

Walter Crane and the decorative illustration of books.

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Walter Crane and the Decorative Illustration of Books

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Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 38, 2010

pp. 27-43

ARTICLE

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Abstract

An analysis of passages from Walter Crane's *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (1896) demonstrates how this well-known Victorian author/illustrator used an architectural model to promote the coordination of words and images in picture books.

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The title page of Walter Crane's *Household Stories from the Collection of the Brothers Grimm* (1882; fig. 1) contains an intriguing visual thought. Storybooks, the artist seems to say, are buildings—or perhaps more precisely, can be experienced like a building. The image consists of a multistory house, richly decorated in the elaborate historical style for which Crane (1845–1915) is justly famous. Medieval chimney pots, classical columns and figures, and Renaissance strapwork compete for our attention with fairies, goblins, angels, and animals.¹ The artist gives us much to ponder in addition to the requisite title and names of the author, illustrator, and publisher. Perhaps most important is the small boy at lower left. He is shown with his back to the viewer, in the act of entering the building through a columned, multi-arched Romanesque door that is partly open. As he steps up and over the threshold, he grasps a large key, presumably that which unlocked the door. Shall we enter with him? The boy's action is surely meant as a kind of invitation to interact with this "multistory" house, simply by turning the page.

That a title page, or indeed an entire illustrated book, might work like a building or become a portal into an imaginative world is not a new idea, but it is startling to find it expressed so explicitly in visual form over seventy years before the publication of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* in 1958. Furthermore, the choice of subject for this title page was surely not accidental. The book as architecture appeared not only in Crane's art, but in his writing as well. For Crane as well as for Bachelard, the house could become a symbolic structure whose every detail bears significance.² In Crane's mind, the act of reading was a direct corollary to the exploration of the architecture, or structure, of illustrated books.

Crane was one of the few Victorian illustrators to write extensively on art and book illustration.³ He published ten books on these subjects in the later stages of his career, from 1891 to 1907.⁴ Although Crane clearly was a prolific author and critic, his writings have not received much attention from students of illustrated children's literature.⁵ This is unfortunate, since many ideas essential to understanding this important artist's work are found in these sources. One particularly worthy of exploration is his strong belief in what he called the "decora-



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