The Fearful Connecting of Worlds in *Rose Blanche*

The subject matter of *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti and Christophe Gallaz is very unusual for a children’s picturebook. The front cover portrays a child looking fearfully out of a window that reflects tired and wounded soldiers during World War II. The whole page is illustrated in grey tones. If placed beside the bright colours and cheerful subjects of many children’s books, *Rose Blanche* would almost seem as if it were not meant for children at all. It seems like a book that would upset or scare children rather than entertain them. It is not surprising, then, that Innocenti and Gallaz’s book has been challenged for reasons relating to the fear that it causes its readers. Focusing on the front cover again, it is notable that Rose is not fearfully looking out at the reader, but rather she is looking out at the soldiers. The reader can see the window’s reflections of the same soldiers that Rose sees. Therefore, the reader is looking fearfully at the very same thing that Rose herself is looking at: a scene of war. The window serves as a connection between the reader and Rose and brings the reader into her frightening world; this is perhaps the most fearful aspect of the book. *Rose Blanche* is an immensely complex and unique picture book which takes its readers on a journey that ultimately, and fearfully, connects readers not only with Rose, but with Rose’s frightening world as well.

Rose is the centre of attention in the first part of the book, which is not surprising considering the book’s title. On the inside title page, there is a small image box on a mostly-white page which shows Rose running along a muddy road. The little illustration can be taken in
two different ways: Firstly, it seems as if Rose is running away from someone who is following her. Taken the first way, the image brings Rose’s own fear to mind. Secondly, it seems as if the reader is the one following Rose and that she is leading them into her life; this is also a frightening idea, as the cover of the book has already shown that following Rose means following her into a story-world of war, fear, and suffering. However, despite the fact that the beginning pages of the book do depict scenes of war, it is quite clear that Rose is the centre of attention. It is Rose that the reader connects with. On the very first page of the written story, Rose begins with an introduction: “My name is Rose Blanche. I live in a small town in Germany with narrow streets, old fountains, and tall houses with pigeons on the roofs.” Her story begins, then, not only with an introduction to her, but also with an introduction to the world in relation to her – she tells readers about the place that she lives in. A few more pages in, there is an illustration of Rose wearing bright clothes and looking out of a big window. Outside the window there is truck full of soldiers. There is a sense, on this page, that Rose herself feels disconnected from the war. She says, “Sometimes it seems things have not really changed. But my mother wants me to be careful crossing the street between all the trucks. She says soldiers will not slow down.” At this point in the story, Rose’s personal world still seems bright to her, even though the world around her is grey and dangerous. It seems that although readers have followed Rose into a world of war, they have also followed her into her own personal experience of it which, at this point, is not all that frightening.

Because readers make a connection with Rose at the very beginning of the book, it follows that their experience of her world will be changed alongside her experiences of it. After the first pages, Rose’s life does change dramatically as she discovers a new world which has existed in her own world all along. Following the truck with the little boy in it, Rose says, “I
walked for a long time, past the edge of town into the open fields, where I had never been. The
clouds were gray. Everything was frozen. Sometimes I ran.” The illustration that accompanies
these lines is an echo of the picture on the title page of the book. That is, it shows Rose running
down a muddy road, following the truck as the reader follows her. The page conveys a sense of
fear, both in that Rose sometimes runs, which suggests that she herself is scared, and also in that
there is barbed wire and fences in the illustration, which suggests that Rose, and perhaps the
reader, is not supposed to be there. Certainly, when Rose finally discovers the destination of the
truck, her face looks simultaneously sad and frightened. The reader does not see what Rose sees
at the moment because Rose is positioned on the page to look straight past – or at – the reader;
there is a strong sense of fearful suspense in regards to finding out what Rose is looking at.
Turning the page feels much like turning around to discover a world that has previously been
unseen. By this point in Innocenti and Gallaz’s story, readers are no longer only connected with
Rose; they are also connected with Rose’s world. There is a sense of devastating discovery when
the reader encounters the children in the concentration camp, just a page-turn after the
protagonist herself makes the encounter.

On the page after the children in the concentration camp are first shown, the book’s text
changes from Rose’s first-person narration to third-person narration by an unidentified speaker.
The effect of the focalization shift is that it widens the scope of the story. That is, Rose Blanche
is no longer a story in which Rose is the only focus. The new narrator writes that, “By now she
knew the road by heart. There were more children by the wooden houses, and they were also
getting thinner behind the barbed wire fence. Some of them had a star pinned on their shirts. It
was bright yellow.” When Rose is the “she” in the story, rather than the “I,” the other characters
start to hold larger parts. Rose no longer appears to be living in her own world inside of a world
that is at war. Rather, her world is the world that is at war. This connection is also evident by the illustration where Rose is passing a piece of bread to the imprisoned Jewish children through the barbed wire that surrounds the concentration camp. For Rose, the war is no longer simply on the other side of the window, as it seemed to be earlier on in her story. Now, the war is on both sides of the window – on both sides of the barbed wire – and Rose’s story becomes strongly connected with other peoples’ stories of the war as well.

After the shift in narrative voice, Rose gradually disappears as the focus of Innocenti’s illustrations. In the eight illustrations after the switch, Rose only appears in five. In two of the five pictures, Rose no longer stands out from the war scenarios in the bright clothes that she wore in the beginning of the book; rather, her clothes are grey in their tone, just like the soldiers’ clothes and the clothes of the children in the concentration camp. In contrast to her cheerful expression on the first page of the story, her facial expressions are weary and frightened, which emphasizes the fear that has come to dominate her world, even though she did not experience such fear earlier on. One of the more alarming aspects of the book is perhaps that it is not a story of overcoming fear. Rather, it is a story of fearing real dangers that do have devastating consequences. For Rose, the devastating consequence is her own death, which is revealed by the simple sentence, “There was a shot.” In a disturbingly abrupt way, Rose completely disappears from her own story. She disappears from her story when it becomes too intricately connected with a story of war.

Even after Rose’s disappearance from her own story, after her own death, the story of *Rose Blanche* continues. The next page-turn reveals what is going on back in the town where Rose lives, at the very moment of her death. Another page-turn reveals the most colourful illustration yet; it shows how Rose’s place of death looks in the springtime. The sky is blue, the
trees are green, and there are colourful flowers growing around the broken barbed wire fence. In a sense, although the spring scene is beautiful, this illustration makes a connection that is perhaps the most frightening connection that Innocenti and Gallaz’s book makes. The springtime imagery brings to mind seasons and a continuation of life, even when Rose’s story has been so devastatingly ended. In other words, the springtime imagery connects Rose’s story with the reader’s story. It acknowledges that it is impossible to completely separate the story of children like Rose, and the story of World War II, from the story of the world today. The world of today is just a continuation of the world then, connected by the seasons. Acknowledging the connection between stories can create fear, as it does in *Rose Blanche*, because it makes it impossible to separate the wider, dangerous and sorrowful world from the safe and happy world that most people want their children to experience. Just as it cannot always be springtime, a child’s world cannot and has not always been happy and safe. However much as a child’s life may seem like springtime at the moment, there was also a winter before it, regardless of how fearful that winter might have been. The challenges that *Rose Blanche* receives indicate that people are often fearful of acknowledging these winters to their children, even if the acknowledgment is inevitable.

Overall, *Rose Blanche* takes its readers on a journey that is very intricate and complex for a children’s picturebook. It starts out by creating a connection between the reader and Rose, which is potentially frightening because Rose’s story exists in a world of war. After this connection is established, the reader discovers devastating aspects of Rose’s world that she herself had not previously been aware of, and Rose’s world becomes a world of war rather than a world that is separate from the war. The narrative form of the story takes into account the connection between Rose’s world and the world of World War II in Germany; rather than continuing on in the first-person, the story switches to third-person narration. This shift in voice
has the effect of making Rose one of the “she” characters in her story, rather than the only “I.” That is, her story comes to be a broader story, not simply a story of the world as she sees it personally. Finally, readers are shown that their world is connected with Rose’s world when Rose Blanche continues after the protagonist’s death. Images of springtime evoke the acknowledgement that life now is a continuation of life then, separated by many seasons but still connected. Ultimately, Rose’s story is transformed into a story of World War II, and then into a part of the story of our world today. Innocenti’s illustrations and Gallaz’s words work to make connections between stories and worlds. The challenges that arise against the book often stem from a fear of acknowledging these connections. After all, Rose’s life would have been much less fearful if the war could have stayed on the other side of the window.
Works Cited