

## **MUSICALITY AND MOVEMENT IN CORINNA LUYKEN'S PICTUREBOOKS**

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**Abstract:** One way to understand the work of the contemporary American picture book author and illustrator Corinna Luyken is to appreciate her work's improvisational spirit, its playful, spontaneous and generative creation, style and reception. It is even more important to recognise the musicality of Luyken's improvisational ethos and the music and rhythm in the language and movement in her picture books. Luyken credits her dance background as being the catalyst for the embodied mindfulness evident in her work, especially in terms of the way it changed how she thought about movement, bodies and creativity. In our article we share concrete examples of Luyken's picture book imagery from *The Book of Mistakes* (2017), *ABC and You and Me* (2023), *Something Good* (2021) *The Tree in Me* (2021), *Adrian Simcox Does NOT Have a Horse* (2018) and *Nothing in Common* (2020). In each, scenes illustrate musicality and harmonising, both literally and metaphorically, in movement and compatibility. To borrow a phrase from performance scholars Lesa Lockford and Ronald J. Pelias, we consider Luyken's "bodily poeticizing" as a means by which the reader is invited to pause and consider the musical rhythms and patterns of the body, language and human interactions.

**Keywords:** movement, musicality, improvisational theater, Corinna Luyken, picturebooks

### **1. Introduction**

Corinna Luyken's picturebooks are models for how movement and musicality, specifically as they are rooted in improvisation, can manifest in literature for children. The contemporary American author and illustrator often credits her approach to bookmaking to the art of improvising. Movement, musicality, and improvisation are familiar terms in jazz and theater spaces, but the way Luyken uses movement

and musicality to tell her written stories likewise reflects the spirit and underlying mechanisms of improvisation. While she often mentions it in the context of her creative process, Corinna Luyken's work, her words, illustrations, and the aesthetic engagement she invites from readers, are models for how improvisation and the wisdom of improv can manifest in picturebooks both in style and content.

Unlike music and theater, "improvisational" is rarely an adjective used to describe books. Jazz is famous for inviting improvisation, allowing musicians to make in-the-moment rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic alterations. And improvisational theater is live performance during which the action evolves spontaneously, often with the help of the audience. While poetry can be created and delivered extemporaneously, it seems antithetical to think about printed books as improvisational. However, a growing body of improv theory gives us language to understand how the spirit of improv—playful, spontaneous, generative—is about more than just a set of behaviors at the production level. This encompasses the classic theories of improvisational theater, such as Viola Spolin's Theater Games in *Improvisation for the Theater* (1963), Keith Johnstone's Impro System (Dudeck) in *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979), modern improv theories like the theory of "bodily poeticizing" and epistemic stances of improvisation by Lesa Lockford and Ronald J. Pelias, and elements of improvisation by Nicholas J. Zaunbrecher. There are studies that focus on specific aspects of improv, such as creativity, acceptance, and well-being (Schwenke et al.) and reading and "worlding" (Tanner et al.), or more broadly, those that address applied improvisation, defined and investigated by Theresa Robbins Dudeck and Caitlin McClure in their edited collections *Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating and Creating Beyond the Theatre* (2018) and *The Applied Improvisation Mindset: Tools for Transforming Organizations and Communities* (2021). Such research gives us access to many different areas in which improv is used. All these studies offer insight into improvisational techniques that are used in and outside of theatrical spaces and how they generate creative connections.

Improv is an aesthetic and a philosophy, a way of being and thinking that transcends real-time performative spaces. It's also a way of understanding "message reception and interactional coordination" (Lockford and Pelias 433); in other words, how readers are invited to respond to a text. In fact, the basic tenets of improv—tenets such as refusing to block ideas by always saying "Yes," working to build on ideas by saying "Yes, and," embracing mistakes, and a dedication to mindfulness—can both generate spontaneous moments of creativity in the arts and cultivate "deeper levels of questioning, awareness, and

human connection” (Pyles and Adam 4) that are integral to civility in human organization. Corinna Luyken’s work reflects the spirit of improv in its creation, its style, and the generosity and compassion that underpins its subject-matter. We will explore Luyken’s authored and co-authored books *The Book of Mistakes* (2017), *ABC and You and Me* (2023), *Something Good* (illustrator; 2021) *The Tree in Me* (2021), *Adrian Simcox Does NOT Have a Horse* (illustrator; 2018), and *Nothing in Common* (illustrator; 2020) for their improvisational qualities of movement and musicality.

## 2. Improvisational Play and the Sound and Rhythm of Language

Like a jazz musician or an improv theater player, Luyken explains her creative process in improvisational terms. Says Luyken,

When I draw and paint, as well as when I write, I rarely have a concrete idea of where I’m going. I prefer to follow the sound and rhythm of language, the sweep and flow of line, or the conversation between colors and to see where it will take me. (Interview)

This is especially apparent in Luyken’s first picturebook, *The Book of Mistakes*, and it is evident throughout her oeuvre. *The Book of Mistakes* begins with the first half of a simple sentence: “It started.” On the opposite page is a half-finished face, a round, bald head with one eye, one ear, and a nose. The second two-page spread begins with the rest of the sentence, “with one mistake,” and shows the face again, now a bit more completed with hair, two eyes, and a mouth—except that one eye is bigger than the other one, which is the “one mistake” in question. So sets off a series of images in which Luyken builds a human figure, the story’s protagonist, detail by detail. While every page shows how small details form to become movement, the journey toward the final image is filled with both good ideas and mistakes; the character we see at the end of the story is who she is because of both. Luyken admits,

All of the mistakes in *TBoM* are mistakes that I have made when I draw. Some of them are mistakes that I make frequently. And all of the “fixes” are solutions I have actually used to transform those supposed mistakes . . . Over time, I discovered that things like glasses, collars, hats, bushes and trees are great ways to transform what feels like a mistake into something that is beautiful. (Interview)

Instead of erasing or starting over, Luyken embraces improvisational techniques like “Yes!” (accepting), “Yes, and” (building) to keep moving

forward, to use mistakes rather than letting them derail her, to move from “Oh, no!” to “What can I do with this?” (“Coming Home”). Knowing how to fix a mistake, though, creative as it may be, is only a part of Luyken’s process, and it is only one aspect of what makes *The Book of Mistakes* so compelling. In her book *Improv Wisdom: Don’t Prepare, Just Show Up*, in a chapter titled “Make Mistakes, Please,” Patricia Ryan Madson asserts, “Mistakes are our friends, our partners in the game. Making mistakes is how we function. We don’t consider them as something to be avoided; they are part of our operating system” (103). For Luyken, “A large part of creative work is this—retraining yourself, changing the way you think, and in turn, the way you see” and adjusting, “First, in my head, then on paper” (“Coming Home”). Luyken’s improvisational tendencies mean that mistakes are opportunities rather than setbacks. *The Book of Mistakes* playfully employs a variety of creative strategies one can use to fix artistic mistakes, smudges, smears, and asymmetry. But the way Luyken embraces mistakes is even more intriguing. As *The Book of Mistakes* goes on, we realize that the main character is much more intricate and complex than she first appears. The final images widen our perspective, pulling back more and more so that we can better see the big picture. The intricate forested landscape—one tree dotted with activity, tents, ladders, balloons, and people frolicking in its branches—from far away becomes a silhouette on the top of the girl’s capped head. We become aware that what we are seeing close-up is only a part of the larger truth of the creative, playful, thinking girl. At the end, the reader is asked, “Do you see how with each mistake she is becoming? Do you see now who she could be?” The girl is because of and not despite the mistakes. Here we see Luyken’s celebration of the beauty and integrity in mistakes, their detours, misunderstandings, and rhythms, which are key components of improvisational play.

In her study on the musicality of language in picturebooks, Robin Heald proposes that, much like a composer, who “makes decisions about musical direction (legato, fortissimo), meter, accents, and tempos,” so too does the picturebook author who captures “rhythms and stresses within simple sentence structures, producing language that lends itself to being read aloud” (233). While there have been many studies on the musicality, prosody and timbre of *language* in picturebooks, in Luyken’s picturebooks the illustrations and images work together and play along with the text to create a cohesive whole, engaging the *whole body*. Whereas musicality in language is expressed through sound, in images it is realized through movement. The metafictional nature of *The Book of Mistakes* shows a book as a process

and an artifact that, much like the main character, is gradually “becoming” through the rhythms of utterances, the movements of the hand, the acts of placemaking and mobility, and the changes in perspective and point of view. As the images progress along with the story and an entire world is being built from scratch, Luyken demonstrates the complexities of improvisational storytelling that even “pre-dates mankind’s first music” (Bailey, qtd. in Heald 231).

### 3. Mindfulness

In addition to espousing the principles of improv by accepting and building on ideas and embracing mistakes, Luyken’s work reflects yet another essential tenet of improv: mindfulness. Broadly defined, mindfulness has to do with practicing a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. Mindfulness is essential to improvisational creativity because it frees us from focusing on regrets from the past and anxieties about the future. Luyken admits to loving being surprised in the creative process, to not know exactly where she is going to end up: “It keeps me interested, and I find that it lends itself to a kind of alertness that is very similar to the practice of mindfulness” (Interview).

More to the point, mindfulness is embodied; one’s focus on the present moment depends on being aware of all of the body’s senses in the moment. The way Luyken uses bodies in *The Book of Mistakes* exemplifies her commitment to embodied mindfulness. As Luyken’s main character is built, part by part, the mistakes and fixes call attention not only to the character’s body—its proportions, and the way a body fits in space—but also to the body of Luyken herself, the wrist and shoulder of the artist moving ink around a page. When an eye is made too large or a neck too long, for example, we are reminded of the way the artist’s body controls her tools. When ink smudges are turned into leaves that look like “they’d always wanted to be lifted up,” we are reminded of the materiality of the wet ink and the physicality of the hand moving across the page. As we witness the main character being drawn, or when a tree is painted around “the girl with the very long leg” to climb, we are reminded of the order of design, foreground and background, and spatial relationships, and the process of an artist designing the book in our hands. Luyken’s metafictional approach at the level of both text and imagery invites the reader to pause and reflect on the process and materiality of the book alongside the story itself, enlisted in multiple levels of meaning making, as improv is wanting to do. Says Luyken,

Holding a pencil or paintbrush and moving it across the page is a very physical act. If the arm holding the pencil is

relaxed or tense, it translates into the drawing. And when people look at a finished piece of art I think that they can get a sense of the energy that was in the wrist and shoulder that drew it. (Interview)

For those familiar with improv theory, this evokes Viola Spolin's concept of "physicalization" which functions at the "physical, non-verbal level" and "keeps the actor in an evolving world of direct perception—an open self in relation to the surrounding world" (16).

Luyken credits her dance background as the catalyst for the embodied mindfulness evident in her work, especially how it changed the way she thought about movement, bodies, and creativity. Says Luyken,

Looking back, I can see how the improvisational dance classes that I took in college had a profound impact on the way I have approached every creative endeavor since. In part, those improvisation classes spoke to me because this was already the way I approached writing poetry and drawing with ink. But the classes refined and honed that ability—they gave me concrete tools for paying attention to the creative work that was emerging around me. Tools like saying "yes, and..." in response to anything that happens on the dance floor (or on the page). (Interview)

#### 4. Bodily Poeticizing

One could even call Luyken's focus on the body "bodily poeticizing," to borrow a phrase from performance scholars Lesa Lockford and Ronald J. Pelias. In a rare discussion of improv and literature, the article "The Great Literary Improvisers" invokes Lockford and Pelias's discussion of bodily poeticizing to describe the "communication, playfulness, sedimentation, sensuality, and vulnerability" (Flegar 193), qualities required in improvisational performance, to discuss mid-19th and early-20th century children's classics (such as *Peter Pan*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and the Croatian classic *Čudnovate zgrade šegrta Hlapića/The Brave Adventures of a Shoemaker's Boy* by Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić) to show that children's books written during this time period—deemed the Golden Age of children's literature—can be characterized by a shift toward the body. Embodied, expressive, playful, and spontaneous, the same can be said for Luyken's work.

Luyken's bodily poeticizing means inviting the reader to pause and focus on the body as a site of meaning. This technique can be seen most obviously in Luyken's picturebook *ABC and You and Me* where, in matte

pastels, Luyken explores the body and movement by showing how bodies can shape themselves into the letters of the English alphabet. The narrator starts by asking, “Can you wiggle your wrists? Can you twist from your hips? Can you lean without bending your knees? Can you point, dip, bend, roll, reach, or sway? You can? Then follow me.” Readers then see a diverse array of bodies bend and stretch themselves through both upper and lower case letters. Some of the bodies are more stylized than others, but the point of the book is less so for readers to match their bodies exactly to the bodies on the page and more to mindfully engage your whole body in movement. The narrator asks,

From the tips of your toes, to your elbows and nose, your ankles, your chin, and your knees. . .from your belly, your wrists, your fingertips, to your shoulders, ears, and cheeks. . . from the smallest of hairs on the back of your neck to the arches of your feet. . . tell me, what shapes can you be?

While this book showcases the English alphabet and even includes embedded images of objects that share the first letter of their name with the letter the body is forming (upper case “C” is holding a cake; lower case “f” is holding a feather), this book is about movement, and the focus is on bodies in motion. In other words, the intellectual takeaway is thinking about your body rather than an educational concept.

Bodily poeticizing also manifests in more subtle ways in Luyken’s illustrations for Marcy Campbell’s picturebook *Something Good*. In the story, objectionable graffiti is found on the wall of an elementary school’s bathroom. Readers are never told what the graffiti says; we are only told that it is a “bad-something.” Instead, Campbell and Luyken let the characters’ bodies and bodily responses convey the magnitude of the objectionable message. For example, a group of girls sneak into the bathroom to see the graffiti and proceed to have various intense responses: the main character’s mouth pops open, her friend Tanisha turns and runs away, Kiyoko kicks the stall really hard, and Emma starts to cry. Rather than explicitly verbalizing the graffiti’s content, the girls’ visceral and physical responses to the graffiti set the tone for the action of the story. What can be interpreted as feelings of surprise, disgust, and sadness serve to explain the characters’ motivation and invite the reader’s emotional investment in wanting a resolution.

In particular, the two-page opening spread of *Something Good* deserves consideration. The written text states, “The day the custodian found the bad-something on the bathroom wall, all the girls from Mr. Gilbert’s class were called into the principal’s office.” The visual text

shows twelve girls lined up against a wall waiting to meet with the school's principal. Each girl looks different from the other girls in line, with different skin tones and hair colors, lengths, and textures, a variety of physical sizes, and diverse styles of dress. But what is most striking are the ways the girls' bodies convey discomfort, guilt, and confusion. Few of the girls are making eye contact with anyone else; instead, faces are turned up to the ceiling or down to the floor. Arms are crossed or hands are stuffed into pockets. Shoulders are hunched. Toes tap. Each body tells a different emotional story, and each individual character appears to be lost in her own thoughts. While the narrator later reports, "Some of us felt worried or confused or sad or angry. No one felt nothing," the reader is left to read the non-verbal, the body language, alongside of the verbal to understand the central conflict of the story. For, it isn't the graffiti that is the central conflict of the story; rather, the "bad-something" is an abstraction, a feeling of distrust and fear, a fissure in the school's sense of community. The conflict's resolution, therefore, happens not when the graffiti is erased, but when the students find community again.

As Madson posits, "Learning how to work together moment by moment without a known formula is the essence of improvisation" (Madson 126). In *Something Good*, Campbell and Luyken explore a problem scenario for which there is no formula or script for success. What's more, what does bring the community back together is "a big project—an art project—and we could all participate." The whole community comes together to paint all over the bathroom wall. In the spirit of improv, building in particular, "Each of us had something to add. Mateo drew flowers, and Rosa drew dragons, and Kai drew both, plus rainbows and dogs and lots of smiling people." Not incidentally, while there are multiple pages dedicated to the creation of the mural, as soon as the kids start to paint, the individual artists' bodies are blurred and blackened, calling attention instead to the image as a whole, to the collaborative product of a community working together rather than of the individual kids. As Carrie Lobman notes,

When an improv troupe is working well together, what they create collectively is greater than the sum of their individual ideas. A well-crafted improvised scene uses every suggestion and every mistake and transforms them into a cohesive whole. (307)

In other words, the book depicts the harmonizing and rhythms of human interactions as a positive resolution to a crisis.

### 5. Building Through Community and Compassion

Though improvisational theatre's origins are 16th century Italian *commedia dell'arte*, American improv is rooted in early-twentieth century settlement houses, social group work, and democratic play. Though the improv methods of people like Viola Spolin are still used today, an equally enduring contribution of improvisational theory is the improv spirit, an open-minded, open-hearted, social, democratic, and creative sensibility. "Improv places a strong emphasis on active listening, risk taking, individual growth, and group mind . . . These are all concepts central to the heart of social group work" (Steitzer 271). Organization theorists of all kinds—education and business in particular—seek the creativity, openness, and active listening made possible by improv because, when done well, it fosters a sense of community, which most certainly breeds compassion. Compassion is at the heart of Luyken's picturebook work.

Luyken's *The Tree in Me* demonstrates her commitment to improvisation in her focus on mindful embodiment, the importance of building, and, ultimately, in the compassion that is at the core of the story. The picturebook begins, "The tree in me is part apple part orange-pear-almond-plum (part yummm) part shade and part sun." The accompanying images, brushy and matte, show a young child reaching for a bright pink apple hanging from a tree—the hue of which matches the pink in the child's cheeks—biting into the apple, preparing the apple for a pie, then sharing the pie with friends outside under a tree. The child, who presents neither explicitly female nor male, goes on to compare themselves to the tree, seed, blossom, branch, roots, trunk, leaf, as well as the bee, sun, sky, bird, wind, rain, and dirt. The visual representation of the child's abstract dimensions, their strength, sweetness, and empathy, are strong, bending, and rooted like the tree. The tree's attributes are embodied by the child. The storytelling is playfully improvisational, too, when the narrator explains, "And because there is a tree in me, there is wind, and rain, and dirt, and a river with fish, and a sky too," building with each "and, and, and," untethered from the rules of standardized English grammar to create a rhythmic communication pattern of accepting and building. But the most profoundly improvisational part of *The Tree in Me* is the compassionate conclusion. After going through all the things they are inside, the child concludes, "Because there is a tree, and a sky, and a sun in me, I can see that there is also a tree in you." In improvisational terms, the child concludes that if they are present and mindful, generous, forgiving, and aware of themselves, they can be the same for others. By embracing the

nature's ebb and flow, its continuity and change, the child in the book builds connections and grows.

*The Tree in Me* is touchingly compassionate and deeply poetic, but we can see an equally powerful expression of compassion in a much less abstract style in *Adrian Simcox Does NOT Have a Horse*, another collaboration with author Marcy Campbell. At its core, the story is about the generative spirit of "Yes, and," accepting and building rather than blocking. In the story, Chloe, the narrator, is sure that Adrian Simcox doesn't have a horse, even though he tells everyone at school that he does. Chloe even goes so far as to call out Adrian on the playground, in front of everyone: "He's lying! Adrian Simcox does NOT have a horse!" Although Chloe is correct, the story isn't about lying as an immoral act, nor is it about Adrian Simcox learning a lesson. Rather, the resolution of the story has to do with Chloe embracing the improv spirit, resisting the urge to "block" so that she can instead engage in the playful and spontaneous act of Adrian Simcox's horse story. In a moment of growth, Chloe lowers her status, to use Keith Johnstone's terminology, and accepts Adrian Simcox's offer of the story of the horse by asking him if the horse is at a farm. The moment is metaphorized by an act of play, "Adrian Simcox tossed a ball to me. I caught it. I tossed it back to him," and is illustrated with an image of Chloe extending a branch toward Adrian. "It was kind of cool to see Adrian Simcox smile," Chloe admits, generously choosing to accept and build, to "Yes, and" Adrian's story. Chloe even goes so far as to credit Adrian Simcox with having the best imagination of anyone at their school—and the most beautiful horse, too. The story's compassionate resolution is based on the generosity and compassion of Chloe's choice. The reader is not invited to judge Adrian Simcox's lie, just as we are invited to forgive Chloe of her initial attitude toward Adrian Simcox. Instead, we are meant to appreciate that, "Saying yes is an act of courage and optimism . . . Yes expands your world" (Madson 27). Accepting another's reality is an act of embodied mindfulness, bodily poeticizing. Building on someone else's perceptions, needs, and wants requires moving in new ways down unknown paths, and attuning oneself to the various patterns of creativity and imagination.

## 6. Conclusion

From the wisdom of the body, bodily poetics, to the general ethical dimensions of improv, the principle tenets of improv are at the core of Corinna Luyken's picturebooks. Expressive, playful, spontaneous, and full of movement, Luyken's picturebooks push against typical

picturebook trends and instead embrace embodied knowledge, musicality, and the collaborative spirit of improv. Luyken's picturebooks represent musicality and harmonizing in the literal and metaphorical sense, through movement and compatibility. In her work, mindfulness breeds spontaneity and, in a group, communality. Embodied mindfulness, to be more specific, offers practitioners an opportunity for holistic engagement, "presence with the whole self, whole self-inquiry, empathetic connection, and compassionate attention," say Loretta Pyles and Gwendolyn Adam (45). Although improv and children's picturebooks seem to have about as much in common as the two kids in Kate Hoefler and Corinna Luyken's picturebook *Nothing in Common*, the best picturebooks are embracing the spirit of improv, "looking on the same quiet rooftops, and under the same whale, and near the same planets." When the two come together, though, they find that they have a lot in common after all, "the same stars. And the same earth." Improvisation is a style and an attitude, a joyful, generous, creative space full of play, musicality, and movement. Through the musical rhythms and patterns of the body, language, and human interactions, the improvisational spirit of Luyken's books breeds compassion. Heald says, "In using one art form to describe another, we find what is distinctive about each art form and where they merge. Sometimes we discover something deeper" (228). The interdisciplinary approach has allowed us to look at Luyken's picturebooks from a performative angle, both in production and reception. By using improvisational theory to delve deeper into the creative processes of creating picturebooks, we placed emphasis on their interpretative and performative aspects that may affect reader responses, reading habits, the development of literacies and the explorations of languages and cultures.

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### MUZIKALNOST I POKRET U SLIKOVNICAMA CORINNE LUYKEN

Stvaralaštvo suvremene američke autorice i ilustratorice slikovnica Corinne Luyken možemo promatrati kroz pojam umjetničke improvizacije te njezinu zaigranost, spontanost, kreativno stvaralaštvo, stil i recepciju. Još je važnije istaknuti muzikalnost improvizacijskog etosa Corinne Luyken—glazbu i

ritmičnost jezika i pokreta u njezinim slikovnicama. Luyken ističe svoje plesno iskustvo kao važan pokretač utjelovljene i usredotočene svjesnosti koja je sastavni dio njezina opusa te posebno način na koji je ples promijenio njezin način poimanja pokreta, tjelesnosti i kreativnosti. U ovom radu analiziramo specifične primjere iz slikovnica *The Book of Mistakes* (*Knjiga pogrešaka*; 2017), *ABC and You and Me* (*Abeceda, ti i ja*; 2023), *Something Good* (*Nešto dobro*; 2021) *The Tree in Me* (*Stablo u meni*; 2021), *Adrian Simcox Does NOT Have a Horse* (*Adrian Simcox NEMA konja*; 2018) i *Nothing in Common* (*Ništa zajedničko*; 2020). Odabrani prizori iz ovih slikovnica odišu muzikalnošću i harmoniziranjem, u doslovnom i prenesenom smislu, kroz pokret i kompatibilnost. Koristeći se terminom teoretičara izvedbenih umjetnosti Lese Lockford i RONALDA J. PELIASA, smatramo „poetiku tijela“ Corinne Luyken strategijom pomoću koje se čitatelju daje prilika zastati i promotriti glazbene ritmove i obrasce tijela, jezika i ljudskih interakcija.

**Keywords:** pokret, muzikalnost, improvizacijski teatar, Corinna Luyken, slikovnice