Scribbles, Scrawls, and Scratches: Graphic Play as Subtext in the Picture Books of Ezra Jack Keats

One of the uniquely recognizable emblems of Ezra Jack Keats's picture books is the appearance of pictographiclike images that playfully punctuate many of Keats's books set in the urban environment. Images ranging from indistinct scribbles and scrawls, to impressionistic floral patterns and concentric circles, to representational figures, appear with calculable frequency on a variety of background panels: on alley fences, exterior apartment walls, discarded doors, garbage cans, sidewalks, etc.

To the casual observer, these images appear ornamental, coinciding with many of the "decorative" aspects of Keats's manipulated backgrounds. On the other hand, upon closer inspection, these images reveal a decidedly complex web of "intentionality"; that is, they encode meaning that further "narratizes"—rather than illustrates—the story. Thus, Keats's graphic marks or images become a type of conceptual play that adds an additional layer of symbolic meaning—in the form of a subtext—which reflexively comments upon the main narrative.

Before we turn to this phenomenon, however, a few words about Keats's illustrative style may be instructive. The guiding genius of Keats's style lies in his predilection for collage technique. From his first authored/illustrated—and award-winning—book, The Snowy Day, Keats demonstrates a delicate sensitivity toward compositional balance obtained by the juxtaposition of solid planes of "found" or constructed blocks of paper, newsprint, cloth, etc. Although Keats
Ezra Jack Keats, God Is in the Mountain, The Snowy Day, John Henry, Whistle for Willie, Jennie's Hat, Peter's Chair

Indicative of Keats's collage technique, however, are two other artistic features easily identified. On the one hand, Keats often manipulates many of his collage materials in the preapplication phase of his work, typically marbling or splattering fragments of torn or cut paper with paint. This technique, which early on became part of his insignia, is particularly evident in God Is in the Mountain, The Snowy Day, John Henry, Whistle for Willie, Jennie's Hat, and Peter's Chair.

On the other hand, the "flatness" of many of these early collaged works gives way to the subsequent development of a textural richness brought on by the more liberal—and impressionistic—use of paint. This approach is evident in A Letter to Amy, Goggles!, Hi, Cat!, Dreams, The Trip, Louie's Search, Regards to the Man in the Moon, where Keats's earlier portrait and still life painting background emerges to complement his evolving collage approach. It is particularly evident, however, in Pet Show!, Apt. 3, Louie, and Maggie and the Pirate, where Keats's collage technique is held to a minimum, if present at all.

An additional level of manipulation can be discerned, moreover, which is as much a part of Keats's artistic style as his wonderfully marbled or paint-splattered background panels. The third level of manipulation involves the superimposition of pictographiclike images on his already solid painting and/or collage foundation. It is precisely these images that Keats utilizes in his graphic play which adds an additional—and vitally important—textual quality to his main narrative.

The Secret Meaning of Childhood Games

One of the most obvious graphic images that Keats employs to supplement (and, in some cases, subvert) his narrative is the gridlike structures which underlie many childhood games, for example, hopscotch grids, tic-tac-toe squares, and toy train track lattices. Keats uses the graphic elements of these various childhood game or toy formats to comment playfully upon the often serious emotional tenor of his main characters' predicament. This self-reflexivity often creates an interesting dynamic between the comic and the serious.

For instance, in A Letter to Amy, Keats employs a hopscotch grid to subvert the text at the crucial point where Amy's letter is whisked out of Peter's hand by the wind. In the course of chasing the errant