends on the personal genius of the performers. (1-2)

To continue with my equation, then, in a picture book written by one person and illustrated by another one can argue that the author is the composer, for in such a situation the words usually come first, and the illustrator is the arranger, the one who brings the piece alive visually by infusing it with his or her own personal genius so that the illustrations are far more than a simple transmission of the words. While all three of the books I will look at are truly jazz picture books in this sense, *Ben's Trumpet* differs from the other two books by virtue of the fact that Rachel Isadora gives a solo performance as the picture-writer, to use the term

Eric Carle has adopted, whereas both *Ragtime Tumpie* and *Hip Cat* are joint performances. All three books offer us variations on a recognizable and familiar theme, but it is the genius of each book's use of improvisation that distinguishes it from the others.

Ragtime Tumpie is a relatively formal rendering of the exuberance of ragtime music, which is itself a formal style by jazz standards, with framed text on the left hand page and full page illustrations on the right (see <http://www.twbookmark.com/books/78/0316775045/index.html> and also <http://www.randomhouse.com/teachersbdd/schr.html>). The story is a very condensed biographical and historical account of Josephine Baker's childhood, which Alan Schroeder has based on a handful of details and incidents drawn from the first chapter of Lynn Haney's biography of Josephine's life and times, *Naked at the Feast*. The text is smooth, compelling and satisfying. Combined with Bernie Fuchs' illustrations, the reader is left with a vivid impression of Tumpie's daily life and future aspirations. [Tumpie is a childhood nickname: her mother called her this because she was plump like Humpty Dumpty (Haney 7).]

Hip Cat, by contrast, is a representative and fantastic fable of a saxophone playing cat's rise to fame and fortune (see http://www.grolier.com/detail.asp?product_id=0811803155&product_type=B). Jonathan London's story is told as a kind of narrative poem with occasional and strategic bursts into scat singing, a vocal technique in which the voice improvises without lyrics popularized by Louis Armstrong (*Jazz Styles* 73). The moral of this animal fable is inspiring because of its idealism: "Do what you love to do, and do it well," shouts Oobie-do John, the *Hip Cat* hero of the tale. This same moral, if we must call it that, is endorsed in *Ragtime Tumpie* and *Ben's Trumpet*. However, *Hip Cat* conveys its moral by breaking all the formal boundaries of the picture book through its mixture of prose and poetic forms, its use of typography, and Woodleigh Hubbard's combination stylized, abstract, folk and naive art illustrations in bold colors; all of which combine brilliantly to bring *Hip Cat's* music to life on the page, much as the improvisations of bop and cool jazz broke with the conventions of "early jazz" or pre-1940s styles.

Lest we forget that it is equally possible to be dazzled by the sheer ingenuity of line and pattern in the absence of color, Rachel Isadora's *Ben's Trumpet* provides a useful contrast to the first two books as it reflects the period of jazz that falls between them and as it relies entirely on visuals to convey emotion and music. (See http://www.penguinputnam.com/catalog/yreader/authors/34_biography.html) The power and imaginative scope of the music is conveyed on the page in black and white through an incisive use of line coupled with either strategically simple representation or complex compositions of pattern and space, depending on the point in the story, which is about Ben's delirious passion for the jazz trumpet. Though there are various anachronisms, the story appears to be set in the 1920s and, like Mary Hays Weik's Newberry Honor book *The Jazz Man* (1966), centers on a young boy's devoted observation of and delight in the music that pervades his neighborhood. Both boys immerse themselves in the imaginative world provoked by the music. *The Jazz Man* is a storybook however, and as such the imaginative world is predominantly conveyed in words which describe how the piano playing jazz man transforms the everyday cityscape into an exotic and idyllic fantasy jungle. *Ben's Trumpet* conveys that fantasy in its pictures. All the words tell us is that Ben plays his (imaginary) trumpet for the various members of his family, none of whom pay him any attention. The sound of the music is conveyed by relatively tame patterns that frame the narrative focus of the pictures until Ben's playing is noticed by his hero, "the trumpeter from the Zig Zag Jazz Club!" At this point Ben's music and joy explode into a full blown psychedelic sweep of patterns that cover one full page and spill over the gutter bordering the image of the trumpeter walking down the street. The spare text and dependence on visual interpretation is akin to Chris Raschka's *Charlie Parker played bebop*; however, Raschka reworks conventional picture book structures by doing away with an overt storyline. Charlie Parker played bebop is like a fragment of music, or a short song, and, like *Hip Cat*, relies on the whole text (words and pictures) to convey its music. *Ben's Trumpet*, on the other hand, conveys the narrative kernels and overall story in its words while the pictures fill in the imaginative details and emotional resonance. *Ben's Trumpet*, *Hip Cat* and *Ragtime Tumpie* are all variations on the familiar story of the rise to success.

The rise to success from unlikely beginnings forms part of the kinds of stories that feed the American dream, particularly Black Americans' dream of rising above poverty and prejudice. *Hip Cat's* story begins at his riverside shack home and follows him to the city where, despite his talents, "Minnie could only pay him with peanuts," and while he continues to play for the sheer love of it, he must resort to becoming "a short-order cook at the Doggie Diner" so that he can live. The fable qualities of the story are evident in the use of language which combines a kind of hip talk with evident use of metaphor as in:

He hit all the jazz joints in town,
looking for a gig
that would pay the rent
He was getting tired of living in a tent.
But the joints were owned by the top dogs.
If cats wanted to make it
they couldn't fake it.

The distinction between cats and dogs is clearly representative of the hierarchical and racist social order that obstructs Hip Cat's rise to fame though later in the story those same top dogs will pay top dollar to hear him and everyone, cats and dogs alike, will go "hog wild." Similarly, Tumpie's story begins by describing her life on Gratiot Street, "the poorest section of St-Louis." She starts each day by walking "two miles to the Soulard Market" where "she hid under farmer's stalls and snatched up the vegetables and fruits that fell on the ground." Like Hip Cat and Ben, Tumpie is infected by the excitement of music all around her. She cannot simply stop to listen" the catchy rhythm jumped to her toes and her foot began tapping out the beat on the pavement." Similarly, when *Hip Cat* plays: "His sax bobbed/ and swung, screeched/ and/ skonked, purred/ and/ barked," whereas in *Ben's Trumpet* the pictures go wild. The main difference between the books then, is that Hip Cat's creation of music is represented in words and illustrations (or the whole text)the illustrations providing a visual representation not only of Hip Cat's playing, but of his audience's response and the words supplying the audio component through their poetic imagery and diction as well as through a strategic use of typography. Tumpie's reaction to the music she encounters is described in prose and evocatively depicted in the illustrations whereas neither Ben's response to the music nor his creation of music is described; it is shown in the illustrations following the "show it don't tell it" approach to storytelling. Tumpie's dancing is a response to the music while Ben responds by emulating his hero and creating his own music. A further difference, and perhaps an explanation for the illustrators' chosen styles, lies in the music itself.

Ragtime Tumpie, as its title makes clear, is about ragtime music. The story is set in St. Louis in the summer of 1915. As Mark Gridley explains:

The word "rag" refers to a kind of music that was put together like a military march and had rhythms borrowed from Afro-American banjo music. You could tell ragtime music because many of the loud accents fell in between the beats. This is called syncopation. Musicians would use syncopation on all kinds of different tunes and say they were "ragging" those tunes. (35)

This idea is presented in *Ragtime Tumpie* when Tumpie thinks back on her earlier childhood when "her honky-tonk daddy," Eddie, who carried his drumsticks everywhere, would "beat the sticks on the cracked cement" in order to explain syncopation in return to which "she'd skip out the beat on the sidewalk." The

reader's visual experience of Tumpie's exuberance and skipping is conveyed in Bernie Fuchs' paintings, which seem to be a combination of realist and impressionist styles. Each picture is suffused in light and depicts some form of motion. The colors are a combination of earth tones and natural light which help to ground the story in its biographical roots.

The inside cover and sixth opening present the same picture. Both the figures of Tumpie and her father are in motion. The colors are light and there is a blending of the clothing into the background that emphasizes the sense of motion characteristic of Bernie Fuchs's paintings throughout the book. The figure of Tumpie's Papa looms large behind her dancing figure. His mouth is open, his hands hold drumsticks and he is evidently in the heat of playing music he enjoys. Only his torso, in a white shirt and suspenders, is visible. His straw hat glows on his head, both hands are raised, they could be just coming up or going down to strike the invisible drums, his left hand extends beyond the frame of the picture. Tumpie's head is in front of the crook of his right arm. Her mouth is open in a smile, her eyes are half-closed. Her feet are below the frame of the picture, but the weight is clearly on her left foot, which is slightly to the back, and her knee is slightly bent as her whole body leans to the left. The left side of her dress is hinted at by a thin white outline that marks its division from the background. Her left arm is bent and the palm faces outward towards us. Her right arm stretches straight out, the finger tips nearly reaching the other edge of the picture, and the length of her underarm glows red with the light that comes from the side. The painting is warm and suffused with joy. The way the figures lean to the right of the page is an invitation to turn it. This particular picture exemplifies Tumpie's deep rooted passion for music and dancing whether there is an occasion for it or whether it is an impromptu compulsion.

It is important to consider Tumpie's response to the music in the context of the purpose of early jazz. Gridley clarifies its difference from later forms:

Unlike most of today's jazz, the earliest jazz was intended mostly for dancing, not just for listening. The music's beat, form, and spirit interested the dancers the most. The evolution of new dances and the overall popularity of dancing were big factors in the evolution of jazz. Dancers were not necessarily impressed by the wonders of collective improvisation or the inspirations of well-crafted solo improvisations. They responded more to the new jazz rhythms. (37)

Tumpie's desire to dance and the music that surrounds her pervades her dreams and many of her waking moments. Her hopes and aspirations come together in the dancing contest, which she wins, that marks the beginning point of her steadfast determination to make a name for herself as a dancer who cannot help but respond to the new ragtime rhythms. The highlight of the story is a dancing contest that is the definitive beginning point of Tumpie's determination to go on and become famous. The book's exploration of ragtime music and Tumpie's story is, as I suggested earlier, quite formal, which is in keeping with the relative formality of the music itself. The text is always bordered by a thin band from the inside edge of the corresponding picture. The illustrations are always full page, except for one double-page spread depicting the dancing contest. By contrast, *Hip Cat* uses a variety of clever and creative techniques to give one both a visual and a verbal representation of the innovations of the music it is about.

The relaxation of the formal boundaries in both the construction of the picture book itself and of the kind of music being presented in *Hip Cat* make the experience of the book as close as one can get to an actual experience of the music it represents. The contrast between *Ragtime Tumpie* and *Hip Cat* is like the contrast between Lemieux's and Chappell's versions of *Peter and the Wolf*; Lemieux's interpretation is limited by its formal use of picture book conventions and thus succeeds in presenting the story but not the music. The reason *Ragtime Tumpie*'s use of formal picture book conventions succeeds in conveying some sense of the music is because the story explores Tumpie's reaction to the music rather than the music itself. *Ben's Trumpet* relies on the reader's ability to equate the visual patterns, which are part of the illustrations, with the

music Ben plays—a clever but less obvious means of representation. Chappell's version of *Peter and the Wolf*, on the other hand, incorporates elements of the music into the structures of both the storytelling and the illustration so that, as with *Hip Cat*, the reader is left with some sense of feeling for the music itself. Because *Peter and the Wolf* is classical music, the picture book experience of the music is formal, for, as one might expect based on Panassié's earlier analogy, Chappell is only a performer of Prokofiev's composition—and a visual performer of an auditory art at that! Woodleigh Hubbard, by contrast, is the visual arranger of Jonathan London's text. All of the illustrations in *Hip Cat* are double-page spreads. The text is not always in blocks; it rolls, curls, twists and undulates, it changes its size and shape to emphasize certain words or phrases, and it tells the tale in jazz poetry style.

We are introduced to the hero in language that delights in itself, in its variation and sound:

He was a hip cat

a hep cat

a cool cat

living all alone in a riverside shack:

Oobie-do John the Sax Man Scat Man,

the cool cat man.

When he leaves his riverside shack it is for the

...be-bop

repbop city

a bongo-congo roller-coaster-jazz-in-your-bones city

[written as a wave]

It is clear from the first opening that everything moves to Hip Cat's playing: the sun's rays wriggle, chair legs and backs bend and sway and even the blinds in the windows seems to move to the beat. The night scene depicting Oobie-do's journey on a city-bound train is composed of a landscape that is a hill of swirls like a billowing ocean. The city horizon is made up of the same lit-up gray buildings that appear on the end papers, only here they lean crazily to either side and have clearly been influenced by Piet Mondrian's Boogie Woogie paintings. The double-page spread that depicts the reaction to Hip Cat's first performance leaves no doubt that he is a wild success—everything is in motion. The first line of text states that "the crowd went crazy" with typographical emphasis on "crazy." This fact is sparingly described by the text and fully indulged by the illustrations.

The joint was jumping.

Toes tapping

and cats bopping

Chairs dancing

and shadows hopping

The table has legs, and feet, cat tails, chair legs and backs sway and curl, the piano undulates; nothing is still. A sense of the music itself is conveyed in a burst of scat singing on the 7th and 12th openings—at these points the text is not limited by anything as it curls around on itself and is superimposed over the characters:

Oobie-do ee blaa blaa blaaa so wa bebop-a-wamma bing bang blam

shoobie wa ditty, my cat is a kitty oobie-do ee blaa

There is no doubt that *Hip Cat* conveys the "jazz swing feeling" a feeling that is integral to good jazz but one that is not easy to describe in words, as Panassié makes clear.

None of the three books I have discussed are didactic in the sense that none of them deliberately set out to teach their readers about jazz in a direct manner. Of the three, *Ragtime Tumpie* is didactic only in the sense that it provides insight and information about an historical figure due to its biographical nature. Nevertheless, the focus is on celebration and appreciation rather than on overt instruction. Both *Ben's Trumpet* and *Hip Cat* are basically fantasies grounded in an appreciation of and delight in jazz music. The original art is necessarily radically transformed in order to present it and contain it on pages between the covers of a book, but that very transformation yields a valuable and exciting new form of art that makes possible a captivating introduction to the world of jazz or for the initiated an equally captivating rediscovery of the familiar presented in a new form. The muses have clearly inspired the creators of these picture books enough to leave their readers clearly cognizant of their delight in the mediums they have chosen.

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