

**PHOTOGRAPHY, MATERIALITY AND METAFICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK
*THERE'S A GHOST IN THIS HOUSE*****L. M. NAVES*, Â. BALÇA**

Universidade de Évora / Centro de Investigação em Estudos da Criança da Universidade do Minho

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8092-3611>*

ludnaves@gmail.com*

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ABSTRACT

The illustrated children's literature book involves the interaction between written text and image, configuring it as a powerful tool for promoting visual literacy and training readers. Photography as an illustration, added to the materiality of the printed book, can contribute to the development of the literary reader's skills, expanding the possibilities of rapprochement between the reader and the work, based on handling and interaction with the tangible object. This article features a segment from an

ongoing doctoral study, its methodology is a qualitative bibliographic analysis and its goal is to discuss photographic illustration, the materiality of the printed book and the metafictional proposal of the narrative as devices that contribute to the approximation between the reader and the work. As a result, it is considered that the choice of photography, associated with the materiality of the book, is capable of expanding dialogues and interpretations, enhancing the training readers.

KEYWORDS: Children's literature, Illustration, Photography, Materiality, Metafiction**FOTOGRAFIA, MATERIALIDADE E METAFICÇÃO: UMA ANÁLISE
DA OBRA *HÁ UM FANTASMA NESTA CASA*****RESUMO**

O livro de literatura infantil ilustrado envolve a interação texto escrito e imagem, configurando-o como uma poderosa ferramenta para a promoção da literacia visual e para a formação de leitores. A fotografia como ilustração, somada à materialidade do livro impresso, pode contribuir para o desenvolvimento das competências do leitor literário, ampliando as possibilidades de aproximação entre o leitor e a obra, a partir do manuseio e da interação com o objeto palpável. Este artigo apresenta um recorte de um estudo de

doutoramento em curso, tem como metodologia uma análise bibliográfica de cunho qualitativo e como objetivo discutir a ilustração fotográfica, a materialidade do livro impresso e a proposta metafictional da narrativa como artifícios que contribuem para a aproximação entre o leitor e a obra. Como resultados, considera-se que a escolha pela fotografia, associada à materialidade do livro, se mostra capaz de ampliar diálogos e interpretações, favorecendo a formação de leitores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura infantil, Ilustração, Fotografia, Materialidade, Metaficção

1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, much of children's literature is published in books that constitute highly complex aesthetic-cultural objects. Beyond the literary text, the book as an object follows an entire artistic, graphic, and editorial project, incorporating an iconic text composed of illustrations that encompass diverse languages, from painting to collage, sculpture, and photography, among other techniques and artistic manifestations.

This study is based on the premise that an image functions as a text, specifically a visual text, which communicates, narrates, stimulates dialogue, and stands out primarily for its (trans)formative potential. Based on Jacques Aumont (2012), we understand that the meaning of an image is frequently linked to its nature as a representation of an event situated in time and space, which configures it as a narrative image. From this perspective, we recognize the close relationship between visual representation and the artistic sphere, which reinforces its role as a medium of communication and expression.

The different materialities make these children's literature books appealing but also demanding for less experienced readers. The book, as a medium for the literary text, allows materiality to be incorporated into the reading experience. The texture of the paper, the format of the printed work, its design, content layout, cover and back cover, title page, sequential organization of pages, among other elements, are examples of peritexts (Genette, 1982) that impact the interaction process between the reader and the book.

Among these peritexts, this article focuses on illustrations created through photography, while also considering the role of illustration in introducing children to the world of visual and plastic culture. Photography records the world, promotes its comprehension and interpretation, and serves as a clear and expressive language for children. Thus, photography visually presents reality as perceived through sight, proving to be highly effective as a typographic material. In children's literature books, photography appears as an illustration, in symbiosis with the literary text. While photography, as an illustration, introduces objectivity and precision, it still leaves room for young readers to engage in a personal, subjective, and emotional reading of this artistic language. Authors, illustrators, and the publishing market increasingly invest in this field, which enables three-dimensional illustrations, making them particularly engaging for children's perception.

Children's aesthetic sensitivity is shaped not only by reading literary words but also by reading visual and plastic texts, as reflected in the illustrations of children's literature books. As Nikolajeva (2009, p. 57) asserts, "Visual literacy is just as essential a component of a child's intellectual growth as the ability to read verbal texts."

Silva (2019) draws our attention to the necessity of visual literacy to foster communicative visual competence, given that reading images is not an innate ability. Although young children may exhibit an aptitude for recognizing visual signs, this does not mean, as Silva (2019) further states, that they possess the ability to comprehend and analyze them.

Indeed, Reis (2015) argues that visual literacy involves the observer and the social and cultural context in which all types of visual material are produced, distributed, and consumed. Visual literacy requires individuals to access decoding, comprehension, and interpretation of visual material, enabling them to construct meaning. This process necessitates training so that individuals can engage in constructing, manipulating, and communicating visual material. After constructing meaning, visual literacy allows individuals to appropriate and communicate a discourse about visual material.

The transformation of visual material into a coherent, informed verbal discourse that establishes connections with the world is ultimately one of the key purposes of visual literacy. In the case of children's literature illustrations, this refers to a set of specific visual texts that generate potential meanings, either in articulation with or independent of the literary text.

In this regard, this article presents a segment of an ongoing doctoral research project. The methodology consists of a qualitative bibliographic analysis of a children's literature work included in the research corpus. This study aims to discuss photographic illustration, the materiality of the printed book, and the metafictional proposal of the narrative as mechanisms that contribute to strengthening the connection between the reader and the book. To this end, an analysis is conducted on the children's literature work *There's a Ghost in This House* by Australian writer and illustrator Oliver Jeffers.

To establish a solid theoretical foundation, we draw upon studies by Alberto Manguel (2009), Susan Sontag (2004), and Lucia Santaella (2012) on photography, Jacques Aumont (2012) on imagery, Sophie Van der Linden (2011) on the illustrated book, and Diana Navas (2019; 2022) on materiality and metafiction, among other scholars addressing the proposed themes.

For better textual organization of the discussions presented, this paper is structured as follows: after this introduction, we proceed to the literature review, methodology, and presentation of results. The study concludes with final considerations and references.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Illustration and Photographic Illustration

Literature is often regarded as an art form, specifically the art of words, which allows for interrelations with other artistic languages. As Nussbaum (2003, p. 86) states, "The arts cultivate capacities of judgment and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices a citizen makes." Regarding children's literary texts, Becket (2009, p. 66) asserts that "children's literature is not distinct from general literature and should share the same artistic freedom."

According to Charréu (2012), the illustrated book serves as a child's first contact with art. This scholar also notes a strong resemblance between certain forms of contemporary art and illustration, describing it as "an artistic form in its own right and an integral part of the literary composition of the book" (p. 18), making illustrated children's books true works of art.

Moreover, Charréu (2012, p. 3) asserts that children's literary works, particularly their illustrations, "combine the persuasive potential of images with the fluidity of narrative text (...) constituting a successful marriage between the visual and literary dimensions of art." Through exposure to these artistic books, which integrate both verbal and visual arts, children gradually develop an aesthetic-literary sensibility. This process is facilitated by literature's power to create possible worlds and the value of early experiences in shaping subjectivity (Charréu, 2012, p. 16). Consequently, the relationship between literary text and illustration, between verbal and visual text, is vital to understanding children's literature.

According to Mendes (2020), the illustrator, based on the verbal text, employs their subjective perspective and artistic expression to establish an intersemiotic dialogue between words and illustrations, in which "Words and images can enhance and complement each other" (Nikolajeva, 2009, p. 58). For this intersemiotic dialogue to be coherent and effective, "the illustrator must follow the written word of an author, but also add his/her own personality, view, humour, and insight to the story" (Hladíková, 2014, p. 21).

Nikolajeva (2009), Mendes (2020), and Ramos and Mattos (2018) also examine the role of illustration, arguing that it increasingly occupies a prominent place in children's literature, contributing to the definition of the message and the construction of meaning. For this to occur, "the utmost responsibility of the illustrator is to maintain consistency of both verbal and visual communication levels of the book while enriching the story without contradicting the author's manuscript" (Hladíková, 2014, p. 23). As Hladíková (2014, p. 21) states, illustrations serve as a "mediator between the text and the reader," given that they "should stand for as much of the story as the words, expanding the story without duplicating the text itself." Thus, through the elements that compose the visual narrative, children construct an imaginative, subjective, symbolic, and emotional reading journey (Mendes, 2020).

Visual texts, along with the materiality of the book, become essential components in the creation of meaning in a children's literary work, fostering the young reader's interaction with the narrated story. This occurs because the pleasure derived from reading an image is sensory in nature, as the enjoyment throughout this experience "stems from engagement with colors, shapes, and textures" (Cademartori, 2008, p. 87)¹.

We can say that the picturebook offers numerous possibilities for production, incorporating various forms, textures, dimensions, texts, images, and artistic combinations. According to Linden (2011, p. 87), the picturebook presents itself as "a form of expression that brings an interaction of texts and images within a medium"², meaning it is the combination of written and visual text within the book format, with its meaning emerging from the interaction between both. This often occurs in the picturebook, where text, illustration, and physical support can form an *artexto*, as "This bond between the book's visual and written parts is a true key to its lasting success" (Hladíková, 2014, p. 21), making all components essential for understanding the work. The concept of *artexto*, proposed by Agra and Roig-Rechou (2006, s.p.), refers to:

¹ In the original: "provém do envolvimento com as cores, formas e texturas" (Cademartori, 2008, p. 87).

² In the original: "uma forma de expressão que traz uma interação de textos e imagens no âmbito de um suporte".

(...) the dialogue between visual reading and textual reading that must necessarily exist in the children's picturebook or illustrated book (...) contributing to a harmonious conjunction between text and image, which provides the total meaning of the product, as occurs in the children's picturebook.³

Illustrative images present themselves as a form of language—images laden with meanings, ideologies, messages, intentions, and culture, making them open to interpretation. According to Cao and Sardelich (2010, p. 188), “the image has the ability to connect us with both the immediate and the distant world”⁴, as it provokes dialogue by touching the reader through aesthetic sensitivity.

Manguel (2001, p. 291) states that “an image, whether painted, sculpted, photographed, constructed, or framed, is also a stage, a place for representation”⁵. For this reason, we understand that such images constitute a form of expression, a language, a grammar, and, therefore, impose an ethics of seeing.

The picturebook featuring photographic art is gaining prominence in children's literature productions. We understand photography as a testimony of reality, a form of evidence, a trace, a document that verifies information. According to Sontag (2004), a photograph is more than just an image because it is “an interpretation of reality; it is also a trace, something directly imprinted from the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (p. 170)⁶. It is in this sense that the photographic image, as an illustrative component of literary works, gains recognition, as it enables the integration of other artistic expressions within the book format.

The capture of an image follows a process that begins with observing, feeling, selecting the subject to be photographed, choosing the angle, considering the light that illuminates the subject and the scene, and deciding what to include or exclude within the frame, among other choices—until finally pressing the camera shutter to eternalize what the observer's eyes have captured (Santaella, 2012).

Although we recognize that photography can be understood as an emanation of reality, it can also be, at the same time, a transfiguration. As Manguel (2001) states, a photograph “while recording what was seen, always and by its very nature, refers to what is not seen” (p. 92)⁷.

Even when edited or altered, photography retains this characteristic—this power to impact, to verify reality and the existence of what was captured by the camera. It holds the ability to reflect reality, solidifying itself as a document, a testimony that is then eternalized and materialized in the

³ In the original: “al diálogo entre la lectura visual y la lectura textual que forzosamente tiene que existir en el álbum infantil o libro ilustrado (...) aportadores de una conjunción armónica entre texto e imagen, fornecedora del significado total del producto, que es lo que se da en el álbum infantil.” (Agra & Roig-Rechou, 2006, s.p.).

⁴ In the original: “a imagem tem a capacidade de nos conectar com o mundo mais próximo e também com o distante”.

⁵ In the original: “uma imagem, pintada, esculpida, fotografada, construída e emoldurada é também um palco, um local para representação”.

⁶ In the original: “uma interpretação do real; é também um vestígio, algo diretamente decalcado do real, como uma pegada ou uma máscara mortuária” (p. 170).

⁷ In the original: “ao mesmo tempo que registra o que foi visto, sempre e por sua própria natureza, refere-se àquilo que não é visto” (p. 92).

form of an image. "Photography (...) rests on our conviction that what we, the viewers, see did indeed exist, that it occurred at a specific and exact moment, and that, as reality, it was apprehended by the observer's eye,"⁸ explains Manguel (2001, p. 93).

Contradicting the documentary value of photography and its role in verifying reality, the technical image is also a form of magic that authenticates the recording. Photography possesses the additional power of authentication, which manifests through traces and imprints, as it is a mark that materializes an idea, brings a fantasy to life, and makes imagination real before the eyes of the viewer who gazes upon that stage.

We read and create based on who we are—our identity, intentions, ideologies, and other motivations. There is no neutrality in this process, as it is a complex and profound journey, one of interpretation and exchange. Neither images nor our gaze upon them are neutral. "Images are not neutral. Nor is the gaze we project onto them"⁹, explain Cao and Sardelich (2010, p. 188).

Thus, we highlight the children's literature book that employs photography as an illustration technique, expanding discussions and analyses in this field, as it allows for the incorporation of other artistic visual expressions within the literary text. For this reason, it is essential to understand the role of visual literacy in the process of human development, considering that images, photographs, and written words all narrate stories, given that the reading of images can be mediated through various formats, such as the book as an object.

2.2. Materiality and Metafiction

The act of reading extends far beyond mere decoding; it encompasses a complex dynamic that involves the relationships embedded in the book as an object, allowing the reading experience to transform as the dialogue between image and written text—or between images themselves—unfolds. The materiality of printed children's literature can significantly enhance a child's reading experience by fostering interaction and engagement through tactile, sensory exploration of the physical object. As Naves (2019, p. 99) states,

The book is also a tangible object of the reading action; through its physical materiality, it enables access to reading, promoting a playful experience that bridges a child's reality with their imagination, thus establishing meaning-making relationships.¹⁰

Thus, the reading experience is influenced by the physical interaction with the book, whether printed or digital, which integrates a variety of artistic expressions, formats, textures,

⁸ In the original: "A fotografia (...) repousa na nossa convicção de que aquilo que nós, os espectadores, vemos existiu de fato, que aquilo ocorreu em determinado e exato momento e que, como realidade, foi apreendido pelo olho do observador".

⁹ In the original: "As imagens não são neutras. Tampouco o olhar que projetamos sobre elas".

¹⁰ In the original: "o livro é também um objeto concreto da ação leitora, por meio da materialidade física, pode-se permitir acesso à leitura, promovendo uma experiência lúdica, que aproxima a realidade da criança de seu imaginário, dessa forma estabelece relações de sentido."

dimensions, layouts, and typographic properties such as colors and font styles. Santaella (2012) highlights that since the advent of illustrated books, reading has expanded its boundaries to incorporate other forms of language, including photography, captions, drawings, and diagrams.

Handling a printed book stimulates a reader's sensory perception, providing a tactile experience that allows for different textures, reliefs, and even fine motor skill development as readers turn pages carefully. Holding the book and pointing to its images are activities that enhance coordination and motor skills. The deliberate action of turning pages teaches children to handle books with care, fostering an understanding of their value while also nurturing independence and autonomy.

Linden (2011) argues that the materiality of printed books deepens our understanding of books as objects. Their tangible characteristics—textures, weight, angles, and dimensions—highlight for readers that the narrative contained within has a beginning, middle, and end, and exists within a defined space.

Many elements influence a reader's interaction with the printed book, including its format, cover design, selection of illustrations, font choices, paper weight, and thematic color schemes. Diana Navas (2022, p. 121)¹¹ suggests that these elements assume a narrative role, revealing the book as an object that interacts with its own content: "Graphic reasoning develops in intrinsic dialogue with verbal content, and the book-object deepens the interaction between form and content by incorporating the physical medium as language". In another study, Navas (2019) draws attention to a triadic relationship between text, image, and design, which shapes both the book's construction and its ability to narrate through these three dimensions.

From this perspective, the significance of editorial work, narrative artistry, and visual art in the book production process is evident. The creation of a book involves multiple professionals—authors, writers, illustrators, editors, photographers, cover designers, and graphic designers, among others. Goulart (2016) asserts that a printed work is not merely a written text but a structured artifact crafted by an editorial team: "Authors do not write books; they write texts that are transformed into books—artifacts conceptualized and structured by an editorial team" (Goulart, 2016, p. 71)¹².

Materiality and metafiction intertwine to offer new reading experiences, innovative approaches to children's literature, and diverse perspectives in reader development. Materiality, stemming from the creative conception and experimentation of an entire team involved in the book's aesthetic production, enables metafictional readings. According to Navas (2022), metafiction presents itself as fiction about fiction, a contemporary trend in children's literature characterized by its redefinition of the reader's role, positioning them as a co-author of the story by inviting their participation in the narrative.

¹¹ In the original: "o raciocínio gráfico se desenvolve dialogando intrinsecamente com o conteúdo verbal, o livro-objeto aprofunda o diálogo entre forma e conteúdo incluindo o próprio suporte como linguagem" (Navas, 2022, p. 121).

¹² In the original: "os autores não escrevem livros, escrevem textos que são transformados em livros, artefatos pensados e arquitetados por uma equipe editorial" (Goulart, 2016, p. 71).

A metafictional text considers the relationship between reality and fiction. Faria (2012) emphasizes that an essential characteristic of metafiction is the reader's engagement: "Metafiction compels the reader to question the relationship between fiction and reality" (Faria, 2012, p. 246)¹³.

Consequently, metafiction reshapes the role of the reader. As Navas (2022, p. 120) explains, "While the reader is prompted to recognize that they are within a fictional universe, they are simultaneously compelled to participate in it, engaging intellectually, imaginatively, and even emotionally as a co-author."¹⁴

This is precisely the challenge presented in Oliver Jeffers' work, the subject of this study, where illustration, photographic illustration, and materiality foster a dialogue between a fictional entity and the reader. Jeffers' written and illustrated story invites close examination, encouraging readers to scrutinize images carefully, as the written narrative itself demands active observation, analysis of the illustrations, and a search for answers.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study presented here is part of an ongoing doctoral research project, and this work represents a specific segment of that research. The methodology employed in this study is based on a qualitative bibliographic analysis of a children's literature work included in the research corpus, illustrated through the use of photographic art.

Bibliographic research is a mode of scientific investigation that "aims to refine and update knowledge through a scientific inquiry of already published works" (Sousa, Oliveira, & Alves, 2021, p. 65)¹⁵. This type of research relies on documents such as books and is essential not only for understanding the phenomenon under study but also for constructing the research framework. According to Sá-Silva, Almeida, and Guindani (2009), bibliographic research focuses on secondary sources, meaning sources that have already been subjected to scientific treatment. The primary goal of using these sources in research is to gather information, which is then categorized and analyzed. After these procedures, syntheses are developed.

The object of this bibliographic research is Oliver Jeffers' work *There's a Ghost in This House*, which was analyzed using a hermeneutic approach aimed at interpreting both the literary and iconic texts through a critical and reflective reading at deeper and less evident levels.

The selected work, published in various countries, demonstrates that photographic art as an illustration technique in children's literature is a reality, bringing distinct sensibilities, multiple techniques, and various temporal and spatial dimensions to the book. These aspects have the

¹³ In the original: "a metaficção leva o leitor a perguntar sobre a relação entre ficção e realidade" (Faria, 2012, p. 246).

¹⁴ In the original: "(...) ao mesmo tempo em que é incitado a reconhecer que está diante de um universo ficcional, o leitor é forçado a dele participar, envolvendo-se – como um coautor –, intelectual, imaginativa e mesmo afetivamente"

¹⁵ In the original: "tem a finalidade de aprimoramento e atualização do conhecimento, através de uma investigação científica de obras já publicadas." (Sousa, Oliveira e Alves, 2021, p. 65)

potential to contribute to children's visual literacy development and the process of reader formation. These temporal and spatial values "can serve as guides for reading photographic images," states Santaella (2012, p. 80)¹⁶.

This study aims to discuss photographic illustration, the materiality of the printed book, and the metafictional nature of the narrative as devices that contribute to strengthening the relationship between the reader and the book.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The book *There's a Ghost in This House* was written and illustrated by Australian artist Oliver Jeffers, whose work spans various forms of expression, including painting, installations, illustrations, and the creation of 19 other children's books. His work *Lost and Found* was adapted into an animated film by a London studio and has received several awards, including the *New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books Award*, the *Bologna Ragazzi Award*, an *Irish Book Award*, the *United Kingdom Literary Association Award*, and an *MBE from Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth for Special Services to the Arts*.

There's a Ghost in This House was first published in 2021 in Great Britain by HarperCollins. The edition selected for this study was published in Portugal in 2022 by Orfeu Negro under the Orfeu Mini collection. It was recommended by the *Plano Nacional de Leitura – PNL2027* in 2023 and is intended for children aged 3 to 8 years old.



Image 1: Cover of the book *Há um Fantasma nesta Casa*

Fonte: <https://www.wook.pt/livro/ha-um-fantasma-nesta-casa-oliver-jeffers/27405977>

¹⁶ In the original: "podem ser tomados como guias para a leitura da imagem fotográfica".

With the original English title *There's a Ghost in This House* and the Brazilian Portuguese title *Tem um Fantasma Nesta Casa*, the analyzed work features a reinforced hardcover, made of sturdy material, in a vertically rectangular format. The cover presents a black-and-white image of a large house set against a grassy foreground. The book's title is displayed in white, occupying a significant portion of the space, while at the bottom, in yellow—the only color on the cover—the author's name appears in horizontal contrast. Notably, both on the cover, the spine, and the title page, the book's title always incorporates its characters: a ghost drawn within the second letter "A" of the word *fantasma* and a girl within the first letter "A" of the word *casa*. This design choice immediately allows the reader to make interpretative hypotheses and inferences about who these figures are and their possible roles in the narrative.

The back cover of the book mirrors the front cover's image. The black-and-white colors remain consistent, with the moon in yellow as the only highlighted element. This interplay between the front and back cover reveals a difference in luminosity, suggesting to the reader that the cover image, being brighter, represents daytime, whereas the darker back cover image represents nighttime, a hypothesis confirmed by the presence of the moon. Even from the cover and back cover alone, the reader is led to believe in the presence of ghosts in the house. On the cover, a girl stands at the door while a ghost appears in the tower window of the house; on the back cover, the girl is now at the tower window, and the ghost has moved to one of the house's main windows.

The text on the back cover immediately reveals a metafictional intent. Written in white letters, it reads: "Hello. Welcome! It has been a long time since I had visitors. You know... I heard there is a GHOST in this house. But it is very difficult to see it. Can you help me?" (Jeffers, 2022, back cover)¹⁷. As we can see, right from the back cover, the reader of Oliver Jeffers' work assumes a distinct role upon encountering a narrator—and later a character—who directly addresses them and invites them to participate in the story. In this sense, metafiction is characterized by the direct dialogue between the character and the reader, who is enveloped not only by the materiality of the printed book but also by the written narrative that calls upon them to take part in the unfolding events of the story.

The book's endpapers contain several ghost illustrations. However, while the front endpaper exclusively features different ghosts, the final endpaper includes not only numerous ghosts but also the girl, appearing surprised, and a frightened ghost. This prompts the reader to infer that the girl may have indeed found the ghost inhabiting the house—an interpretation not explicitly confirmed by the text, as the girl states at the end, "I have lived here for some time and have never seen a ghost. Maybe I never will" (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)¹⁸. This highlights the importance of paratexts in the reading experience. Jeffers' book thus presents two alternative endings: one based solely on the text and illustrations, in which the girl never finds a ghost, and another incorporating the final endpaper, where she ultimately encounters the ghost living in her house.

¹⁷ In the original: "Olá. Sejam bem vindos! Há muito tempo que não recebia visitas. Sabem...ouvi dizer que há um FANTASMA nesta casa. Mas é muito difícil vê-lo. Será que me podem ajudar?". (Jeffers, 2022, contracapa).

¹⁸ In the original: "Já vivo aqui há algum tempo e nunca encontrei um fantasma. Talvez nunca encontre." (Jeffers, 2022, s.p.).

The book contains two title pages: one displaying the title and author and another featuring the publisher's name and an illustration of the large house. However, in our view, the narrative begins on this second title page, where the house is prominently featured. This is reinforced on the following pages, where we first see an illustration of the house's closed door, followed by an image of the door slightly ajar with the girl inviting us in: "Hello. Please come in." (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)¹⁹. This sequence gives the impression that the reader is gradually approaching the house and being challenged to enter. Like looking through a camera lens, the zoom effect brings us closer to the house, the closed door, the partially open door, and the possibility of stepping inside.

The work is organized into 46 unnumbered pages, most of which feature a large photographic illustration on the left and a blank page with the written text in black letters on the right.

Additionally, the book includes a distinctive element: 18 transparent pages that carry essential visual information for the narrative and are positioned between the illustrated page and the written text. In this sense, by allowing the manual movement of each sheet, the reader can interact with the book as an object and with the narrated story, engaging not only visually but also synesthetically in a journey of surprises and discoveries.

In the work, a colorful girl plays with a group of playful and cheerful ghosts that hide in every corner of a large house. In this case, the book's materiality enables the physical action of searching for the ghosts through the turning of pages and the layering of one sheet over another—an action that allows the reader to visualize the ghosts, which the protagonist searches for from the beginning to the end of the story. The metafictional characteristic, present in Oliver Jeffers' narrative, is reinforced as visual texts, written texts, and the materiality of the book complement and interact with one another.

It is observed that the main character faces the reader as if looking directly at them, while the narrative text of this scene invites the reader to take on a task which, once accepted, unfolds through the manipulation of the translucent page that contains the images of the ghosts.

This is a story of the fantastic, oscillating between reality and imagination, within a world of fantasy and make-believe, where ghosts, in this instance, take on a benign connotation, distancing themselves from the fear traditionally associated with such figures.

An intertextual reading of a promotional video about the work (Jeffers, n.d.), featuring Oliver Jeffers himself, reinforces this theme. In the video, both Jeffers and the colorful girl search for the ghosts, which appear in the most unexpected places, seemingly following the author and the girl's every step. The video's music features eerie chords that evoke a haunting atmosphere. However, despite neither of them feeling fear—only curiosity—the situation is reversed at the end of the video. The protagonist is seen running out of the house, screaming, leaving the viewer with the interpretive possibility that he has encountered a ghost and been utterly terrified.

¹⁹ In the original: "Olá. Entrem, por favor." (Jeffers, 2022, s.p.).

Thus, it seems plausible to affirm that the oscillation between the natural and the supernatural coexists within the world of childhood, yet emerges as an impossibility in the world of adults.

The illustrations in the work, composed of black-and-white photographic images, depict real spaces within a large and old mansion, featuring doors, windows, staircases, hallways, furniture, decorative artifacts, and other objects and settings. Through the use of digital editing tools, a colorful, hand-drawn character—the girl—is inserted into each scene, embarking on her journey to search for ghosts within this space.

In fact, during the launch of his work, Oliver Jeffers stated that this book had also been created “with years of collecting old architecture books and old furniture catalogs” (Silva, 2023, n.p.)²⁰. The careful attention to setting is evident from the very beginning, and in some pages, there is almost an explicit detailing of the environment, as if in footnotes, with references to the house, specific rooms such as the attic, or various components and objects, including the fireplace and its chimney, a large wardrobe, or a Queen Anne-style chair.

As Silva (2023) notes, following the perspective previously outlined by Oliver Jeffers, “There are moments when it feels as though we are flipping through a décor catalog, accompanied by meticulous footnotes” (Silva, 2023, n.p.)²¹, a notion that becomes particularly evident in the following excerpt: “IN THE STUDY. This fireplace acquires a sense of dignity through the total absence of carving and ornamentation—an effect that can easily be achieved in a less imposing room. The excellence of the grate’s design is particularly noteworthy.” (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²²

From this research and creative process emerged the settings of a grand house from another era, spanning multiple floors—from the ground floor to the attic spaces—and featuring distinct rooms, including bedrooms, living rooms, a bathroom, and a library. The house is furnished with objects rarely found in modern homes, such as large wardrobes, a piano, a tall grandfather clock, and multiple candelabras, which suggest the absence of electric lighting and evoke a play of light and shadow. This interplay of darkness and illumination becomes central to the colorful girl’s search for ghosts throughout the house.

On the transparent pages, which resemble tracing paper, the ghosts are illustrated, becoming visible only when the reader positions the sheet against the darker-toned photographic illustration. This interplay highlights the contrast between light and dark shades, making the white ghosts, previously hidden on the translucent sheet, visible.

In the work, elements such as the strategic positioning of the character on the page, the contrast between the colorful protagonist and the black-and-white photographic background, and the precise alignment of the white ghost figures when overlaying the translucent sheet onto the

²⁰ In the original: “com anos a coleccionar velhos livros de arquitectura e velhos catálogos de móveis” (Silva, 2023, s. p.).

²¹ In the original: “Há momentos em que parecemos estar a folhear um catálogo de decoração, acompanhado de esmeradas notas de rodapé” (Silva, 2023, s. p.).

²² In the original: “NO ESCRITÓRIO. Esta lareira adquire dignidade com uma ausência total de talha e ornamentação – efeito que se obterá facilmente numa sala menos imponente. A excelência das formas da grelha é particularmente digna de nota.” (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

photographic image all underscore the significance of the professionals involved in the creation and realization of the literary work, as well as the dynamic dialogue between them.

These ghosts seem to enjoy the colorful girl's search, appearing—without her noticing—behind a sofa in the living room, climbing the stairs, hanging from a ceiling lamp, sitting at the library table, or even reflected behind her in the bathroom mirror. The ghosts engage in playful interactions not only with the girl but also with the reader. They appear in amusing situations, such as sipping a drink or covered in chains, just as the girl imagines them.

Metafictionality emerges as these ghosts, while hiding under the dining room table or sitting at the foot of the bed, do not hesitate to gesture for silence from the reader. In this way, the narrative's reading process draws both characters and readers into a game of hide-and-seek.

It is noteworthy that the written narrative itself invites the reader to carefully examine the images, scrutinize the photographed settings, and search for additional clues that contribute to solving the mystery. This interactivity is further emphasized through reading prompts found on some blank pages in the bottom right corner, offering hints about the ghosts' whereabouts. On these pages, drawings of certain objects from different rooms in the house—where the ghosts will eventually appear—are shown, such as the candelabra on the dining room table, the floor lamp at the end of a hallway, or a book on the library shelves.

The protagonist of this work is a colorful girl with green-tinted skin and hair, immediately evoking an imaginary world. She inhabits the grand old house and, at the very beginning, welcomes the reader into the mansion, stating that it has been a long time since she has received visitors: "Welcome! It has been a long time since I last had visitors." (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²³. From this moment, the girl challenges her reader-visitor, confessing that she has heard there is a ghost in the house, though she is unsure what ghosts actually look like, and asks for help in finding them: "Could you help me?" (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²⁴. From this point onward, as Silva (2023, n.p.) observes, "The dialogue with the reader is the driving force of this book, and, much like in some detective stories, the reader knows far more than the young protagonist."²⁵

In reality, the colorful girl searches for the ghosts in vain, while the reader always knows exactly where they are. Her quest takes her through the entire house—she peers under the stairs, between the books on the library shelves, up the chimney in the living room, under the bed in the bedroom—searching persistently and even emphasizing that she has already looked "TWICE!" (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²⁶. Moreover, the protagonist does not know what ghosts look like—"I'm not even sure what a ghost looks like. Some say they are white with holes instead of eyes. (...) They say some have chains and haunt the hallways." (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²⁷—or when they appear—"Do they

²³ In the original: "Sejam bem vindos! Há muito tempo que não recebia visitas." (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

²⁴ In the original: "Será que me podem ajudar?" (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

²⁵ In the original: "O diálogo com o leitor é o motor deste livro e, tal como em alguns policiais, o leitor sabe muito mais do que a pequena protagonista".

²⁶ In the original: "DUAS VEZES!" (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

²⁷ In the original: "Nem sei bem como é um fantasma. Há quem diga que são brancos com buracos em vez de olhos. (...) Dizem que alguns têm correntes e assombram os corredores." (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

only come out at night?" (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²⁸—whereas the reader possesses all this knowledge. Questions directed at the reader about the ghosts are a recurring element, as is the girl's fruitless search to find them. This pattern persists throughout the book, culminating in her final remark: "I've lived here for quite some time and have never seen a ghost. Maybe I never will." (Jeffers, 2022, n.p.)²⁹. This ongoing game of hide-and-seek between the colorful girl, the ghosts, and the reader is where the true subtlety of the work lies.

The variety of images, combined with the use of a uniquely textured, semi-transparent sheet, grants the reader the freedom not only to turn the pages of the book but also to influence the pacing of the narrative, determining the sequence and speed at which events unfold. Indeed, an analysis of the work highlights its metafictional nature, where the reader actively interacts and constructs their own version of the story.

In fact, photography holds a prominent place in Oliver Jeffers' illustrations, as it fills each illustrated page and carries the documentary impact of representing reality in the reader's eyes. It is also important to note that all photographic image credits used in this work were properly referenced in the publication, validating not only the artistic contribution that shapes the narrative but also the official participation of other creators in the project. In this way, the book underscores the recognition of the artistic value inherent in the process of capturing a technical image.

5 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to discuss photographic illustration, the materiality of the printed book, and the metafictional proposal of the narrative as devices that contribute to strengthening the connection between the reader and the work, focusing on a children's literature book by Oliver Jeffers. Our objective was to explore the interrelationship between illustration, book materiality, and metafictionality, analyzing how these elements interact and dialogue within a work of art such as the children's picturebook.

In Oliver Jeffers' work, it is evident that photographic images, when combined with the use of a uniquely textured paper—specifically one with a degree of transparency—enable the reader to actively participate in the narrative. This is achieved through the freedom to manipulate not only the book's pages but also the pacing of the story itself.

As anticipated, we consider the choice of photographic visual language to be highly significant in enhancing the visual education and literacy of readers. We recognize that advancements in digital technology can facilitate the integration of the arts and the development of visually literate readers. Furthermore, the incorporation of photography into the book format, along with the various opportunities for manual interaction with the object, expands the possibilities for reading, exchange, dialogue, and interpretation. This, in turn, fosters a closer connection between the reader and the work, contributing to the formation of competent readers.

²⁸ In the original: "Será que só aparecem à noite?" (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

²⁹ In the original: "Já vivo aqui há algum tempo e nunca encontrei um fantasma. Talvez nunca encontre." (Jeffers, 2022, s. p.).

Photographic illustration is further reinforced by the book's materiality in all its components, particularly through the multiple ways in which the reader can interact with the work. This interaction is deepened by the metafictional approach of this children's literature book, which establishes a dialogue between the protagonist, the ghosts, and the reader, allowing the latter to become a co-author, actively engaging in the construction and development of the plot.

In this sense, we can affirm that Oliver Jeffers' work constitutes a highly complex aesthetic and cultural object, where multiple artistic languages coexist. Its appropriation by young readers can undoubtedly contribute to the development of proficient readers capable of engaging with both visual and literary texts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

L. M. NAVES

PhD candidate in Educational Sciences from the University of Évora, Portugal. Holds a Master's degree in Education from the Federal University of Lavras (UFLA), with specializations in Early Childhood Education, Art Education, and Inclusive Special Education. Holds degrees in Pedagogy and in Administration. Collaborating professor and researcher at the Center for Studies in Languages, Reading, and Writing (NELLE/UFLA). Researcher at the Study and Research Group on Children's Literature (GEPLI-GPELL-CEALE/UFGM).

Email: ludnaves@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8092-3611>

A. BALÇA

PhD in Educational Sciences from the University of Évora, Portugal, where she is an Associate Professor with Habilitation. Researcher at the Research Centre on Child Studies (CIEC) at the University of Minho. Holds a degree in Modern Languages and Literatures – Portuguese Studies from NOVA FCSH, Lisbon. Visiting Professor at UNESP, São Paulo, Brazil. Her research and publications focus on literary education, reader formation, children's literature, mother tongue teaching, and school libraries.

E-mail: apb@uevora.pt

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4159-7718>

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