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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Illustrated novels have a vibrant history. A rich new era may be upon us.

Perspective by Ron Charles
Book critic

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In the beginning, we fell in love with Wild Things. Dressed in pajamas, we studied how they "rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws." We listened to Maurice Sendak's incantatory adventure while his illustrations drew us "through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year."

That perfect interplay of words and images offered a kind of magic unlike anything else in our young lives. It was an experience conjured up again and again in these miraculous things called books — mere pieces of paper that could somehow invoke whole worlds.

Dr. Seuss hypnotized us, too. With their pointy yellow feet, it was obvious why those two furry things "must not hop on Pop." But who could resist his pillowy belly?

And as perfect as A.A. Milne's witty text sounded, it was E.H. Shepard's pen-and-ink sketches that sent us soaring into the air with Winnie-the-Pooh in search of honey.

But then — pop! — all that delight came tumbling down. No sooner could we read than we were shoved along to chapter books, to age-appropriate stories, to Novels Without Pictures.

Since then, we've toiled dutifully in the unadorned house of modern fiction with its blank walls and straight lines of text. We may have glanced promiscuously at the lush curves and colors of graphic novels, but then we remind one another how much better it is to let the imagination supply all the images we need: "Just the text, ma'am."

There have been exceptions, of course. In 2003, Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" was laced with diagrams from the young narrator's investigation. In 2005, Jonathan Safran Foer wove photographs through "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close." And Marisha Pessl's "Special Topics in Calamity Physics" contained pen-and-ink visual aids related to the teenage heroine's obsessions. But the fact that these visual elements always attracted notice is an indication of how unusual they were.

Now, though, after decades of paging through plain black-and-white text, I'm suddenly seeing a cluster of books whose interior pages are adorned with images. We could be at the beginning of a rich new era of more visually engaging novels. For *adults*. Consider these examples:

● Jonathan Lethem's gentle dystopia, "The Arrest," includes classic sci-fi illustrations and photos.

● Emily M. Danforth's ghost story, "Plain Bad Heroines," includes gothic line drawings.

● Bryan Washington's novel, "Memorial," shows photographs that the characters send to one another over their phones.

● And next month, Edward Carey's story about Pinocchio's dad, "The Swallowed Man," contains paintings by the author.

At the moment, this feels like just a trickle, but these novels could portend a break from more than a century of visual dullness.

And why not? Publishers used to know better. From their start, books attracted the eye as well as the mind. Illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages are still captivating — even if your medieval Latin is weak. William Blake's late 18th-century poems flowing through his visionary paintings are hypnotic.

As novel-reading exploded in the 19th century, publishers sold wonderfully illustrated editions, which made perfect sense since many of those stories had first appeared in weekly or monthly periodicals decorated with woodcuts. It's telling that a young reporter named Charles Dickens was originally hired to write text to *accompany* a series of comic drawings by Robert Seymour. Dickens quickly flipped that emphasis to his own text to create "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club," but illustrations remained an important element of his best-selling novels for decades.

Erin Blake, a book historian at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, has traced the dramatic rise and sudden mass extinction of illustrations in novels. "At the end of the 19th century, everything is illustrated," she says. But then "there's this kind of reaction against it."

Indeed, by the end of the 19th century, novel readers began to be accustomed to unspeakable plainness. The causes are hard to pin down with certainty, but Leah Price, an English professor at Rutgers University, suggests that novels may have shed their illustrations as a way of establishing their intellectual heft.

“One reason that literary fiction becomes so anti-image,” she says, “is that it’s a way of distinguishing itself from children’s literature.” Denigrated as a waste of time for young ladies and other immature readers, the serious novel needed a way to honor its specialness. “Part of what marks literary fiction as literary is the lack of images,” Price says. She notes that George Eliot almost always refused to let her novels be illustrated.

David Alworth, who recently co-wrote “The Look of the Book: Jackets, Covers, and Art at the Edges of Literature,” says that Henry James, America’s preeminent intellectual novelist, may have played a crucial role in the shift away from pictures. “When we’re thinking about periods prior to modernism,” Alworth says, “you have to understand that the novel was a genre of entertainment.” But with his novels — and particularly with his writings about novels — James helped elevate the form to high art.

That lofty new status, Alworth says, came with new pressures to differentiate literature from the visual arts, with each becoming its own distinct and separate sphere. In short: Pictures belonged *over there* — not in the pages of fine fiction.

The eye-catching dust jackets that arose during the early 20th century made the exteriors of books more attractive for marketing purposes, but their arrival corresponds roughly with the bleaching of the interior pages. Novel readers quickly settled for uninterrupted lines of text. Even in the late 20th century, as graphic novels exploded in quality and popularity, serious literary fiction kept plodding along in black and white like some old crank horrified by what the kids are wearing these days.

Book historian Nicholas Basbanes laments what he calls “a kind of dark age of craftsmanship and decline in design through much of the 20th century.” He says that fiction writers themselves may be to blame for our stark-looking books. “Novelists who have come to be regarded as ‘literary’ novelists chafe at the idea of creative collaboration and can be exceedingly sensitive when it comes to allowing visual interpretations by others of what they regard as their intellectual property.” Then there’s the added expense of “bringing a visual artist into a publishing project,” many of which don’t earn much money anyway.

But maybe — just maybe — the visual elements we’re starting to see in literary fiction are a sign of a publishing industry finally willing to open its eyes to our radically optical era. Rebecca Rego Barry, editor of Fine Books & Collections magazine, says these changes “could be the influence of Instagram — or, perhaps more accurately, the influence of a highly visual culture.” For a new generation of readers and writers immersed in social media’s rich integration of text and pictures, the plain pages of a literary novel may feel artificial and intolerably segregated.

Claire Vaccaro, the art director at Penguin Group who oversees hundreds of titles a year across the company’s many imprints, says, “Book designers obsess over every little thing” — from the book’s size to its typeface to the number of lines on a page, *everything* that will influence a reader’s experience. But she agrees that something new is in the air. “There are quite a few literary novels coming through that either have photographs or art with them — more than usual. We’re being allowed to do much more and so is the author.”

Purists will whine that the Snapchat era is out to ruin the novel, but if illustrations and photographs start sneaking into the pages of literary fiction, remember: We’ve been there before. I have great expectations.

Ron Charles writes about books for The Washington Post and hosts TotallyHipVideoBookReview.com.

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