Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Early, Easy, First, Beginner, Chapter 1
ANNETTE WANNAKAKER AND JENNIFER M. MISKEC

SECTION I
History

1 From the New England Primer to The Cat in the Hat: Big Steps in the Growth and Development of Early Readers 13
RAMONA CAPONEGRO

2 The Boxcar Children and The Box-Car Children: The Rewriting of Gertrude Chandler Warner’s Classic and the Origins of the Early Reader 26
MICHELLE ANN ABATE

3 Creating and Marketing Early Reader Picture Books 38
REBEKAH FITZSIMMONS

SECTION II
Aesthetics and Form

4 The End? Approaches to Closure in Early Readers 57
KAREN COATS

5 Reading Reading in the Early Reader: Mindset, Emotion, and Power 71
GRETCHEPN PAPAPIAN

6 Redefining the Early Reader in an Era of Multiliteracies: Visual Language of Mo Willems’ Elephant and Piggie Series 88
DANIEL HADE AND LAURA ANNE HUDOCK
Long before my daughter was an independent reader, she was a storyteller. The stories she told to her Montessori classmates when she was three and four years old were seemingly interminable, characterized by a relatively flat narrative trajectory of events tied together with the repetition of “and so ...” “and so ...” “and so ...” until her teacher would encourage the class to clap in order to get her to bring her “story” to a close. Soon, her storytelling style developed to the point where every story she told ended in one of two ways: either there was a large and elaborate wedding, or dinosaurs entered the tale and ate everyone. There was even one story where dinosaurs showed up at the wedding.

I share this anecdote because it represents a fairly common pattern in a young child’s developing sense of story, one that has been formally studied and mapped by Margaret S. Benson. In her research, she found that four-year-olds can recount events in an unploted temporal sequence, while five-year-olds often introduce a problem-resolution structure into their stories, resulting in a plotted sequence (Benson 219). Tom Trabasso and Margaret Nickels concur with Benson. They found that, when asked to tell a story, three-year-olds had a sense of fiction in that they can describe imaginary characters and events, but they don’t organize these around a central theme. Four-year-olds, on the other hand, can organize action sequences around a theme, but their narratives lack a sense of purpose or movement toward a goal (Trabasso and Nickels 251-254). Through imitation and innovation over time, however, preliterate children develop the ability to construct meaning on the scaffolding of their culture’s storytelling forms.

Anyone who has ever heard a very young child tell a “knock-knock joke” has heard a demonstration of how this form-first, meaning-later developmental sequence works: the ability to imitate a form of patterned language emerges long before an understanding of meaning or significance is present, so that what sounds like a knock-knock joke might not have the requisite play on words to make it funny.

In my daughter’s case, her mental model of what a story should be was not fully developed at first, so she produced sequential narratives rather than plotted ones. The “and so ...” structure of her storytelling represented an imitation of the formal sequencing that characterizes stories, with the
“and” highlighting the knowledge that, while discrete events happen one after another in time, episodes in a story have some sort of connection, whether it be through character, place, or setting, that justifies and/or necessitates a coordinating conjunction between actions or episodes. The “so” further hinted at an emergent sense that events in a story do not simply follow each other in a temporal sequence, but follow from one another, in a cause-and-effect or symbolic structure; a proper story is not merely the recitation of things that happen one after another, but the shaping of experience into patterns that show relationships.

Trabasso and Nickels further found that five-year-olds introduce goal-plans into their stories, and with these goal-plans come the potential for plotted narratives (Trabasso and Nickels 253). Plotted narratives differ from mere descriptions or sequential narrative because they include a problem or conflict that must be solved, so that the narrative arcs through tension and release rather than merely progressing flatly over time. Even though the outcomes produced by the five-year-olds were based on a naïve grasp of psychological and/or physical causation, their plans culminated in goals being achieved, producing what Frank Kermode famously called “the sense of an ending” in his book of that title. Once my daughter figured out this goal-plan structure, her classmates no longer needed to cue the end of her narrative by clapping when she’d gone on too long; she was able to put a finish on it herself through the deployment of a conventional termination point. Over the next four years of development, Trabasso and Nickels report, children’s growing understanding of psychology and the physical world results in more logically motivated plots, so that the differences between story structures (not content, of course) produced by nine-year-olds and those produced by adults are negligible (Trabasso and Nickels 273–75). Older children and adults know that conventional stories have beginnings that establish scenes and introduce and describe characters, an event that instigates a conflict or sets a goal, complications that prevent the protagonist from achieving his or her goal, and a resolution that brings the story to a close under its own terms and thus gives it a sense of narrative completeness.

In this chapter, I look at how endings are managed in chapter books designed for newly independent readers. Studies on closure in adult literature have theorized the “sense of an ending” in stories, poems, and longer works from various perspectives that can be loosely grouped into two broad categories: stimulus-driven approaches where the formal features of a text drive meaning-making and teach readers how to understand closure, and culturally inflected cognitive approaches, where the feeling of completeness in a narrative depends as much on the processing activities of the human mind as on the text itself, such that readers’ culturally informed expectations and somatic responses must interact with textual inputs to produce a sense of closure and completeness. I examine what these approaches to closure bring to an enhanced understanding of individual examples of early chapter books as well as to the more general goals of the category. Ultimately, I argue that, viewed from the perspective of either theoretical model, contemporary Early Readers offer a sound apprenticeship in understanding closure in literary narratives.

Stimulus-Driven Approaches to Closure

Studies of closure that are stimulus-driven focus on how textual features imply and foreground endings that suggest wholeness. In his insightful essay, “Text as Teacher: The Beginning of Charlotte’s Web,” Perry Nodelman argues that, despite speculations by Vladimir Propp that “narrative structures are inherent, preexisting in all human beings,” story structure is in fact something that must be learned, and that novels written for children “must be constructed so as to allow those young readers who know only simple fiction to comprehend their greater complexity” (115). He goes on to describe how the opening two chapters of White’s novel present a condensed version of the story that is about to unfold in a more elaborated form, engaging young readers at the level of their likely literary competence through identificatory realism and providing a “cognitive map” for the more complex themes to come (125). The novel presents a narrative trajectory that mimics a complete life cycle: it begins with a birth, features the penultimate closure of Charlotte’s death, and ends with the birth of her children. Along the way, the problem of Wilbur’s impending death is resolved twice, once in the opening two chapters, which present the story structure in abbreviated form, and then in long form as the story of Wilbur and Charlotte unfolds.

This type of story structure can be mapped onto the familiar pyramid structure that graphically illustrates the successive complications as rising action culminating in a pinnacle of climactic tension and resolved through falling action. Further, each episode that comprises the rising action has its own rhythm of problem and solution so that it can be argued that the form itself is what drives the need for a particular kind of closure. If the first problem the text poses is one of life and death, then the resolution of that problem must come down on one side or the other. If a second problem has to do with a character’s existential boredom, then some sort of excitement or purpose is required for a sense of closure to be evoked. If the problem is loneliness, then companionship is the necessary solution. The vectors that lead from these particular problems to their particular resolutions seem all but inevitable in a closed narrative, so that the story structure that they follow seems inevitable as well, a necessary rather than a contingent form.

While the complete plot trajectory of Charlotte’s Web can be charted on this geometric form, Nodelman’s attention to the two-part structure of this and other children’s novels reminds us that certain textual moments that are experienced as “closural” are not always final. The ending of the first two chapters, for instance, marks the beginning of Wilbur’s life as a talking animal in the world of the Zuckerman farm. And that life is characterized by episodes marked by changes in place and time, naturally occurring event terminals such as sleeping and waking, arrivals and departures, and rhythms
of event and reflection. Short-story theorist Susan Lohafer suggests that this stop-and-go rhythm is best understood by thinking in terms of pre-closure rather than closure. “Syntax moves us forward,” she says, “whether we’re speaking technically about strings of words or loosely about narrative sequence. Yet the impetus to read on is checked by the need to read in, to absorb, to connect, to make sense” (Storyness 17). Moments of pre-closure, even as simple as the end of a sentence or the end of a paragraph, offer opportunities for readers to stop and make a connection between what they have just read, what has come before, and what they suspect will come next. They enable authorial control over what some theorists have called “episode chunking,” which is a process whereby readers draw meaning from a set of sentences that depict a scene or event that is coherent in terms of setting, but more importantly, in terms of “a thematically distinctive topic requiring a shift in the reader’s understanding” (Black and Bower 309; Miall 120). Formal markers of closure at the end of an episode signal a need to stop and reassess what you’ve learned before going forward. What Nodelman interprets in his reading of the structure of Charlotte’s Web, what he argues the text enacts in some sense for the reader, is the rhetorical force of pre-closure; the completed, closed structure of the first two chapters evokes a feeling-state that, even if it is lost to short-term memory as the reader progresses through the text, nevertheless primes the reader to move forward and affectively apprehend the rest of the book.

Moments of pre-closure are not new to beginning readers, many of whom have a rich experience with folktales. Snow White’s story doesn’t end when she is chased into the woods, nor even when the dwarves come home to find her seemingly dead. The wolf doesn’t stop after eating the first or second pig. These moments are examples of pre-closure that impel a reader or listener forward to find out what happens next because the story can’t just end there. Thus, children’s experience with simple stories may give the impression that they have an innate understanding of “story grammar,” which is another stimulus-driven way of conceiving of story wholeness. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, constructed a notion of story grammars based on the model of the sentence (108–113). In simplest terms, the subject and verb of a sentence become the equivalents to the protagonist and action of story, with adjectives and adverbs describing the state or quality of the protagonist as something that happens to him or her or as he or she performs an action. Introducing a character through some sort of denomination (say, for example, a name or a physical description) implies a kind of originary stasis or condition. A predicate can then indicate a change or movement that introduces disequilibrium, and the conditions for a story structure are born through a linguistic act. In longer narratives, multiple changes or movements may be introduced that relate to and complicate the central problem, so multiple moments of pre-closure must be included on the way to ultimate closure.

Consider the first paragraph of Lunch Walks Among Us, the first book in Jim Benton’s Franny K. Stein: Mad Scientist series:

The Stein family lived in the pretty pink house with lovely purple shutters down at the end of Daffodil Street. Everything about the house was bright and cheery. Everything, that is, except the upstairs bedroom with the tiny round window. (1)

Benton layers densely evocative adjectives and denominators to create a specific kind of imagery; pretty, pink, lovely, purple, bright, and cheery exaggerate the type of house one would expect to find on Daffodil Street. This hyperbolic expression of a particular kind of stasis sets readers up for the twist at the end of the paragraph, effectively forcing them to anticipate an equally hyperbolic antithesis and thus establishing the disequilibrium that will characterize Franny’s problem throughout the book. Indeed, the paragraphs in the first chapter alternate between what is considered normal and desirable by her mother versus what is considered desirable by Franny. The ending sentences of the first two chapters extend the descriptions of Franny’s originary state by affirming what Franny likes—bats and going to school. The next chapter, however, introduces the expected conflict that was hinted at in the structure of the opening paragraph and chapter: in a world of “sweet and pretty,” Franny prefers “dark, and spooky, and creepy” (2). This puts her at odds with her classmates; she is lonely and wants to make friends. Once this central conflict has been introduced, the plot switches from description to complication, and the chapter endings change accordingly. The next three chapters end with markers for the passing of time: “one day ... after class” her teacher suggests that she approach her problem like a science experiment (15); Franny vows that her data collection “begins tomorrow” (22); and “[a]fter school, Franny ... headed home to analyze the data she had gathered that day” (34). Each of these chapters ends with a natural-event terminal that marks the end of an activity or the beginning of a new one, with the path from problem to solution unfolding in a straightforward temporal sequence.

The simple path from equilibrium to disequilibrium to restored equilibrium in a story with a straightforward grammar or simple pyramid structure is one that young children will have trod repeatedly, but the more complex structuring of episodes in longer narratives requires them to attend to and process the movements of pre-closure in relation to the whole. As Nodelman implies, the best apprentice texts have formal features that provide the literary competences readers need in order to access them. Charlotte’s Web was not necessarily written to be an apprentice text for newly independent readers, and Nodelman does not treat it as such; instead, he suggests that it is a text that an adult will read to a child. But books such as Lunch Walks Among Us are meant to bridge the gap between read-aloud and read-alone experiences, so their formal characteristics must echo structures of simpler texts while extending those structures in ways that readers can follow. For instance, in what we have analyzed so far, we have seen the familiar story entry point of description and the instantiation of a conflict through a
straightforward clash between social norms and Franny's preferences. The story then follows a straightforward temporal sequence, with chapter ends indicating Franny's activities on successive days. The purpose of pre-closure as an opportunity for reflection is made clear, however, in the next chapter. After analyzing her data, Franny has a dream about how nice it will be to interact with her peers on their terms. A dream is a natural-event terminal, as it usually takes place at night, but always as a step away from everyday consciousness, so it stops the flow of events. For new readers who may have been reading on in terms of the progressive sequence of events but not in terms of considering the significance of each event to the whole story, as Lohafer suggests, this break actually models the process of stopping, absorbing, connecting, and making sense of how the preceding action connects with what is to come, because even though sleep suggests closure, and Franny has in fact solved her problem in her head, the story does not yet feel complete. Instead, this episode motivates reader interest in what will happen next.

In an attempt to understand how a perception of whole-storyness is conditioned by formal patterns of closure, Lohafer examined forty-five short stories, focusing on closural sentences. Her analysis revealed certain structural features that she divided into global (story-level) and local (discourse-level) categories and parsed for their syntactic and lexical features. Sentences that “complete a narrative structure such as the overcoming of an obstacle, the return to an earlier state or event, [or] the achievement of equilibrium” were coded for their global syntactic qualities. In terms of lexicon, these sentences tended to include words that actually named “an end state in relation to the story as a whole, such as sleep, death, parting,” etc. (59). Syntactic signals of pre-closure at the local level included rhetorical figures such as repetition, parallelism, and inverted word order. Their lexical characteristics included the use of closural words (that is, words that signal temporal shifts or ends, such as words that indicate the close of a day or activity, or leave-taking), words that indicate a summative or absolute degree of something (such as “never,” “all,” “ever after”), and words that indicate a relationship of sequence or opposition between states or conditions (such as “in the end,” “finally,” “except,” “but”). The last line of the first paragraph cited above, for instance, uses the word “everything” to point to the summative characteristics of brightness and cheeriness that characterize Franny’s house, but indicates a relationship of opposition to what came before it through the use of the word “except.” In addition, closural sentences may also contain words that have acquired significance throughout the text to remind readers of their importance to the themes and plot lines that are now resolved.

After Franny’s dream, the remainder of the book crescendos through a climactic action sequence that demonstrates three stages of pre-closure, as identified by Lohafer, that seem to be fairly common in the Early Reader category: an anterior stage, a penultimate stage, and a final closural stage. The first two are points at which a story could end, but doesn’t. They are instead points at which the text teaches new readers the variations in perspective that can be offered through characters, narrators, and authors. This can be a complex negotiation, but it affords readers the opportunity to develop a more robust Theory of Mind—the ability to attribute beliefs, knowledge, and concepts, including ones that differ from one’s own, to other people—through the depiction of false beliefs and ethical miscalculations. After Franny completes her research, she creates a potion that will transform her into the kind of girl that will fit in with the other children at her school. From her perspective, then, the obstacle that was holding her back from making friends has been removed. This is the defining characteristic of an anterior pre-closure sentence or paragraph; it expresses the resolution of the problem from a character’s point of view and is usually “a false or temporary perception” (Lohafer 61):

After school the kids all said good-bye and a few even asked her to come over to their houses and play. It was great to be asked, but Franny had to hurry straight home and analyze her day. She was happy. The other kids liked her, even if it was only a transformed her. (Benton 60)

Working with Lohafer’s model, we can see that the lexical features in this passage signal closure. Words that indicate time shifts (“after”) or an absolute condition (“all”), as well as “patently closural” words (“good-bye”) all give the sense of an ending (Lohafer 60). There is contextual repetition; we have seen this activity of going home to analyze data before as a closural element in this text. But there is also what Lohafer would call a “global syntactic feature” in the sense of an obstacle removed in her invitations to play, her happiness, and her sense that the other kids liked her (61). Because this is an Early Reader, however, Benton is explicit in foregrounding her transformation as the condition of their liking; he doesn’t leave that detail as an irony to be inferred.

Obviously, this is an unsustainable position for Franny; our sense of story wholeness won’t allow a character to remain in a state of disequilibrium or false consciousness. And, in fact, a second moment of anterior pre-closure occurs after Franny becomes herself again and saves the day with her quick mad-scientist thinking. When her classmates are attacked by a Monstrous Fiend, she uses her skills to create an even bigger monster out of the cold cuts they have in their lunches. Franny’s classmates are so overwhelmed by the appearance of not one but two hideous monsters, and also by the fact that the second monster was actually created by the little girl they have befriended and come to regard as someone like them, that they cannot speak: “The kids all just stood there, trembling. They didn’t say a thing. Franny turned away and walked home, sadder and lonelier than before” (Benton 94). Once again, Franny is operating under a false consciousness, thinking that her friends no longer like her because she is too different; this
time, however, her false perception comes as a result of the distancing effect created by the aposiopesis of her classmates. "Aposiopesis" refers to the sudden breaking off of discourse by failing to provide the final word; it is usually marked in literary discourse by the use of an ellipsis or a dash. But in this apprentice text, the situation is described rather than inscribed through punctuation that may be unfamiliar. The effect, however, is the same; speech fails, requiring both character and reader to make an inference—that is, to stop and read in before reading on. Once again, we see the lexical signal of the word "all," and the natural-event terminal of turning away and walking home. But the distal effect is intensified by the silence of her classmates; she is separated from them in both literal and emotional space, and she thinks that this is the end of her relationship with them. Because it is an anterior pre-closure based on a false impression, however, it does not provide a sense of story wholeness for the reader.

The next chapter, then, provides penultimate pre-closure. This is when the story ends from the narrator's point of view. Because these pre-closure points generally occur just before the actual end of the story and carry more authority and stability than anterior pre-closure points, Lohafer contends, they feature both global and local syntactic elements. For instance, the last sentences in the penultimate chapter of Lunch Walks Among Us read: "'Friend!' Franny said. 'Yeah. I am your friend. Just the way I am. Just the way you are. Friends!'" (Benton 98). Franny's problem was that she didn't have friends. Now she does, and she doesn't have to transform herself to keep them. Hence, global closure conditions are satisfied; Franny is herself again, but has achieved a higher state of equilibrium. The local syntactic register features the repetition of the word "friend" and the parallelism of phrases. While Lohafer does not mention punctuation, the inclusion of repeated exclamations points is also a stylistic feature that signals closure (Burke 129).

As for final closure—that is, closure from the reader's point of view—the last chapter sums up the outcomes of Franny's new situation. Of the six sentences in the last chapter, three begin with the word "and" and two include a "but," as does the title. Additionally, the word "still," as a temporal marker, is repeated twice, and the double letter "ll" is repeated in different words in four of the sentences. This accords with Lohafer's observation that in this stage of closure, syntactic features are least evident but lexical features abound. It would seem, then, that our sense of an ending is in fact tied at least in part to formal and stylistic aspects of a text, and that this Early Reader text apprentices readers into those elements at both syntactic and lexical levels. It is, of course, irresponsible to extrapolate from a single example to an entire genre, but what struck me in this analysis was that I selected this book at random in order to test Lohafer's hypotheses and was frankly amazed at how closely Benton's text hewed to the kinds of closural statements Lohafer found in her study of 45 canonical American short stories. The Early Reader may be a disparaged category, but this analysis shows that, at least in some ways, it bears up well under the kind of formal scrutiny we tend to reserve for what is generally considered "great literature."

Culturally Inflected Cognitive Approaches to Closure

While Nodelman cites multiple critics to bolster his rejection of an innate sense of story, empirical research demonstrates that children possess certain "cognitive endowments" that allow them to "vary [...] a small set of elements to create a larger range of possibilities" (Bruner 29); they have the ability to alter and recombine mental models and patterns drawn from actual experience in order to generate new, sometimes imaginary, experiences. In short, humans seem to be hard-wired for producing and understanding fictional content. We are able to recognize and construct story schemata and goal-plans, as shown in the research by Benson (202-223) and Trabasso and Nickels (249-275). We also, from an early age, have the following cognitive resources and affects to draw from: (1) the ability to entertain counterfactuals (situations or scenarios that are not true or have not yet happened [Gropnik 23]); (2) well-developed mental structures drawn from everyday practices called "scripts" (Schank 4); (3) a preference for happy endings rather than just ones (Jose and Brewer 920); and (4) prior experiences and memories that can result in mental representations that are not supported by the text (Cothern, Konopak, and Willis 15).

With regard to closure in stories, it is significant that Kermode used the term "sense of an ending," as recent developments in cognitive literary studies reveal that endings are felt and intuited through embodied awareness as much as through intellectual assent; that is to say, story endings are affectively, as much as cognitively, processed. Theorists such as Michael Burke, Ed S. Tan, and Lohafer herself remind us that our understanding of the rhythm of stories is a multimodal affair that emerges through a confluence of the formal features of a text with the processing activities of the human mind. Our sense of an ending, they argue, is influenced by the sounds of closing sentences that include, as described above, both syntactic structures and lexical evocations, the settling down of action sequences that we have been following in our imaginations through the activation of mirror neurons, the invocation of particular kinds of movements or perspective that signal distal effects, and even the materiality of the book itself (if a physical book is the carrier of the story). These sensory aspects of closure reinforce a more intellect-dependent recognition of when a story is over, such as knowing when an obstacle has been overcome or an interpersonal conflict has been resolved. Thus, the "perception of storyness is a gestalt; each of us, as a human story processor, has internalized a story schema, a set of expectations about what stories offer" (Lohafer, Storyness 57–58). And indeed, how we feel at the end of a story entwines with the formal ending to tell us what kind of story we just experienced.
The role of emotions in literary reading has been studied by cognitive theorists (Burke *passim*; Lohafer 91; Tan 165–88). Extending their work to the study of children's literature is particularly important, since children are more attuned to the play of emotions in text processing. Tan goes so far as to distinguish between affective closure and cognitive closure and argues that emotional appraisal is the guiding feature of reader response (184). If this is true for adult subjects, it is even more true for children, whose frontal lobes have not yet developed to the point where detached intellectual appraisal of a situation is possible. Burke names what we do when we read “affective cognition,” suggesting that “works of art may therefore activate in viewers and readers certain affective cognitive structures, perhaps even mirror neurons in implicit, emotive, and somatic ways” (44). Indeed, Lohafer suggests a model of story rhythm based on somatic processes, arguing that stories operate according to cycles that replicate “organic periodicity.” Breathing, heartbeat, sex, and so forth “consist of repeated, reciprocal acts,” where “a resisting medium... yields to pressure until a limit is reached” and the act is completed (*Coming to Terms* 91). She stresses that the movement must be finished before it can be repeated—that is, we must have closure before we can start up again—and that this is precisely how we experience the rhythms of story.

This close tie of story to the rhythms and repetitions of embodied experience has multiple implications for the Early Reader. One is the imposition of an event-reflection rhythm on the storytelling that actually replicates the way our brains take in and process information (Armstrong, ch. 4). Claudia Mills is a master of this storytelling style. A close reading of the prose style she employs in her Early Readers reveals a tight rhythm between the depiction of an action or the posing of a question and the character's assessment or reflection on that action or question. Often, these assessments and reflections appear as isocolons, which comprise a family of figures of speech that feature a succession of words, phrases, or clauses of equal grammatical length, rhythm, or meter, and are further specified by how many of these parallel structures there are. For example, John F. Kennedy's famous pronouncement, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,” is a bicolon. Lincoln's description of government “of the people, by the people, for the people” is a tricolon. Readers experience isocolons as closure because of their repetition and parallelism, but that effect is heightened in the case of tricolon or tetracolon crescens, where each phrase, though parallel, gets a little longer than the ones before it. This extensional quality gives a sense of distance and finality. In Claudia Mills's book, *How Oliver Olson Changed the World*, a classmate asks the teacher why we no longer undertake manned space voyages. Oliver has this unspoken response in the form of a tetracolon crescens: “Oliver could guess the answer: the moon was too far away, was too cold, and didn't have gravity. And when you got there, it was just a bunch of rocks” (*Mills, How Oliver 8*). This statement does not appear in a position where one would expect closure, such as the end of a chapter, but it acts as closure to a rhythmic thought process. Note the distal effects created by the meanings of the words, the invocation of extreme conditions, the repetitive and extensional structure of the tetracolon, the use of the word “and” to show a relationship, all of which Lohafer points to as local syntactic and lexical signals of closure (*Coming to Terms* 91). Kelsey Green, another of Mills's characters, highlights why this sort of reflective closure is necessary when she “blurted out any old wrong answer, so that she could finish the thought that was bursting in her brain” (Mills, *Kelsey Green* 43). Lohafer's insight that organic processes, including thoughts, operate on a building pressure/release cycle that must be both completed and repeated, is foregrounded throughout Mills's realistic matrix of characters confronting everyday problems that require continual processing and reflection before they can be effectively resolved.

Another particularly salient implication of the interaction of embodied processes with story form, and particularly endings, is related to the fact that organic cycles must complete themselves before they can be repeated, and that they must be repeated. This analogy, if valid, poses ethical and intellectual challenges for the Early Reader category as a whole: ethical, because we don't always get closure on life's complications, and intellectual, because the goal of the Early Reader is to instill in children the idea that reading as an activity is so pleasurable that it becomes a habit. Despite the rhythmic similarities imposed by style and form, reading is not analogous to an organic process because we can get along without it; we can get to the end of a book without picking up another one or going back to the beginning to repeat the experience. The challenge of the Early Reader is to come up with rhetorical strategies that both provide the satisfaction of closure and encourage the continuation of immersion in a fictional world rather than a final resolution. This latter pressure is perhaps why most Early Readers appear in series, but it doesn't explain why readers are drawn to them. For that we may have to do a bit of psychologizing.

**After the End**

Story endings have cultural resonance through intertextuality. So, a purely formal, stimulus-driven explanation would indicate that the reason we seek a particular kind of closure is because we have been trained to do so; through immersion in the stories of his or her culture, “a child is offered a flow and recoil of sympathies that accords with the culture pattern in which he is growing up” (Harding 379). This is likely where my daughter picked up her penchant for weddings and death-by-dinosaur as suitable endings for stories. Indeed, in *The Turn of the Novel*, Alan Friedman notes that the traditional novel—that is, a novel that does not partake of a modernist aesthetic—“tends to conclude in marriage or death” (18). Most of the stories we offer to very young children have this “closed” quality, with fairy tales ending in weddings, and growing up—leaving Neverland or the Hundred
Acre Wood, for instance—representing a kind of death. The conventional “And they lived happily ever after” ending demonstrates the qualities of affective closure (affective closure is more effective when it is happy than when it is sad, because we prefer positive emotions, even to the extent that we are moved to manipulate endings to effect our own happiness, if not the characters’); syntactic and sonic closure through the repetition in the final syllables of ever and after; lexical closure through the marking of a temporal shift (“after”) that gestures toward the distant, eternal future (“ever”); and intertextual closure in that this is the way many western stories end. But prior to this closural sentence, there has usually been global syntactic closure as well, with an overcoming of obstacles, punishment of the villains, a return home or the establishment of a new home, the restoration of equilibrium, the release of some tension, the achievement of a particular goal, and so forth, such that the last sentence is an affective affirmation of an already achieved sense of cognitive closure.

But Friedman argues that the novel has in fact “turned” from this closed form in response to a change in our attitudes toward experience. We no longer feel that life is a battle that we can win or lose through the force of our agency. Rather, we are continually buffeted by “assaults and offers” that we must respond to (9). This modernist aesthetic mitigates against happily-ever-afters, turning them instead into never-ending stories. Friedman sees in this shift a more ethical rendering of reality in the novel, since it charts a path of response to ongoing experience rather than a final destination, but it poses the problem of figuring out how to “end without closing” (180).

The Early Reader offers an exemplary site for exploring this problem for a few reasons. First, its purpose, as noted above, has to do with encouraging reading as a repetitive act, so each book has to end with an invitation to return rather than an expression of finality such as Mike Cadden explores in his essay on epilogues in fantasy novels (344). Second, the Early Reader category was born after the “turn of the novel” that Friedman charts, so that while some Early Readers, such as mysteries or historical fiction, have their origins in traditional genres and adhere to those conventions, many of the realist novels do in fact demonstrate the “stream of events” quality that Friedman theorizes (xiii).

Karen English’s Nikki and Deja books are a case in point: while these books have the same local syntactic and lexical signals of closure that characterize stories without regard for their historical provenance, they often lack global closure: obstacles remain and problems are left unresolved, just as they are in life. Nikki and Deja are African American girls who live next door to each other and are in the same class. Throughout the ongoing series, they encounter an array of everyday situations relevant to third-grade life, including coping with Antonia, a mean girl new to their neighborhood, figuring out what they might be good at, and establishing and maintaining relationships with school friends, family members, and neighbors. But while English establishes character and conflict—or, perhaps more precisely, while she gradually develops Nikki’s and Deja’s characters through their responses to conflicts—she doesn’t offer the kind of direct resolutions apparent in many children’s texts, especially those where the narrator or an adult retroactively explains the problem after it’s been solved. Instead, friendship frictions and jealousies are not addressed openly, for instance, but merely waited out until one or the other girl gets over whatever made her mad in the first place. Punitive justice isn’t served up to the deserving Antonia when she tries to sabotage Deja’s birthday party, and neither readers nor characters find out who stole Deja’s invitations out of the cubbies. Nikki’s parents stop talking to each other and Deja’s estranged father doesn’t appear at her birthday party as she hopes he will. English continually finds ways to “end without closing” at both the episode and book terminuses as her characters endure an ongoing series of assaults and offers that they respond to with varying degrees of success. In this respect, her ethical stance accords with what Friedman finds in the modernist novel.

But lastly, the ethical stance of children’s literature as a whole is one of encouragement to mature without losing innocence; to engage in perpetual reform; to dare to act even if those acts turn out to be mistakes. Closure is only ever pre-closure, and any other stance taken in fiction is an imposition of stability and orderliness that doesn’t accord with the ebb and flow of daily experience. In the contemporary Early Reader, then, we are ultimately invited to end without closing. We are invited to do as Lulu’s teacher says in Lulu and the Duck in the Park, the first book in Hilary McKay’s Early Reader series, where she admonishes: “We learn, leave it behind, and move on to make things better!” (49) (See what I did there? Lexical signals: Lastly, as a whole, ever, ultimately, end, closing, and two tricolons ...)

Works Cited


The fourth story in Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad Together*, "Dragons and Giants," begins with Frog and Toad reading a book together.

"The people in this book are brave," said Toad.

"They fight dragons and giants, and they are never afraid."

"I wonder if we are brave," said Frog. (42)

Inspired by their reading, the two friends set out to determine the nature of their courage. Alas, after huffing and puffing up a mountain, fleeing from various animate and inanimate menaces, and just generally shaking and trembling (all the while shouting "We are not afraid!" [45, 47, 49]), Frog and Toad find that their reading has merely led them into danger. They abandon their adventure, and the story ends with the two hiding: Frog in a closet and Toad under the bed (50). Teya Rosenberg—one of the few scholars to have approached Lobel's stories in any extended, analytic fashion—concludes that the plot sequence demonstrates "thematic irony":

> Reality is dangerous, and fairy tales, this story suggests, don't give helpful information for how to deal with that danger. Frog and Toad, however, do show an appropriate response in running away from danger—thus, irony [...] exists in contradicting the textual authority of fairy tales. (79)

Beyond offering a reading that underscores the complexity of children's books (Rosenberg's stated goal), the plot sequence also draws attention to the role(s) that books play in children's literature. Even more, it raises questions about the role of books in books that, like Lobel's, have been designed for those just learning to read.

Books and reading play a big role in books for children. Books tend to inspire, give characters information, offer solace, and help solve problems. Reading, children's literature argues, generates power as it offers skill, authority, purpose, and knowledge. One might even say generally, as Karen Chandler does, literacy "is the superhero of [children's] books" (14). And yet, the scholarship on representations of books and reading in children's literature remains sparse. The absence stands out particularly in relation...