

Public images, private images: Photographic illustrations in the *Booky* trilogy

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Résumé: Dans cet article, Eileen Conway étudie la trilogie de *Booky* de Bernice Thurman Hunter. Cette trilogie à caractère autobiographique s'accompagne à chaque fois de photographies tirées d'albums de famille et autres archives. Le texte et les photographies apparaissent d'abord dijoints; mais c'est dans l'injonction de cette disjonction que Conway voit le sens profond de cette oeuvre.

Bernice Thurman Hunter's *Booky* trilogy (*That scatterbrain Booky; With love from Booky; As ever, Booky*) presents the student of illustrative conventions with an interesting complex of problems. Only the photographic covers of the three novels match our usual expectations of illustrative form and content. Separately and together, they show us the heroine at three stages of her life; each is carefully composed to illustrate not only significant physical features, such as size, and circumstances, such as poverty, but also some significant manifestation of the heroine's state of maturity and/or her prevailing mood in the novel in question. The first *Booky*, the youngest, is poorly clad yet sports a poignant cheerfulness; the second *Booky*, better dressed and conspicuously permanent-waved, is somewhat implausibly absorbed in literary composition; the third *Booky*, supported now by a fashionable hairdo and wardrobe, possessor of a bicycle, gazes romantically into the future. Each of these images has been deliberately posed and composed to match and supplement a premise of the corresponding text. They show the basic chronology of *Booky's* growing up; they *mean* that she grows not only older and taller but more prosperous, more confident, better dressed, better groomed. Although photographs, they have at the same time an overtly fictional character: they mimic the casual snapshot, but pose, expression, composition and finish all obey a different, more artificial set of criteria.

Within the novels themselves, the other images that ostensibly illustrate Hunter's autobiographical fiction about growing up in Depression-era Toronto are an arresting and disturbing mixture of private, personal, captionless, autonomous, random family snapshots, and, in contrast, mass-produced commercial images, many of which are also photographic in origin. The latter include publicity photographs (most gleaned from the Eaton Archive), and reproductions of other advertising material. A few reproductions of the front pages of newspapers round out the total. Throughout all three novels, the re-

relationships between text and illustrations, and among the illustrations themselves, are problematic.

On the one hand, the "non-imaginary" photographs seem to provide, in Susan Sontag's words, "incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened" (5). They claim a "truth" and authenticity for this story that ordinary illustrative media cannot claim; an illustrative drawing or painting witnesses to the illustrator's technical skill and imaginative response to the possibilities of the situations narrated in the text, while these snapshots apparently aver nothing more than their factual "content": that these people and these objects existed, that this story is somehow peculiarly true, that it shares with us a basis of the factual.

On the other hand, the public images, photographic and other, although they are primarily engaged in illustrating something in a rhetorical way, have a patently different primary purpose than supporting the narrative of Booky's growing up. Neither group of illustrations is self-sufficient as the basis of narrative. Although they manifest meaning and purpose of their own, their meaning and purpose are not those of narrative – not, at any rate, those of this narrative. The text is not subordinate to them; but neither are they created out of the substance of the text. Repeatedly, then, in reading text and illustrations together, the reader is involved in determining primacy of meaning. Which element is in control of the reading experience from moment to moment? To which must we pay the greater attentiveness?

Taken by themselves, the illustrations often fail to underline or accompany the main foci of narrative energy and attention, in the way that illustrations created for a pre-existing narrative typically do. Even major characters come and go, described in the text but unrepresented by accompanying images. Major incidents, similarly, are narrated without accompanying, reinforcing pictures to shape our imaginative response. Yet the pictures, considered by themselves, do not seem to form an autonomous continuity of their own either, unlike a typical picture-book treatment of a subject, in which pictures tell the story, and the text is essentially reduced to captions. Here, the pictures are not consistently captioned by Hunter's text; and the pictures, as I have said, are not always present or arranged so as to complement, match, or extend our reading of the text. At first sight, then, the text and the illustrations seem almost to have been assembled under two very different impulses: the narrative is apparently controlled by memory of what happened "historically," as a piece of a personal memoir exemplifying and explained by social history; the pictures seem to represent what was more or less accidentally available or interesting to the author from either private family collections or the various public deposits of images. The photographs may, indeed, "fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the . . . past" (23), but our reading of them is not straightforwardly related to our reading of the narrative, which follows a fairly simple line of adversities overcome and achievements gained.

Second and subsequent readings, however, reveal an increasingly subtle and dynamic complementarity, a dialogue and symbiosis in process between narrative and picture – a profound and disturbing interdependency that in turn is intimately and intrinsically involved with the development of a major theme of the whole trilogy: the establishment of a livable and acceptable identity for Booky herself, within a specific historical and geographical context. In this process, we see worked out in the concreteness of the illustrations many of Sontag's observations on the psychological and sociological, as well as aesthetic, dimensions of photography as a social phenomenon.

The theme of the quest for identity divides itself into subsidiary concerns. The theme of memory, for example, gives prominence to images that accompany and sometimes appear to structure the narrator's recapture of her past. We remember what we have pictures of; but, as Sontag points out, "only that which narrates can make us understand" (23). Images give substance and reality to the heroine's understanding and acceptance of her own physical being in terms of family resemblances and inherited features, for example. Booky frequently discusses the distribution of the family features among her siblings; she spends much of one volume, moreover, trying to alter the shape of her own nose, and is reconciled to its "bumpiness" only upon discovering a tintype of her great-grandmother (*With love from Booky* 149-152). But the tintype alone is not enough to reassure her; her mother's assessment is also necessary: "Well, I wouldn't complain if I were you. . . I'll have you know my grandmother was considered something of a beauty in her day" (151). It is also interesting that although Booky describes storing the tintype carefully "among my keepsakes," it is not reproduced as an illustration in the book.

A second sub-theme, that of material prosperity and desirable possessions, is more pervasive in the earlier part of the trilogy than later. Here the illustrations



Fig. 1
 What they illustrate, most often, is not the achievement of the tokens of prosperity and comfort; instead, they form a kind of negative image of the Thomson family's grinding poverty. The advertising text, and the sharply rhetorical accompanying illustrations, both thrust upon our

awareness the merchandise that embodies convenience, comfort, and beauty. As such, they furnish a bitterly exact record of what the various members of the family, especially Booky and her mother, long for in vain. A substantial part of the text in the earlier novels details how Booky's mother contrives to possess such desirable consumer goods as a washing machine or a sewing machine, although only for poignantly brief periods. For example, this paragraph faces an Eaton's advertisement for a sewing machine (*That scatterbrain Booky* 36):

And to make matters worse, the trial period for the sewing machine had already run out. Not only was Mum expecting a baby any minute, but she was also expecting the horse-drawn Eaton's wagon to pull up to the door and repossess the precious sewing machine. (37)

And a few pages further on in the same novel, we have, indeed, an archival photograph of "the horse-drawn Eaton's wagon" (69). Here the accompanying text describes Booky's mother's manoeuvrings to gain temporary use of a washing machine. But in both instances, the institutionalized memory of the commercial archive, fixing a benign image of retail distribution, is ironically converted into a private family memory of anxiety, deprivation, and overwork.

The power of these advertising images, their iconic prominence as symbols of the virtually unattainable, wanes as the family gradually attains relative prosperity, over the course of the three novels. But as the pictures of merchandise appear less frequently, snapshots of the family displaying prized new possessions replace them. And in the process the aesthetic of the advertisement, moreover, has come to permeate the protocol of the snapshot. The pictures of Booky in her new winter overcoat (*As ever, Booky* 100), and at the wheel of her boyfriend's new car (135), are posed and composed like advertising photographs. The developing contrast is clear if we compare the earlier snapshot of Grampa Cole and his car (*With love from Booky* 141). The development of photographic skill – in other words, the adoption of the grammar of the commercial photograph – is highlighted whenever we consider the contrast between the early "Canadian Gothic" images of family members (*That scatterbrain Booky* 77, 178; *With love from Booky* facing page 1; see figure 2) and the later, more artistic snapshots (*As ever, Booky* facing 1, 151). Another instance of the commercial iconography's influence in family snapshots is obvious when we compare the composition of the Eaton's Archive photograph of the Santa Claus parade (*That scatterbrain Booky* 44-45) and its echo in



Fig. 2

the family snapshot of the little boys harnessed to their wagon (124).

The theme of identity sought in terms of pictorial resemblances also moves rapidly away from the nostalgic search for validating similarities in the photographic memorials of dead relatives. The wider sphere of meaningful resemblance is provided by the movies (often called, simply, "pictures") and their attendant publicity, including still photographs. Very early in the story, new characters, especially the young and attractive, begin to be described from first encounters in terms of their similarity to the "looks" of movie stars. The ancestral tintype, among the family keepsakes, is replaced by the mass-produced movie magazine; the essentially clannish community of Swansea, where "there were literally hundreds of us cousins and 'lations . . . all descended from the very first settlers to emigrate" (*With love from Booky* 2) is superseded by Hollywood and the iconography of Hollywood.

This development, the "reading" of personal attractiveness and worth in terms of a pre-established commercial standard of human beauty, is of course a determining factor in the whole theme and the detailed to-and-fro of romantic love. But it also structures one of the most complex interrelationships of images in the series, and some of the most illuminating juxtapositions of pictures. In the fifth chapter of *As ever*, Booky and two friends found an "exclusive" fan club after seeing the Deanna Durbin movie, *Three smart girls* (29). Part of the rationale for this club is the fantasy-assumption of the stars' identities:

We argued all the way home, then Glad and I had to admit that Ruth, with her Deanna Durbin hairdo (completely accidental) and her round, nice-featured face, actually was the best choice. That left the other two movie sisters to choose from, which was easy because Nan Grey was a blue-eyed blonde, like me, and Barbara Read was a brown-eyed brunette, like Glad. (32)

Almost immediately, the newspaper announces "a Deanna Durbin look-alike contest" (33); entry requires not only a plausible resemblance, but access to a camera:

'Don't worry,' Glad consoled me . . . 'Ruth probably won't be able to afford film for the camera. And Cousin Aimie probably won't let her use it anyway.'

But Glad was wrong. Cousin Aimie did better than that. She was so intrigued with the idea of her daughter winning a famous screen-star contest that she marched Ruth straight down to Paramount Studios on Yonge Street where they had a special on, four poses for a quarter. One of the pictures turned out to be a remarkable likeness. (33)

While the results of the contest are pending, Booky is once more refused a longed-for garment: this time, a Deanna Durbin dress (39). In the upshot, Ruth loses:

We found the picture – but it wasn't Ruth. It was a girl who looked so much like Deanna Durbin that she could have been the famous soprano's twin sister. (46)

The winner, however, is apparently snubbed by the movie star, and the Three Smart Girls Club write a final letter of protest. An autographed photo arrives in answer to their letter – but Booky's name is omitted:

My name was conspicuously absent. Frantically we turned the picture over. But it wasn't on the back either. My heart fluttered and seemed to stop and I thought I was going to drop dead. . . . at last I had to accept the fact that I was never going to hear from Deanna Durbin. (51)

Although Booky "recovers," the experience is a major blow to her feelings of worth, and we may not at first notice the oddity of cause and effect in the incident. There is something strange in the logic whereby Booky's ego can be so severely battered by the non-appearance of her name on a photograph of someone else, whom she does not even resemble. Something of the same pathos has already been conveyed by the juxtaposition of the actual stars of *Three smart girls* with the members of the Three Smart Girls Club (pp. 30-31; see figure



Fig. 3

3); and to a lesser extent the twinned images of Deanna Durbin and her "double" (47). In both comparisons, despite the differing quality of the look-alike photographs, what is immediately obvious is that these girls do not look like movie stars, for all their careful hairdos. Personal beauty and personal worth are ironized by the fans' "scrapbook devoted to our idol's life and fabulous career" (32).

Booky's recuperation is hastened by her decision to pursue a writing career, a decision fairly promptly followed by some small degree of success: "There it was – my story! – on the second page of the pink Tely" (97). Her friend Glad

underscores the point: "Now you don't need to feel bad about your name not being on our Deanna Durbin picture. Winning a story contest is a lot more important anyway" (98). But a scar remains. In a sense, the Deanna Durbin picture has cancelled the self-validating effect of the ancestral tintype. In Ann Ulanov's words, the picture of Booky's great-grandmother affirmed her "sense of being-at-the-core-of-oneself. . . . sensing one's 'self' as somehow found, given, and reflected, instead of achieved, created or manufactured" (77). The sense of being part of a heritage of beauty into which she may grow is supplanted by a sense that a beautiful self must be striven for with conscious, strenuous, and ultimately unavailing effort. The availability of photography to the general public, and photography's disingenuous relationship to physical, concrete "reality," aggravate this sense of dislocation. In many ways the story of Booky's growing up is less a story of the Great Depression than a story of the first great era of amateur photography. Speaking of her sister Willa, Booky says,

She had brought along her Brownie camera. She had got it free from the Kodak company for being born in 1918. Every Canadian baby born the year of the Armistice got a free Brownie. The only trouble was Willa could hardly ever afford a film. But she had some that day. . . . *Click!* went the Brownie, and that lovely springy day was captured forever on celluloid. (*That scatterbrain Booky* 116)

The generosity of the Kodak company is two-edged. In Willa's happy recording of a happy family group, we see the beginnings of the development that will make of photography "one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation" (Sontag 10). A new consciousness, indeed, a new "ethics of seeing" (Sontag 3) is in formation in the period spanned by Hunter's *Booky* trilogy. As we re-read the novels, we are forcibly made aware that beneath the apparently innocent and random "nostalgia" and "pathos" (Sontag 15) of those fragments of photography a major social and technical force is at work, changing forever the way we participate and believe in "reality."

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