

Depicting Emily Dickinson: Michael Bedard and Barbara Cooney's *Emily*

Jefferson Peters*

Contents

1. The Emily Dickinson Genre
2. Poetic Effects and Dickinson in Bedard's Words
3. Poetic Effects and Dickinson in Cooney's Pictures
4. Complex Relationships between Words and Pictures
5. Adherence to and Modification of the Historical Record
6. For Children or Adults?
7. Celebrating Mystery

Acknowledgements

Works Cited

The Emily Dickinson Genre

Due to the charm, power, and originality of her writing and life

* Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University

(1830-1886), including her refusal to publish her poems or to leave her family's property, Emily Dickinson has long been one of the most famous American poets and characters, compelling many people to seek her and depict her. Even during her life her fellow Amherst townspeople called her "the Myth" and told "inflated and unreal tales ... about her" (Habegger 556), the editor T. W. Higginson described her in letters to his wife as child-like, wise, and draining, and Helen Hunt Jackson, a writer friend of Dickinson, supposedly based the heroine of her novel *Mercy Philbrick's Choice* (1876) on her (Hart 175). In the 20th and 21st centuries much attention has been paid to Dickinson, including biographies like Polly Longworth's *The World of Emily Dickinson* (1990), critical studies like James McIntosh's *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (2000), translations like Hisashi Noda's *Iro no Nai Niji: Taiyaku Emily Dickinson Shishuu* (1996), handsome coffee table books like Jerome Liebling's *The Dickinsons of Amherst* (2001), classroom lectures like mine at Fukuoka University, personal accounts of journeys to Amherst like Masako Takeda's *In Search of Emily* (2005), web pages devoted to the poet like the Dickinson Electronic Archives, poetry about her like that collected in Sheila Coghill and Thom Tammaro's *Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson* (2000), fiction inspired by her like Jane Langton's *Quieter than Sleep: A Modern Mystery of Emily Dickinson* (1997), plays featuring her like William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst* (1976), and many collections of her letters and poetry, like Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward's *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958) and R. W. Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (1998). New depictions of Dickinson draw on or respond to previous depictions of her

(including the Dickinson both revealed and concealed by her own letters and poetry) and try to add something original to the Emily Genre.

This paper focuses on an interesting section of the Emily Genre: children's fiction about Dickinson. By analyzing the picture book *Emily* (1992), text by Michael Bedard and pictures by Barbara Cooney, I will demonstrate the following things: first, why *Emily* is an excellent example of the picture book medium; second, what kind of Dickinson it depicts; and third, how it realistically employs and fictionally modifies the historical record of Dickinson's life and times to tell a compelling story for children new to her as well as for adult fans of her.

In the picture book in spring an anonymous little girl narrates the story of her encounter with the reclusive Emily (who, according to clues in the story and its afterword, must be at least fifty years old). The girl's story begins in winter shortly after she and her parents have moved to a house across from the yellow one in which Emily lives with her sister. Fascinated by Emily, the girl watches her house and room and asks why she never comes outside and whether she is lonely and what is poetry. Needing spring, Emily invites the girl's mother to visit to play the piano. While her mother is playing in the parlor of the yellow house, the girl tiptoes upstairs and meets Emily and gives her two lily bulbs, in return for which Emily gives the girl the poem she has been writing while listening to the music. They hide their gifts away until at the end of the story both bloom.

Poetic Effects and Dickinson in Bedard's Words

As in any picture book, in *Emily* the words provide information that

the pictures do not show and context for the information that the pictures do show. For example, on the first page of the story, the girl introduces us to Dickinson and hints at her special relationship with the poet, explaining that Emily lives in the yellow house with her sister, that “Her room is the one up on the left at the front,” that she hasn’t left home in nearly twenty years and hides when strangers call, that therefore she is called “the Myth” by the people of Amherst and thought by them to be crazy, but that to the girl “she’s Emily.” This information tells us that the yellow house in the picture on the facing page must be Emily’s, that the ghostly form in its upper left window must be hers, that the people on the street must be trying to catch a glimpse of the Myth, and that despite her creepy appearance she must be a friendly ghost because the girl calls her by her first name.

In *Emily* words tell a compelling story that pictures alone could not tell so well, delineating character (as when the girl says that Emily’s voice is “like a little girl’s”), expressing mood (as when the girl says, “Still the music played--but now I felt it breathe”), building suspense (as when we wonder whether the girl will meet Emily and if so what gift she will give the poet), and introducing difficult concepts (as when the girl’s father evocatively explains human nature and poetry).

Moreover, to evoke Dickinson and her style, Bedard writes a densely poetic prose that creates an Emily-like context with which we view the pictures and respond to the story. So Bedard uses many fresh and vivid descriptions and much figurative language, especially personification and natural metaphors, as in the following examples: “There was no one there but winter, all in white”; “The road was full of mud and mirrors where the

sky peeked at itself”; “She walked us down a whispering hall”; and “Our dresses both were snow.” He also enriches his prose with poetic sounds, from **rhyme** (“Her pencil **dashed** across the paper on her knee, as Mother’s fingers **flashed** across the keys”) to consonance and assonance (“I thought of Emily in her garden behind the high hedge, hiding my gift below the ground.”

Bedard also captures Emily’s voice (as heard in her poetry and letters) for the few things she says in the story, as in her letter and dry flowers inviting the girl’s mother to visit and play the piano: “Dear neighbor... I am feeling like these flowers. Revive me with your music. It would be spring to me.” He even incorporates into his prose direct echoes of Emily’s writing, as when the girl’s mother tells her that the letter from Emily is from “Nobody” (evoking Emily’s poem “I’m Nobody--who are You?” [Franklin #260]), and when Emily says to the girl, “No, you are poetry. This [poem] only tries to be” (recalling her expression in a letter, “Nature is a Haunted House--/but Art--/a House that tries to be haunted” [Johnson #459A]).

Other picture books use poetic images and sounds, but *Emily* does so remarkably to provide pleasure and to awaken the reader to the power and beauty of poetic language and to approximate the experience of reading Dickinson’s writing.

Poetic Effects and Dickinson in Cooney’s Pictures

As in any picture book, in *Emily* Barbara Cooney’s pictures provide information that the words do not give and contexts with which to read the information that the words do give. The richly colored, still, and lovely

pictures communicate a wealth of detail not mentioned by the text. The text of the story never overtly reveals its time or place or Dickinson's family name or hometown or birth and death dates or even that she is a famous American poet. Barbara Cooney's paintings of 19th-century clothes and exteriors and interiors of houses, however, vividly depict the American Victorian era, including the perceived formal self-restraint of people living then, so that the very few times characters smile in the book, they do so subtly. This all helps children to understand that the story occurs in the past and frees Bedard to express in his text the book's plot and themes and the poetic and sensitive mind and heart of the girl narrator.

Cooney's pictures of Emily undergo a transformation unmentioned by the text. The first few pictures (including the cover) show Emily as the Myth, a small ghostly silhouette in her window seen from a distance. Emily is still the spooky Myth when the girl visits the yellow house and glimpses her transparent white form escaping up the stairs. Cooney next for the first time paints Emily's face in a medium range frontal pose as she is sitting at the top of her stairs listening to the girl's mother play the piano and writing a poem when she notices the girl standing before her. From the waist up this Emily looks like a person, red-haired, serious, and sensitive, but only the wall behind her (not her legs) is visible through the bottom of her white dress, so she is still part Myth. For the gift-exchanging climax, Emily appears in profile as if we are standing just behind her on the right as the girl offers her the lily bulbs. This Emily is sensually beautiful, with a long neck and full lips, provocative curl of hair escaping from her tight bun, and flesh we might touch glowing reddish-brown through her white dress. In her final picture we view Emily from a

distance again, but now she is reassuringly opaque and human, wearing a bright blue apron over her solid white dress with sleeves rolled up as she kneels in her spring garden planting the girl's lily bulbs.

As Bedard uses poetic rhyme and rhythm in his text, Cooney uses them in her pictures. The pictures often express visual rhymes, as when the green text of Bedard and Cooney's names and the red of the title *Emily* echo the green stems and the red stamens of the lilies in the little picture of blooming lilies on the title page. Other examples appear in the similar poses of the girl (in her white dress) and a cat (in its white fur) as they watch Emily escaping upstairs and the white dresses the girl and Emily wear when they meet and the blue aprons they wear when they garden. The layout of pictures in *Emily* forms a visual rhyme scheme in which the first several full-page pictures alternate white winter outdoors scenes with dark brown or red indoors scenes (cold outside--warm inside--cold outside--warm inside). This visual rhyme pattern holds until the girl and her mother visit the yellow house, after which the picture pages depict the interior of Emily's house without alternating outside scenes. This deviation from the pattern helps to prepare the reader for the gift exchanging climax and emphasizes the warmth of Emily's house.

Furthermore, the layout of the pictures in the book forms a visual rhythm in which each two-page set features one page that is white with black text and occasional small picture and a facing page that is completely filled by color picture. Cooney varies which page is text and which is picture, but maintains the text-page picture-page rhythm except for the gift exchanging first climax and gift blooming second climax, when to increase the impact of both scenes she fills both pages of the two-page

spreads with one expansive color picture.

Other picture books use visual rhyme and rhythm, but *Emily* does so to an exceptional degree to provide pleasure, tell its story, and enhance the poetic feel of the book and its subject, Emily Dickinson.

Complex Relationships between Words and Pictures

Through their content and style, then, Bedard's text and Cooney's pictures depict an increasingly poetic, sensitive, and human Emily, but they do so in dynamic relationship with each other. The best picture books use words and pictures to provide different information so that we must "read" and synthesize the two different languages, verbal and pictorial. Perry Nodelman says that in picture books words and pictures

come together best and most interestingly not when writers and illustrators attempt to have them mirror and duplicate each other but when writers and illustrators use the different qualities of their different arts to communicate different information. When they do that, the texts and illustrations of a book have an ironic [or even "combative" (221)] relationship to each other: the words tell us what the pictures do not show, and the pictures show us what the words do not tell. (222)

In *Emily* words and pictures achieve that rich complexity even when they seem at first to give the same information. When the girl and her mother are walking to the yellow house, for example, the text says, "Father stood and watched us from the door," and in the picture her father stands and watches them from the door. But even this text and picture combination becomes "ironic" because the girl and her mother are in the foreground, her

father in the background, and the picture is painted not from her father's point of view but rather from the perspective of Emily in her room, the only time in the book Cooney paints a picture from the poet's view point. As the girl has been watching Emily, now Emily is watching the girl.

In *Emily* words and pictures achieve the rich and at times ironic complexity of the best picture books in various ways, beginning with the cover. In the cover picture a little girl in a hooded blue coat walks on a snowy winter day towards the large red letters spelling "Emily" in front of a large yellow house in which a small ghostly form is looking out the second floor window on the far left. Because the girl is so much more vivid, large, and close than the vague figure in the window of the house behind her, the first-time reader who does not know the book features Emily Dickinson will probably not even notice her silhouette in the window and will probably think that the title names the girl. When we read the story and learn that our original assumption was incorrect and look again at the cover picture and see Emily's small dark form looking out her window above the red "Emily," we may realize we should be alert when reading the carefully constructed picture book, in which things--especially dull or quiet or hidden things--are not always what they seem.

Often in *Emily* the pictures and words give complementary information to help us understand the story, as when the girl and her mother enter the parlor of the yellow house and the girl says, "I turned and saw a rush of white escaping up the stairs," Emily's sister says, "My sister is feeling unwell today and fears she cannot join you," and a ghostly form that must be Emily vanishes from the picture. Without the words, we wouldn't quite understand the painted white form, without the picture we wouldn't quite

understand the words. Another example occurs when the girl says that “a robin settled on the sudden grass,” and the picture of a jaunty robin standing on a patch of grass from which the surrounding snow has melted helps us understand the unusual description of the grass as “sudden.” And when we read “I thought of Emily in her garden behind the high hedge, hiding my gift below the ground,” the small picture above the text shows Emily kneeling and patting the earth down over the two bulbs she has just planted, while the full picture on the opposite page shows the girl standing and imagining the small picture scene after just having finished planting her own bulbs. Her father pushes a wheelbarrow in the background as her mother opens a window in the foreground; the actions of Emily and the girl echo one another, and the girl’s parents being present in her picture adjoining Emily’s make the poet seem less alone.

Often the complementary information provided by the words and pictures is challengingly complex, as in the first two-page set of the story. On the first page in a small picture above the text on the white page the little girl in the blue coat faces us. Her removed hood, the grass around her home, and the birds flying in the blue sky indicate that she’s standing in spring. She is also standing behind and holding with one hand a large red letter T (of the first word of the story, “There”), a hint that she will tell us the story we are about to read, and gesturing with her other hand towards the right page of the two-page set, where we see the yellow house against the gray sky and white snow of winter from behind the little girl, who stands in her blue coat (hood up) watching the house. Although the text of the first page identifies the yellow house as the place where a woman some people call “the Myth” and the girl calls Emily lives with her sister, there

is no mention of spring, and the snowy picture on the cover has established a winter context. When we return to the full-page picture on the right, if we notice the faint white ghostly shape in the second floor far left window we may suspect that it is Emily. But the temporal relation between the two pictures is unclear: does the spring picture on the left happen before or after the winter picture on the right? In the real world spring immediately follows winter, but in the book the spring picture precedes the winter one. And because when looking at pictures in a picture book we first suppose that they occur in chronological order, we might assume that the winter picture occurs after the spring one. But when we turn the page the text changes from present to past tense and reveals that the girl and her family had just moved to a new house in winter when the invitation from Emily came, and that therefore the winter picture in question happened before the spring one, and that the girl is telling the story of something that happened in some previous winter.

Another example of textual and pictorial complexity involves the gift of flowers in Emily's invitation to the girl's mother. The narrator first describes them as "a little spray of flowers," implying moist freshness, and then after she sees them closely as "dry and flat," while the small picture below the text shows lovely blue flowers with brown stems. On a later page the girl's mother dismisses them as "a few pressed flowers," while on a yet later page the girl's father sees that some of them have "crumbled onto the sheets" of her bed and says, "Bluebells. How beautiful they are. But very delicate." When he sings a good night song to the girl, she writes, "Like flakes of flowers the words fell to the sheets," as if she hears the song through a flower filter. The changing context of the descriptions and

picture develops our view of the flowers as it reveals the relationships between the girl and her obtuse mother and sensitive father and explains why she brings a gift to the yellow house.

Sometimes the pictures and words even contradict each other. The girl describes the parlor of the yellow house as being “stiff and dim,” for example, but the three full-page pictures of the room during the visit show colorful rascal cats full of life and mischief, including a calico who reveals only its hindquarters as it leaves each picture, an orange tabby that looks at the reader while being held by Emily’s sister, and a gray tiger that rubs against her or claws the furniture. Pictures and text together reveal that the room is stiff and dim except for the cats, or that the girl is too preoccupied with Emily to notice them, or that the cats express the spirits of the people freed from Victorian social restraints. Another disjunction occurs when the girl and Emily exchange gifts, and the girl says, “Our dresses both were snow,” but Cooney depicts Emily’s dress as being at least as red-brown as white and the girl’s dress as being at least as blue and brown and yellow as white. The reader who contemplates this contradiction between word and image may conclude that perhaps the girl’s poetic nature is running away with her because snow is not always pure white, as things in life are not always clear cut, or that the girl and Emily are flesh and blood living human beings beneath their cold and pure snow-like dresses. And when Emily receives the bulbs from the girl, she calls them “lovely,” although the girl has earlier described them as dull and dead looking. The reader who wonders about this contradiction may sense that Emily is seeing their future metamorphosis into beautiful blooming lilies or that their hiding of potential beauty makes them lovely now.

In other picture books words and pictures give stimulating and pleasurable reading experiences by communicating different information, but they do so in *Emily* to an exceptional degree particularly relevant to its depiction of Dickinson as discoverable but difficult to fathom, a mystery.

Adherence to and Modification of the Historical Record

In an email the Emily Dickinson expert Hisashi Noda drew my attention to a historical inaccuracy in the text of *Emily*. When the girl and her mother are invited into the yellow house, Emily's sister walks them "down a whispering hall, past a door, a spill of stairs, into a parlor at the rear." This implies that the party walks past the stairs and then enters the parlor, but according to the Dickinson homestead floor plan (Longworth 54) and to Cooney's picture, the stairs are right across from the parlor entrance, so that it is impossible to walk past them to enter the parlor. This error doesn't detract from the story or themes or depiction of Emily, and otherwise Bedard and Cooney's research into the historical textual and visual record (they visited the Dickinson Homestead and the Jones Library in Amherst, the Houghton Library at Harvard University, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Boston Athenaeum, and so on) is accurate.

For example, they depict Emily's house as yellow. The Emily Dickinson Museum homepage explains that her house was once red brick, but from 1855 when her father had it remodeled it was an ochre mustard yellow until 1916, when new owners had the house sandblasted back to the brick, which it crumblingly remained until being restored in 2004 to the yellow of Dickinson's adult years. Although it was red brick at some points in its existence, then, it was surely yellow at the time the picture book takes

place, during the last several years of Emily's life. The pre-restoration red brick house fooled many Dickinson fans, for according to Masako Takeda, readers who had seen it before its 2004 restoration sent Cooney so many complaint letters that she had a pre-printed postcard made to explain why the house is yellow in the book (116). It also fooled Jeannette Winter, for in her picture book *Emily Dickinson's Letters to the World* (2002), in which after Dickinson's funeral her sister finds and reads her hidden cache of poems, the house is illustrated as red brick. And in Winter's "Note" after the story, she writes, "When she was nine years old, the family moved to a red brick house on North Pleasant Street, where Emily lived the rest of her life." In fact, Dickinson began her life in the red brick Homestead on Main Street, moved away from it to a different house on North Pleasant Street when she was nine and lived there for fifteen years, and then returned to the Main Street Homestead (which her father then painted yellow ochre), where she lived the rest of her life. Children will miss these mistakes and fans forgive them because Winter's book so appealingly and accurately depicts the charming, adventurous, and imaginative spirit of Dickinson and her poetry through fantastic pictures accompanying twenty-two poems.

The house being yellow is perfect for Bedard and Cooney's purposes, for yellow is the color of illumination and the sun, cheerful, active, and warm and gives Emily a positive context to counter winter and rumors of insanity. Bedard and Cooney embrace the color, calling Emily's house "the yellow house" instead of its more common appellation, the Dickinson Homestead, including it in five pictures (one with windows gold from the sun, one with windows gold from Emily's light at night) and even rhyming its color with the unusual yellow endpapers of the book, as if in opening the

book we are entering Emily's yellow house (most picture book endpapers are white). And Bedard calls the color yellow rather than ochre or mustard because yellow has those more obviously positive symbolic meanings and is an easier word for children.

But although Bedard and Cooney adhere to the historical record, they also imaginatively modify it to tell their story. Bedard's afterword, for example, confirms aspects of Emily's life alluded to in the story (her reclusiveness, gardening, poetry writing, and affinity with children), adds others (her observation of nature, birth and death dates, family name and hometown name, and sister discovering her nearly 1800 poems upon her death), remains silent about others (like her sister's name, Lavinia, protecting Emily's status as the only named character in the book), and plays with the historical record when he depicts Emily lowering gingerbread in a basket to children from her second floor window and casts himself as such a child: "In writing this book, I went to Amherst to visit the house where she lived. I sat in the parlor with the piano, visited the room where she wrote. I stood beneath her window and she lowered this story to me." Bedard also adapts lines from Dickinson's writing, as when after the encounter with Emily, her sister serves the girl gingerbread and her mother sherry, and as they are about to leave, the girl notes that "The little bit of sherry left in the glass was the color of Emily's eyes," an adaptation of Emily's own description in a letter of her eyes being "like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves" (Johnson #268).

And Bedard's use of the real letter-poem (Johnson #845) Dickinson wrote to Martha Dickinson (her niece) and Sally Jenkins (her niece's friend) in 1883 as the poem that his Emily writes and gives to the fictional girl

accurately exemplifies Dickinson's poetry, love of children, and worldview and perfectly adapts them to suit the story and themes of the picture book. Here is the letter with its poem quoted in full (with the part Bedard includes in the story rendered in bold type):

Dear Girls,

I hope you are having superb times, and am sure you are, for I hear your voices, mad and sweet--as a Mob of Bobolinks.

I send you my love--which is always new for Rascals like you, and ask instead a little apartment in your Pink Hearts--call it Endor's Closet--

If ever the World should frown on you--he is old you know--give him a Kiss, and that will disarm him--if it don't--tell him from me,

Who has not found the heaven--below--

Will fail of it above--

For Angels rent the House next our's,

Wherever we remove--

Lovingly,

Emily--

Necessarily, because the fictional Emily writes her poem for but one girl and because the fictional situation differs from the real life one (Emily is meeting the little girl for the first time, whereas Dickinson was on intimate terms with her niece and her niece's friend), Bedard omits the original letter beginning "Dear Girls" and introducing the poem. Indeed, Bedard con-

structs his entire story around the poem to make it seem as if the real Emily had really written it for the girl. Fittingly, he retains Dickinson's original closing "Lovingly, Emily--" and presents Emily's poem in her own difficult to read writing (and helpfully provides a smaller printed text version below it).

It is unsurprising that Bedard did not choose the alternative version of the poem that appears without any introductory letter in Franklin's edition of Dickinson's collected poems. The alternative version reads:

Who has not found the heaven below,
Will fail of it above.
God's residence is next to mine,
His furniture is love. (Franklin #1609[A])

Although the first two lines are essentially the same in each version, the last two lines of the letter version suit Bedard's story better than do the last two lines of the [A] alternative, for the former pair may be interpreted as being Emily's way of telling the girl that she and her family are like angels who have moved next to her or that the girl will find angels wherever she goes in life.

Bedard, then, uses the textual record as inspiration for his own creative depiction of Emily, making the events of his story possible in terms of the historical record of Dickinson's life and staying in her "voice" as discernable through her letters and poems. By doing so he provides an authentic Emily texture to his prose which gives an extra level of recognition and pleasure to Emily aficionados and helps introduce her and her work to young readers.

Like Bedard, Cooney often invokes the historical record and uses it as

a base from which to imaginatively make her own fictional paintings. So for the story she adapts real world Dickinson family photographs from different eras. The first is the photograph of Dickinson's brother Austin from 1870 (about eleven years before the story takes place) used to depict the man behind the hedge of the yellow house in the first full page picture of the story. While the original photograph shows the seated Austin's face and emphasizes his bushy side burns, intense eyes, and black hat (*The Dickinsons* 67), Cooney's picture shows the standing Austin's profile from a distance with the same bushy side burns and black hat. The second is the famous daguerreotype of Dickinson (*The Dickinsons* 27) from 1847 (about thirty-five years before the story takes place) used to depict the first recognizable close-up picture of her when encountered by the girl. Although Emily in both photograph and illustration has the same hairstyle, face, and expression, the sixteen-year old photo Emily is wearing a dark dress, whereas the fifty-something illustration Emily is wearing the trademark white dress of her adult years. The third is a photograph of Dickinson's sister Lavinia (*The Dickinsons* 101) from 1896 (about fifteen years after the story takes place). Cooney adapts this photo for the picture in which Lavinia is asking the girl and her mother to make themselves at home. The photograph Lavinia is standing outside her house in a dark dress with a plaid shawl, holding a cat, while the illustrated Lavinia is standing in the parlor in the same clothes holding the same cat in almost the same pose (except for her left hand extended in welcome). The 1896 photograph (taken when photography had come to permit more natural poses) shows Lavinia fully smiling while her cat looks severe, whereas the picture book painting shows Lavinia looking poker-faced (as the characters

in the book look most of the time) while the cat looks amused (as its fellow rascal cats add lively mischief to the room). Cooney, then, takes photos spanning fifty years of real world time from their historical contexts to invoke their authority even as she modifies them to tell a story spanning at most a few weeks.

A disturbing example of modification of the historical record occurs in *The Mouse of Amherst* (1999) by Elizabeth Spires, an illustrated novella in which a mouse called Emmaline moves into Dickinson's bedroom and begins exchanging poems with her. Their informal poetry workshop is thrilling and charming, and Spires captures Dickinson's voice for Emmaline's poems and uses the relationship between the human and the mouse to introduce children to the power of poetry and the interest of Dickinson. So far so good. To cast Dickinson as a victim of male domination and to add action to the story, however, Spires warps the historical record too much away from the consensus view of her. Despite showing Emmaline the poem "If I can stop one Heart from breaking" (Franklin #982), Dickinson enjoys shocking "small revenge[s]" (35) on a male cat and a male stoat who almost kill Emmaline and on a "thick-headed" (37) male editor, Higginson, who almost crushes the mouse and does crush Emily's attempt to publish. In her afterword Spires says, "The visit with 'Mr. Higginson' (Thomas Wentworth Higginson), the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, really happened," which is true (although a poetry-writing mouse probably did not witness the meeting). But to imply that Higginson's rejection of her poems deeply "disappointed" Emily (62), something unsupported by the historical record, Spires telescopes historical time and rearranges historical events by making his real life 1870 visit come weeks *before* the poet's

well-known and mysterious early 1860s emotional trauma. Spires thus creates a false impression of cause and effect between the editor's visit and the poet's trauma, which probably derived instead from an affair of the heart. In *The World of Emily Dickinson*, Polly Longworth, in fact, recounts Dickinson's "demurrals" to publish when editors asked her to and explains that she used Higginson as "an authoritative literary voice to back up her refusal to publish" (4) and even told him that he had saved her life by recommending her not to publish yet (4). In a letter to Higginson Emily wrote, "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish'--that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin--" (Johnson #265). Finally, although in her afterword Spires mentions the agency of Dickinson's sister Lavinia and "family friend" Mabel Loomis Todd in publishing her poems posthumously, she ignores that of Higginson, who also was instrumental in that process. Biographies of Dickinson like Polly Longworth's make it delightful and suitable to imagine Emily exchanging poems with a mouse, but difficult and disturbing to imagine her enjoying hurting animals or people or really wanting to publish her poems.

There are, then, different kinds of divergence from the historical record: inadvertent mistakes when writers or artists lose hold of their historical sources (Bedard and the floor plan) or haven't done enough research (Winter and the red brick), and intentional deviations for fictional purposes (Bedard and the poem-letter, Cooney and the three photos turned into pictures). The most troubling divergences are those that violate the consensus historical view of or spirit of the historical person or event in order to push the creator's agenda (Spires and victimized and victimizing Dickinson). Like the best historical fiction, *Emily* uses the historical visual

and textual record as authentication and inspiration for its own story, adhering to known facts and accepted interpretations of Emily's character and imagining what it would be like for a little girl of her era to embrace the mystery of Emily by meeting her.

For Children or Adults?

Creators of a book for children based on a famous person like Dickinson who attracts so much passionate attention must feel both a duty and a satisfaction to accurately tell an engaging story that depicts Dickinson's poetic pursuit and strange lifestyle so that children will enjoy reading about her and want to learn more about her. Although it may seem as if the audience for picture books is children, however, because adults are the ones buying the books, they too are target readers. And a legion of adult Dickinson fans bring to reading a new book about her the schemata of their past experience of reading the Emily Genre. It must be a different responsibility and pleasure to adhere to and modify the historical record to suit Emily aficionados.

So how well does the book satisfy different readers? On Amazon.com's web site, the reviewers for *Publisher's Weekly* and *Library Journal* praise *Emily* ("like a Dickinson sonnet, a quiet gem: unassuming upon first glance, it is in fact deeply lustrous, with new facets becoming apparent the longer one looks," and "imaginative and unusual") and five adult readers rate the book highly with four to the maximum five gold stars ("wonderful," "excellent," "a masterpiece of word and art"). Although one adult reviewer's six-year-old daughter "gives it a thumbs up," however, the two child reviewers represented on the web page are less enthusiastic,

giving the book three gold stars and betraying their misunderstanding of it. One child says that the book “is a very good story and might even be a true story. I enjoyed it,” but also tries to solve Emily’s mystery in a way the book does not suggest, saying that Emily “is shut in the house for so long because she is writing poetry.” The other child reviewer thinks the anonymous girl narrator is Emily, and Emily is a nameless “person,” and says the book is “an OK book for me because I’m just not into mystery books but you other kids may like it,” even though the book does not belong to the mystery genre. For some children *Emily* may be too difficult to understand and enjoy as much as adults do. My Fukudai students--not exactly children or adults--find it difficult but rewarding, saying that the pictures are pretty, the story moving, the themes important, and the change from winter to spring impressive.

Though children probably cannot fully understand some of the concepts in the book and the poem Emily gives to the girl and may be puzzled by some things in the pictures, they must find in the book many pleasures: the fascinating pictures, the exotic Victorian setting, the richly poetic language, and the compelling story of a lonely little girl (with whom the child reader may easily identify) who finds in the seemingly ghostly and remote Emily a secret friend, a charismatic alter-ego, and a playful, poetic, and child-like surrogate mother (to complement her stiff mother). Along with the mischievous cats in the yellow house, children must enjoy the secret exchange of gifts between Emily and the girl and its aftermath, for when the little girl and her father are planting their lily bulbs, he tells her that he was sure they had more, but the little girl keeps her own counsel and honors Emily’s wish to hide their gifts, and children must

relish knowing more than their parents.

Adults must appreciate in the book the things that children do, understand more of the text and pictures and story, and enjoy introducing their children to Dickinson and poetry. Depending on their familiarity with Dickinson's writing, life, and house, adults will enjoy recognizing varying amounts of the elements of Emily's house and writing woven throughout the story. In the yellow house Cooney accurately depicts the real life childhood portrait of Emily, her sister Lavinia, and her brother Austin that knowledgeable fans of Dickinson will feel pleased to see and that readers new to Dickinson will find no reference to in the text of the book, leaving the identity of the children a mystery.

In any case, *Emily* appeals to enough readers to have stayed in print for fourteen years and counting. Nodelman says that

Picture books are clearly recognizable as children's books simply because they do speak to us of childlike qualities, of youthful simplicity and youthful exuberance; yet paradoxically, they do so in terms that imply a vast sophistication in regard to both visual and verbal codes. Indeed, it is part of the charm of many of the most interesting picture books that they so strangely combine the childlike and the sophisticated--that the viewer they imply is both very learned and very ingenuous. (21)

This is especially true of *Emily*.

Celebrating Mystery

Scholars of Emily Dickinson usually attempt to solve the mystery of her retreat from the outside world. According to Polly Longworth, for

example (who consulted the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and a professor emeritus of psychiatry), Dickinson's "deft evasion of invitations, avoidance of social situations, and startling habit of running from the doorbell" would be understood by "a psychiatrist today ... as the combination of anxiety disorders called social phobia, with avoidant personality disorder" (*The Dickinsons* 40). And although Alfred Habegger says that Dickinson's "reclusiveness, originality of mind, and unwillingness to print her work left just the sort of informational gaps that legend thrives on," he also holds that "there is no need to settle for the simplifying icons of her that pass for truth, including the icon of ineluctable mystery," for "there are enough materials for a solidly documented narrative of her life covering the conditions that shaped her to the inner dynamics of her art and thought" (xi), which is just what his biography of the poet admirably proves.

Longworth and Habegger convincingly explain the Myth, but one of the achievements of Bedard and Cooney is to depict an appealing, fascinating, and human Dickinson even while respecting the privacy she sought in life and the celebration of mystery that inspires her writing. The text of *Emily* provides examples of such mystery. When the girl's father explains poetry to her, he says, "Listen to Mother play. She practices and practices a piece, and sometimes a magic happens and it seems the music starts to breathe. It sends a shiver through you. You can't explain it, really; it's a mystery. Well, when words do that, we call it poetry." When the girl asks her father why Emily never comes out, he answers, "I don't know, my dear... no one really knows." When the girl concludes that perhaps Emily doesn't leave her home because she is afraid, she thinks, "That is why she

hides herself. That is why she runs when strangers call. But why--you cannot say. Maybe people are a mystery, too, sometimes.” And when spring has come the girl says that rain and sun transforming the hidden life in dead-looking bulbs into lily flowers is a mystery.

The pictures of the book also introduce mystery, as with the red haired man in a black hat standing behind the hedge in front of Emily’s house in the first full page picture of the story. If Emily lives only with her sister, as the text implies, who is that man and what is he doing on their property? Is he a servant or a stalker? Why does Cooney depict him? To play a game with the reader? To introduce a male element into Emily’s life? Readers aware that Emily’s red-haired brother Austin lived with his wife next door to the yellow house and familiar with the photo of him wearing a black hat may guess that the man is Austin, but because the text ignores him, his identity remains a mystery for many readers and a possibility for some fans.

And words and pictures combine to express mystery as well. The story ends in a transcendent double page spread that surprises the reader because after the earlier double page spread of the gift-giving climax, the usual pattern of two page sets, text on one page, picture on the facing page, had been resumed for four pages. The double page spread of this sublime second climax depicts a fantastic spring in which the girl, freed from her strict Victorian clothes, stands barefoot in a light brown shift with arms outstretched among butterflies and blooming lilies on an almost transparent green ball surrounded by blue sky under yellow sunlight. As we read the text that for the first time appears on both pages and look at the picture, we see the blooming of Emily and the girl’s hidden gifts: poem and

lilies. The text on the left page says, “So many, many things are Mystery,” and on the right reveals Emily’s poem (quoted above), in both her writing and type font. These last pages of the story depict the girl--a little angel--reveling in the insoluble and wonderful mystery and heaven on earth of life, including poetry and people and plants and Emily.

Although Linda Greengrass in a *School Library Journal* review quoted on Amazon.com’s web site says that, “Bedard’s charming story demystifies [Emily] the person and offers some understanding of her odd behavior,” and Bedard and Cooney’s picture book transforms Emily from a Myth into a woman, neither in the story nor its afterword do they really try to explain her character, and finally their book re-mystifies Emily, as evidenced by the pair of numinous text-less pictures of her doorway that frame the story. The one before the story shows Emily standing with her back to us in the open doorway looking out into bright green spring, a sunlight halo around her head. It tells us, even readers who know Dickinson wore a white dress and had red hair and quickly identify her, that we cannot completely know this woman. We cannot read her expression. And we may wonder, if the cover picture sets the story in winter, why and when is she looking out into a spring world? We may guess that she is admiring a later or earlier spring or thinking of gardening, but it is a mystery. Even more so for children reading the book for the first time (who probably at first think the little girl on the cover is Emily and have no idea who the woman in the doorway is). As we read the story we learn (or confirm) that the woman in the doorway is Emily, and as the images of her progress from a far away ghost to a nearby woman and the girl meets her, we may feel that we are approaching her and come to believe

that although she may be eccentric, she is a kind, humorous, creative, and healthy person whom we may meet by reading such a story about meeting her. But then we turn the last page of the story and are confronted with a picture of the same doorway empty of Emily, except, perhaps, for a sunlight afterimage where she had been standing. Where has Emily gone? Into the world outside her home as a result of her contact with the girl (which is what some young readers believe)? Into her house to write a poem? Into her garden? Into infinite spring after dying? Wherever she has gone, she is hidden from the reader again.

What finally does the pair of doorways mean? According to Cooney, they show “Emily’s freedom in spite of her so-called ‘reclusive life’” (Takeda 116). But that is just one interpretation. The pictures have no text to help us. Bedard and Cooney could place Emily in the second doorway turned towards us and inviting us into her world. But one of the virtues of the book is that after depicting Emily, it shows that she cannot be completely depicted. Just when we have gotten somewhat comfortable with Emily, the book reminds us of her essential mystery, of the essential mystery of any people we meet or read about and can never completely know, of the mystery of life, a cause for celebration.

Acknowledgements

I warmly thank Professor Hisashi Noda for his kind and indispensable help in the writing of this paper. When I suffered from uncertainty as to the color of Dickinson’s house, Noda Sensei patiently directed me to the Dickinson Homestead web page and to Masako Takeda’s *In Search of Emily: Journeys from Japan to Amherst*. Moreover, while we worked

together at Fukuoka University, Noda Sensei was ever an inspiring fount of enthusiasm for, understanding of, and information on Emily Dickinson. And he still is to this day.

Works Cited

Primary

- Bedard, Michael, and Barbara Cooney (pictures). *Emily*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Spires, Elizabeth, and Claire A. Nivola (pictures). *The Mouse of Amherst*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
- Winter, Jeanette. *Emily Dickinson's Letters to the World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Secondary

- Amazon.com. 9 September 2006. <<http://www.amazon.com/>>.
- Franklin, R. W. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1998.
- Habegger, Alfred. *The Life of Emily Dickinson: My Wars Are Laid Away in Books*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Hart, James D., ed. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*. 6th ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Johnson, Thomas H., ed. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1958.
- Liebling, Jerome. *The Dickinsons of Amherst*. Essays by Christopher Benfey, Polly Longworth, and Barton Levi St. Armand. Hanover: UP

of New England, 2001.

Longworth, Polly. *The World of Emily Dickinson: A Visual Biography*.

New York: Norton, 1990.

Nodelman, Perry. *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's*

Picture Books. Athens, Georgia: U Georgia P, 1988.

Takeda, Masako. *In Search of Emily: Journeys from Japan to Amherst*.

Florence, MA.: Quale Press, 2005.