

# The Possible Functions of Letters in a Picture Book : An Analysis of Taro Gomi's *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* (1991)

Hiroko Sasada

## Abstract

There are various alphabet books to teach child readers alphabet letters, including how to pronounce them and how to make words with them according to the alphabetical order. All of them are diversely elaborated to entertain young children as well as to teach them: representing them in accordance with songs or narratives, describing them as if they are iron bars of a zoo, or showing each letter like a performer on the stage. This article will focus on the exploration of possible functions of letters in picture books and the originality of the picture book titled *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* (1991) from a series called 'Picture Books of Sound and Word,' created by Japanese picture book artist, Taro Gomi (1945- ).

## 絵本における文字の機能の可能性 —— 五味太郎作『る・る・る・る・る』の分析 ——

笹田 裕子

## 要旨

一般的なアルファベット絵本の主要な目的は、子ども読者に知識を与えることである。文字の形状・名称・発音、およびその文字を用いてどのような語を作ることができるかということが構成の基本となり、文字の配列もABC順である。しかしながら、それぞれに楽しみながら文字を覚えることが出来るように工夫がされている。19世紀に人気があったナーサリーライムに基づくアルファベット絵本 *A Apple Pie* をはじめ、唄や物語に沿って終始一貫した流れと共にアルファベットを導入する絵本もあれば、文字だけを提示し、単語については次ページあるいは最終ページまで触れない絵本もある。さらに、これらの多様なアルファベット絵本の中には、Chris Van Allsburg (1949-) の *The Z Was Zapped* (1987年) のように、文字そのものを擬人化している絵本も見られる。

作品の多くが英訳されている日本の絵本作家五味太郎の最大の関心は、言葉と言葉遊びである。10冊の絵本から成る五味太郎の「音の絵本・言葉の絵本」シリーズは、他の五味作品と同様「遊び心」を随所に感じさせる作風だが、それ迄に五味が手がけたアルファベット絵本と同種の平仮名や片仮名を覚えるための絵本とは趣が異なる。本稿では、シリーズ中最も文字と絵とが一体化されていると思われる『るるるるる』(1991年)の分析を通して、五味の「音の絵本・言葉の絵本」における文字の機能の独創性を探る。

## Introduction

In this article, I shall try to examine the use of letters in picture books in association with a work created by the famous Japanese picture book artist, Taro Gomi (1945- ). It can be argued that his picture book series called ‘Picture Books of Sound and Word’ is quite different from any other picture books that focalise on alphabet letters. Among the ten picture books in this series, *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* (1991) seems to be the most original and expands the function of letters in picture books. Thus, an analysis of this work might explore the possible functions of letters in picture books. The whole discussion falls into four: First, a consideration of alphabet books in general; Second, a discussion of the animation of letters; Third, an examination of Taro Gomi’s ‘Picture Books of Sound and Word’; Fourth, an analysis of Gomi’s *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru*. Finally, the remarkable originality of the picture book titled *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* will be clarified.

### 1. The Function of Letters in Alphabet Books in General

Generally speaking, the main purpose of alphabet books is to teach child readers alphabet letters, including vocabulary and pronunciation associated with each letter. Just like educational toys, such as bricks or cards on which alphabet letters are printed<sup>1</sup>, typical alphabet books show a letter and a word

beginning with that letter on one page, or page opening, in alphabetical order.

Some of the words learnt with alphabet books are nouns such as animals, fruits, vegetables, or everyday things, and others are verbs. Picture books illustrated with the following nursery rhyme might serve as a good example of the point:

A was an apple-pie;  
B bit it,  
C cut it,  
D dealt it,  
F fought for it,  
G got it,  
H had it,  
I inspected it,  
J jumped for it,  
K kept it,  
L longed for it,  
M mourned for it,  
N nodded at it,  
O opened it,  
P peeped in it,  
Q quartered it,  
R ran for it,  
S stole it,  
T took it,  
U upset it,  
V viewed it,  
W wanted it,  
X, Y, Z, and ampersand  
All wished for a piece in hand. <sup>2</sup>

In spite of rather difficult words for young children, such as ‘inspect’ or ‘mourn’, this nursery rhyme was especially popular as an introduction to

alphabet letters in the nineteenth century. Although there are a great number of picture books based on this rhyme, the most famous of them is undoubtedly Kate Greenaway's *A Apple Pie* (1884), which is still in print.<sup>3</sup>

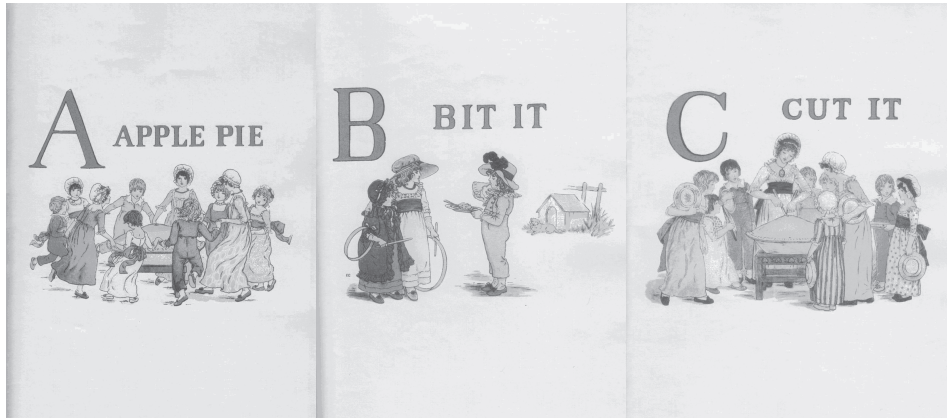


Figure 1. *A Apple Pie*. (New York: Everyman's Library Children's Classics, 2002) page openings 1-3.

Alphabet books, in which songs or stories supplement pictures to teach alphabet letters and words, seem to be similar to the picture books based on nursery rhymes mentioned above. For instance, Wanda Gág's *The ABC Bunny* (1933) suggests alphabet letters and words in association with a song about a bunny's adventure. Moreover, in Leo Lionni's *The Alphabet Tree* (1968), how a word is produced by combining some letters, and how a sentence is completed with some words, are told in association with a story about a tree full of letters. These picture books teach alphabet letters supported by a narrative, that is, 'the continuity of space and the series of actions.'<sup>4</sup>



In the works discussed above, letters function as elements to construct words. However, there are other nursery rhymes that describe alphabet letters as if they were living things, as follows:

Great A, little a,  
Bouncing B,  
The cat's in the cupboard  
And she can't see.<sup>5</sup>

Great A was alarmed at B's bad behaviour,  
Because C, D, E, F, denied G a favour,  
H had a husband with I, J, K, and L,  
M married Mary and taught her scholars how to spell;  
A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I J, K, L, M, N,  
O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z. <sup>6</sup>

In the latter, letters are personified. Likewise, in some picture books, letters possess their own meanings or have a role as characters. In the next section, further possibilities for functions of letters will be considered.

## 2. The Animation of Letters

Where letters are decorated, they usually emphasize the beginning of a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, or a whole book itself. <sup>7</sup> However, decorated letters can occasionally be used to convey meanings as well. For example, on the recto of page opening 2 in *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (1989), by Lane Smith and Jon Scieszka, the following sentence is written with decorated letters: 'This is the real story.' Some alphabet letters are made of

hay, wood, or brick, all of which are associated with the original story of 'Three Little Pigs'.

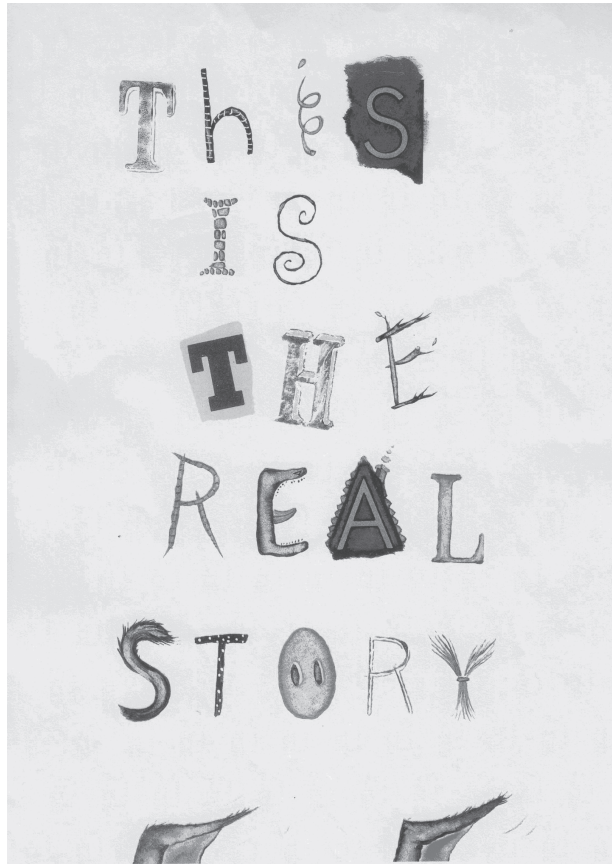


Figure 2. *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!* (New York: Viking, 1989) page opening 3. recto.

Likewise, in some works, alphabet letters play their own roles. Bert Kitchen's *Animal Alphabet* is slightly different from some examples suggested in the previous chapter. This picture book shows alphabet letters not just as the first letter of animals, but as a hint of each picture suggesting a quiz in which readers have to guess each animal's name because the animals' names are kept secret until the final page.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, as David L. Russell points out that ‘good alphabet books have some unifying element that helps to make them[child readers] a satisfying artistic whole’<sup>9</sup>, it can be argued this is exactly an artistic work. In this picture book, each animal interacts with a letter: plays with, gets on, stands by, or swims in each alphabet letter, each letter seems to be a part of the pictures. Therefore, each letter can be regarded as an iron bar for each animal. In other words, the whole work looks like a zoo.

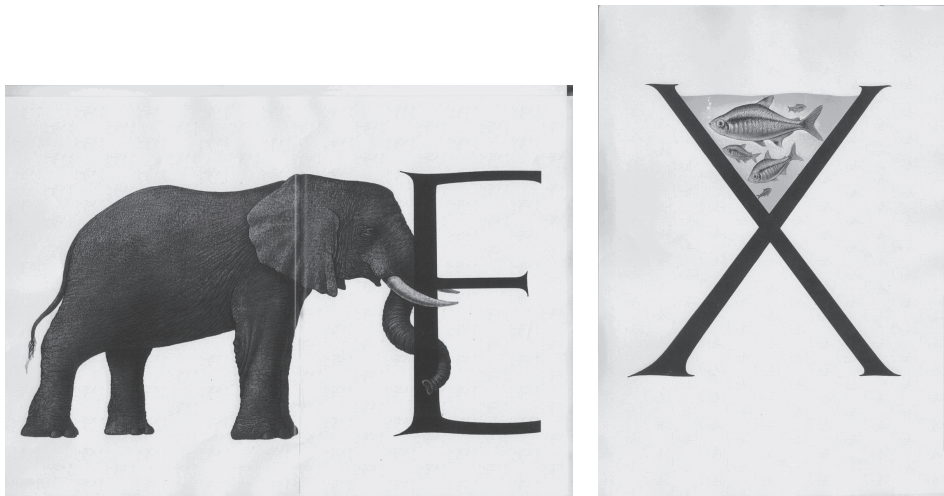


Figure 3. *Animal Alphabet* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1984) page opening 3 and page opening 12 recto.

Although each alphabet letter is the object in Kitchen’s work, in Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Z was Zapped: A Play in Twenty-six Acts* (1984), alphabet letters are presented as the subject. Allsburg is well known as a creator of picture books full of enigma, and this picture book can be regarded as being one of his representative works. At first, a letter is shown with its own act,

and then an account of each letter's act is explained on the next page. Just like Kitchen's *Animal Alphabet*, readers can enjoy a guessing game, that is, they need to make a sentence with a word which begins from a specific letter before turning the page to check the answer. On every page, alphabet letters are one by one affected by an action and transformed. Thus, the letters in this picture book are performers on the stage; and therefore, the subject who acts. In other words, each alphabet letter is animated: 'The A was in an Avalanche', 'The B was badly Bitten', 'The C was Cut to ribbons', 'The D was nearly Drowned', and so on.



Figure 4. *The Z Was Zapped* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) page openings 1-4.

As the explanation on the front cover suggests, this picture book seems to be ‘an alphabet book in disguise’. An unusual and bizarre presentation of alphabet letters might function to leave a strong impression on the reader, just like the educational TV programme, *Sesame Street* (1969- ), which emphasises one or two alphabet letters a day to be impressed on the child audience’s memory.<sup>10</sup>

Just like animated, coloured smudges playing as characters in *Little Blue and Little Yellow* (1959), an epoch-making picture book by Leo Lionni, animated and/or personified non-living things have often appeared as characters in picture books. Hence, animated alphabet letters in Allsburg’s work is merely one example, in spite of their disastrous fate.<sup>11</sup> However, hiragana letters in Taro Gomi’s picture book series called ‘Picture Books of Sound and Word’ seem to be different from simple presentations of animated letters.

### **3. Taro Gomi’s ‘Picture Books of Sound and Word’**

Taro Gomi has always been interested in ‘words,’ and picture books are the best tool to express words for him.<sup>12</sup> Gomi has created alphabet books like the books mentioned in the previous sections to introduce young readers to the Japanese alphabet letters, *hiragana* and *katakana*. His *Fun with*

*Hiragana* (*Sutekina Hiragana*, 2005) employs a distinctive layout: in a page opening, verso is occupied with a large *hiragana* letter and several words with pictures are depicted on recto. On every page opening, among the illustrations of words, Gomi inserts a collage, that is, there is always a photograph among the pictures on recto. These photographs illustrate the creator's playfulness because every photograph shows a focused letter, that is to say: the letter 'e' described with paint ( 'enogu' in Japanese), the letter 'ha' made with wire ( 'harigane' in Japanese), the letter 'ro' written in the melted wax of a candle ( 'rou' of 'rosoku' in Japanese), and so on.

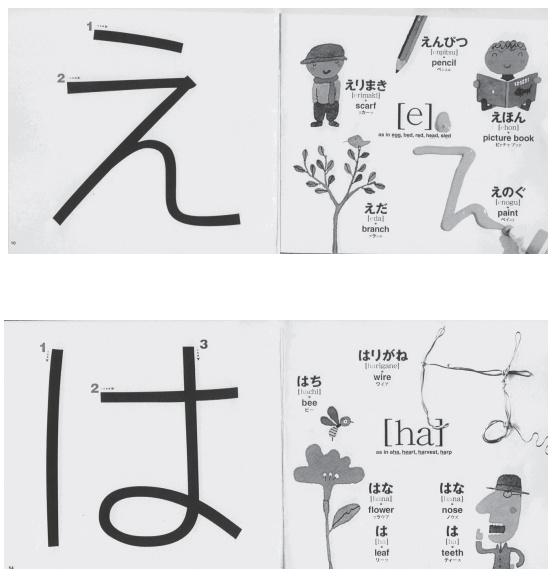


Figure 5. *Fun with Hiragana* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2008) page openings 4 and 26.

As Yoshiro Imai points out, Gomi's positive expression is to share pleasure and astonishment with child readers in his works.<sup>13</sup>

In the afterword of *Fun with Hiragana*, Gomi states his viewpoint of the

distinguishing features of *hiragana* as follows:

The people who invented hiragana long ago must have been a leisurely and spiritually rich people. Whenever I see hiragana, or whenever I read or write it, this is what I think. Hiragana characters are gentle and unrestrained, and each has its own whims . . . I believe the best way to learn hiragana is to get to know the personalities and whims of the individual characters – to appreciate the rich variety of shapes and sizes they come in.  
(107)

This viewpoint seems to be reflected in his creation of a series called ‘Picture Books of Sound and Word’, which consists of ten picture books: *Po Po Po Po Po*, *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru*, *Do Do Do Do Do*, *Ka Ka Ka Ka Ka*, *Te Te Te Te Te*, *Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha*, *Bi Bi Bi Bi Bi*, *Nu Nu Nu Nu Nu*, *Ri Ri Ri Ri Ri* and *NNNNN*.

Each picture book focuses on the letters contained in the title.

On the front cover of each book of this series, the following is written:

This is a picture book of sounds,  
and a picture book of symbols.  
During the act of reading this picture book,  
the reader will gradually be able to  
hear the words and see the narrative.

The analysis of one of these picture books in the next section will explore how this statement is actualised in a picture book.

#### **4. An analysis of *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru***

Other than *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru*, in this series, there are also two other



works in which a vehicle is the main character. In *Po Po Po Po Po* (1989), the main character is a steam-locomotive, and in *Do Do Do Do Do* (1992), a bulldozer. There seem to be several common points among these three works. First, the titles of all three books employ onomatopoeia to express the sound of each vehicle. Just like ‘ru’ is obviously the main symbol to describe the action of flying and the sound made by a small aeroplane in *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru*, in the other two picture books, the function of the main symbol seems to be just the same. Second, the text is written using a limited number of *hiragana*, something that is common among all the works of this series. The third is the personification of a vehicle. In each work, there is a scene where a *hiragana* letter seems to express a vehicle’s inner feeling or monologue. For example, in the sixth Figure below, the symbol expressing the sound of a bulldozer is changed from ‘do’ into ‘re’ and the vehicle stops as if it were astonished and in trouble.

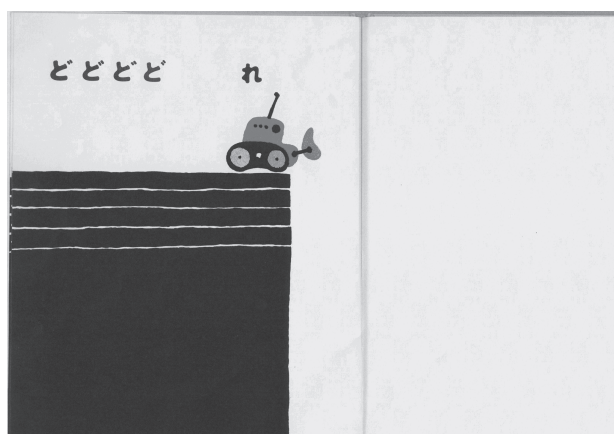


Figure 6. *Do Do Do Do Do* (Tokyo: Kaiseisha, 2009) page opening 9.



There is a similar scene in *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru*. The letter ‘re’ first appears in the picture when the aeroplane enters into complete darkness after getting through the cloud. Thus, ‘re’ seems to be a sound uttered by the aeroplane, which is surprised by the sudden change of time from daytime to night.

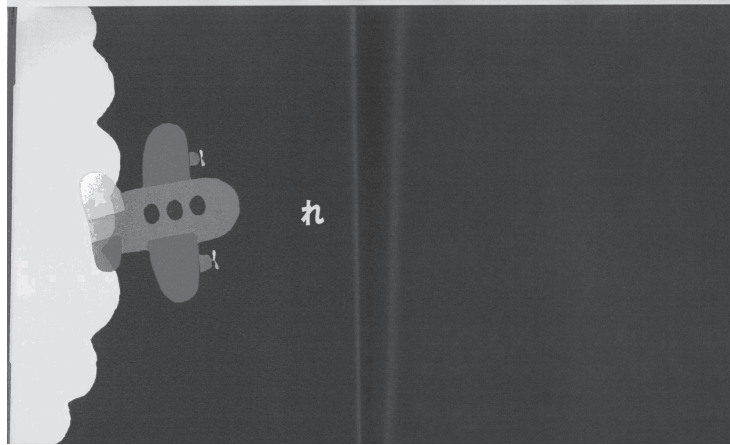


Figure 7. *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* (Tokyo: Kaiseisha, 1991) page opening 8.

Until the previous picture, the lines of the symbol ‘ru’ seem to be onomatopoeic, the whirr of the propeller mimicking the sound made by a flying aeroplane; however, in this picture, the symbol ‘re’ can be also regarded as a representation of this aeroplane uttering its thoughts and expressing its feelings in a human way. Therefore, this picture functions to show the fact that the aeroplane is personified in this work. In other words, the aeroplane is turned from a vehicle into a living character to be sympathised with by the reader. Also, the change of the size of this aeroplane, which gets closest to the reader in page openings 6-9, functions to let the

reader share the personified aeroplane's experience.<sup>14</sup> After that, the use of the symbol 're' conveys a double meaning, that is, the sound of a propeller, and a feeling of puzzlement.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, when the symbol 'gu' appears, it seems to display the aeroplane's embarrassment when it encounters a group consisting of lots of other aeroplanes. In addition, all the other aeroplanes are coloured differently from the main character, which indicates that the situation must be a difficulty to be overcome, like swimming against the tide.

After safely getting out of the difficult situation, the aeroplane seems to be in a tail-spin and going down. It has crashed head-first into the ground and beside it the symbol 'ru' is upside down and cracked as if in sympathy with the aeroplane. In the final picture, normality has been restored and the plane is facing in an upward direction, ready to start again. The symbol 'ru' has also regained its correct position. This scene provides a happy ending.

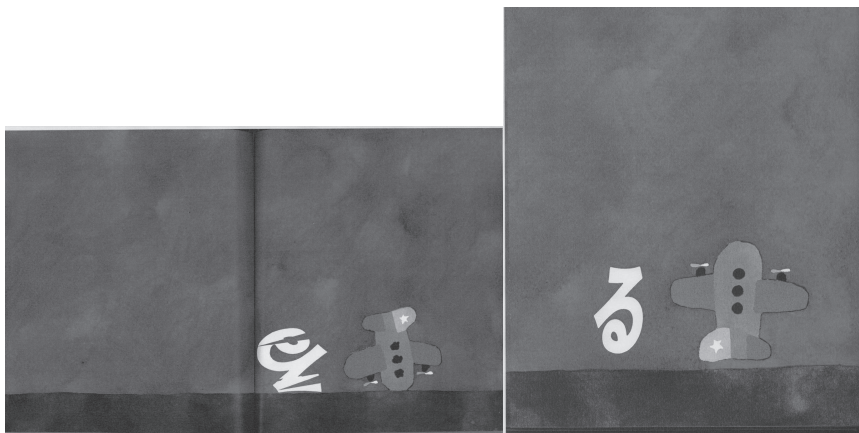


Figure 8. *Ibid.* page opening 16 and page opening 17 verso.

These final two pictures might show a difference between *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* and the other two works in which vehicles are personified. Letters seem to be completely identified with pictorial characters in the final scenes. In other words, verbal and visual images are ideally combined to convey a narrative.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

As a consequence of the whole discussion, it seems to be clear that the identification of a letter with a personified character in *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru* is something original to this work and is different from any other apparently similar works, including other picture books in the same series. Since the letters, which convey both sound and narrative, are also part of the pictures, this picture book functions as a picture book without text. The text and the pictures interact with each other as layers of sound and image to convey the narrative in this picture book.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Deborah Jaffé explains that a set of bricks or cards to learn alphabet letters is one of the most simple and popular toys in *The History of Toys: From Spinning Tops to Robots* (2006), p.101.
- <sup>2</sup> Iona and Peter Opie (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1997), p.53.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp.53-4.
- <sup>4</sup> Teresa Colomer, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, and Cecilia Silva-Díaz (eds), *New Directions in Picturebook Research* (2010), p.129.
- <sup>5</sup> Opie (eds), *Nursery Rhymes*, p. 57.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.58.
- <sup>7</sup> There is another example of meaningful decorated letters in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Stories* (1979) even if they are just the beginning of the first sentence of each chapter. The first letter of the first chapter of this work is the letter 'a' and the final one is the letter 'z', that is, they are intentionally arranged alphabetically.
- <sup>8</sup> The method of Kitchen is similar to that of Satoshi Kitamura, who also suggests a quiz to

- readers to guess what words the next two letters make in his *What's Inside? The Alphabet Book* (1991). Since the next two letters are hidden somewhere in every page opening, readers can enjoy a guessing game: while they are looking at pictures of an apple and a banana, they also find the letter 'c' and 'd', and are invited to guess what is depicted on the next page opening. The answer is always revealed on the next page opening.
- 9 David L. Russell, *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction* (Boston: Pearson Education, 2009), p.122.
- 10 26, September, 2011. <<http://www.sesame-street>>  
Every day in *Sesame Street*, one or two alphabet letters are emphasised as 'Today's Alphabet Letter': these letters are gorgeously decorated and a flood of words beginning with the letter are shown. Adding to alphabet letters, 'Today's Number' is also emphasised. For instance, a showy and flashy '8' is represented repeatedly, and various things enumerated by the number are shown like a flood. Once the final scene of the skit was always the same: a pâtissier appears at the top of the stairs with a large decorated cake on which there are candles representing 'Today's Number'. Without exception, the pâtissier misses his first step and falls down the stairs to mess up the cake. Such spectacles are used to make a strong impression on child audiences. In this way, they could be helpful for young children to remember a couple of alphabet letters and a number per day.
- 11 According to Iona and Peter Opie, and Brian Alderson, animated alphabet letters have already appeared in some of the earliest works such as *Mama's Little Pet's ABC* (1860). These letters are introduced like living things in this work: 'A stands for Apple, which here you may see' or 'B is for Ball, as round as can be'. (1989 p.126)
- 12 26, December, 2010. <[http://www.ehonkan.co.jp/authors/profile/gomi\\_taro.html](http://www.ehonkan.co.jp/authors/profile/gomi_taro.html)>
- 13 Motoko Nakagawa, Yoshiro Imai, and Jun Sasamoto, *The Expansion and the Function of Visual Expressions of Picture Books* (2001), p.45.  
Gomi himself places a great emphasis on playfulness in his process of creating picture books in his book titled *About Picture Books, Anyway* (1981).
- 14 As Jane Doonan points out, the size, shape, and viewpoint seem to be important to determine the stance of the character in the whole composition. (1993 p.34)
- 15 In the filmed version of *Ru Ru Ru Ru Ru*, included in *Saru Ru Ru Ru* in a DVD series of 'Taro Gomi's Video Library,' there is a five minute movie describing the whole picture book. The narrator's voice gives not only the small aeroplane but also the sound emotion as if it were personified, though each sound seems to be only onomatopoeic.
- 16 In *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality*, Maria Nikolajeva suggests that the intermediality between words and images in films is suitable to be employed to discuss the playfulness of picture books. (pp.56-7)

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