

# Analysis of Storyline in Picture Books of Fantastic There and Back Again Stories

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## To cite this article:

Naoko Koda, Kanae Hara. Analysis of Storyline in Picture Books of Fantastic There and Back Again Stories. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 11, No. 3, 2023, pp. 110-118. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20231103.13

**Received:** April 28, 2023; **Accepted:** May 26, 2023; **Published:** June 6, 2023

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**Abstract:** Children acquire a variety of information from picture books and apply this information to reality. Fantastic narrative picture books contribute to child development of their imagination by providing various simulated experiences that they cannot experience in reality. The structure of there and back again stories is related to secure base. Child readers are expected to gain real and indirect fictional experiences, which promote psychosocially healthy development. This study quantitatively analyzed the storylines of 217 picture books of fantastic there and back again stories with human protagonists and explored the features of simulated experiences that children get from these. There were many cases in which the protagonists moved by themselves without help in a way impossible in the real world, implying children's preference for novel experiences. The simplified description of the return movement was consistent with the conditions for establishing a secure base. This would stimulate the readers' imagination after reading, in addition to the experience of exploration. In storylines with helpers, male protagonists are predominantly moved by the help of imaginary entities, which are consistent with previous studies showing that many male protagonists in picture books reflect the image of active and curious males. Moreover, there were many cases in which child protagonists were helped by imaginary entities associated with animism. Moving to another place with the help of imaginary entities overlaps with the zone of proximal development and is attractive for children. There were many cases in which the protagonists voluntarily moved to or were invited to visit paranormal places and were accepted there. This matches the self-centered nature of children. Cases in which the protagonists partake in adventure or fight in paranormal places are attractive to children and are expected to become materials for fantastic play activities. Storylines often lack clear features. Various narratives without templated contents are expected to encourage children to use their imagination to overcome various difficulties in life.

**Keywords:** Child Development, Fantasy, Imagination, Picture Books, There and Back Again

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## 1. Introduction

Fantastic stories are attractive and popular among children and provide effective learning opportunities by stimulating imaginative thinking [1]. Fictional stories provide children with experiences they cannot have in real life [2]. Children exposed to imaginative worlds are more likely to acquire the knowledge necessary to distinguish between fantasy and reality, acquire information from fiction, and apply it to reality [3]. Thus, effectively using fictional stories can facilitate children's thinking and learning. Therefore, children need not only realistic expressions and depictions but also fantasy

elements in media.

Children rapidly develop the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality around the age of 3 to 5 years [2, 4]. Children are sensitive to the distinction between fantasy and reality; they tend to not apply information that is unclear the truth [5]. They try to distinguish between fantasy and reality from an early age, and gradually, accurately judge things as different from reality and then face an imaginary world.

Picture books as media provide opportunities to enrich children's experiences [6]. Children use their imagination to combine experiences and impressions and recreate images to construct the inner world that surrounds them [7]. Imagination is the basis of creative activities that depends on the richness

and variety of personal experiences, and culture is the product of imagination [8]. Narrative picture books portray a diverse world and serve as a source for children's imagination. Bettelheim [9] argued that folktales could provide children's lives with a variety of fantasies and prevent daydreams caused by biased preconceptions, although some parents are concerned about children dealing less with reality because they are too immersed in the fantasy of folktales. Children pick up elements from folktales related to problems that unconsciously oppress them; they consider, rearrange, fantasize, and open new dimensions to their imagination. Children are not only fascinated by the fantasy and unreality of fiction but also extract elements related to their own anxiety and conflicts and get suggestions that lead to solutions while enjoying the story.

Uchida [7] described the externalization of children's imaginary worlds. Children's imaginary worlds are constructed and externalized as coherent worlds in response to the development of language and movements. Typical examples include pretend play and storytelling. With the development of language and cognition, children compose simple time-series stories around the age of two and create complex fantasy stories that incorporate dreams and recollections around the age of five. They externalize their imaginary worlds and actively engage in creative activities involving fantasies. Fantastic picture books are extremely important because they daily provide children with various simulated experiences.

Similar to *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien in 1937, there and back again stories in which the protagonist travels somewhere and then returns has a simple structure that young children prefer [10]. Saito [11] discussed this concept. In daily life, the protagonist is in place A, and from there, goes to place B, a new experiential realm. The protagonist gains new experiences in B and returns to their daily life. However, the place they return to is place A, not A', where they left from. Even if A and A' are geographically the same, A has transformed into A'. Place B need not be connected to the real A. In fantasy stories, B is often spatially separated from reality and the protagonist returns from an unrealistic, idiosyncratic world. Therefore, readers feel impressed by the movement in these stories.

In attachment theory, there and back again story's structure suggests a relationship with secure base [12]. Attachment figures for children are generally caregivers such as mothers. Attachment behaviors are released when a person is frightened, fatigued, or ill, and is relieved and calmed when comforted or cared for by the attachment figure. When children find themselves in a crisis during exploration, they return to attachment figures and experience the resupply of security and safety, which allows them to resume exploration. As children grow, their activity range expands, and the time that they are separated from their caregivers increases. They seek new attachment figures and adopt a sense of security. A secure base is deeply involved in maintaining psychological health throughout life. Humans can leave and return because of their secure bases. The experiences of going and returning to real

and simulated exploration in fiction are expected to promote healthy development in children.

## 2. Purpose of This Study

There and back again stories are believed to impact children's psychosocial development. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have quantitatively clarified the characteristics of fantasy expressions in many stories, although there are works and structural theories about representative picture books. This study quantitatively analyzes the storylines of fantastic there and back again stories and elucidates the features of indirect experiences that children get through picture books.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Survey Target and Period

This study defines fantastic there and back again stories as follows [13]: (1) a story in which protagonists go to and return from another realm that does not exist in the real world; (2) a story that takes place in an imaginary realm (even if another place exists in the real world); the way of reaching it, and the experiences the characters have there are paranormal, and the space is physically and psychologically isolated from the real world; and (3) a story that readers cannot reproduce in the real world. Moreover, this study defines "movement" as the protagonist going to another world and/or returning to the original world.

Data were collected from 2020 to 2021 using Japanese picture books on the open shelves of a city library in Tokyo, Japan. Picture books of fantastic there and back again stories for 2- to 7-year-olds in which humans were the protagonists were surveyed. This is because child readers may be more connected to human protagonists than to non-human protagonists, and it may be easier for them to apply the information obtained from picture books to the real world [14].

### 3.2. Recording

The data for each movement were recorded, as shown in Table 1. When establishing a classification was difficult, the two researchers consulted each other. The definitions of the characters involved in a protagonist's movement to a different world are as follows [13]: (1) Helper: directly assists the protagonist's movement. This involves not only physically moving the protagonist's body (e.g., a dragon takes the protagonist away to another world) but also arranging the situation or giving advice so that the protagonist can move (e.g., an old woman tells the protagonist how to get to another world) and verbally invites them to another world (e.g., a fox invites the protagonist to a mysterious shop); and (2) Accompanier: goes to another realm and returns to the original world with the protagonist (e.g., the protagonist's cat goes to the dream world and returns with the protagonist).

**Table 1.** Elements and their classifications about protagonist's movement.

| Element                         | Classification   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Helper                          | Animal/Human/Imaginary entity/None/Unclear, and specific description   |
| Protagonist's gender            | Male/Female/Unclear  |
| Protagonist's age group         | Child/Adult/Senior/Unclear   |
| Protagonist's intention to move | Voluntarily/Accepting after invitation/Forcibly taken away/Unknowingly/Unclear   |
| Outward destination             | Paranormal place/Animal world/Natural place/Existing place but cannot go/Imagination or dream/Human living area/Unclear  |
| Experience in another world     | Unrealistic experience/Playing or receiving hospitality/Adventure or fighting/Fear or difficulty/Helping others/Solving challenges/Finding/ Learning from experience/Unclear |
| Change after returning          | Acquisition of object or ability/Harmony or peace/Change of feeling/Not depicted/No change/Object changed/Something disappeared/Others (multiple choice)                     |
| Accompanier                     | Animal/Human/Others, and each specific description   |
| Boundary with reality           | Free description   |

## 4. Results

Among the 5,392 picture books checked, 4,009 were narrative picture books containing 272 there and back again stories. Of these, 217 picture books with human protagonists were selected as the subjects of this study. We analyzed the helpers and protagonist experiences along the storylines. Moreover, we investigated accompaniers during the protagonist's movements and boundaries between reality and another world.

### 4.1. Helper for Movement

Table 2 shows the number of cases in which characters helped the protagonist move outward and return. The most frequent cases were without helpers on outward and return movements (e.g., the protagonist fell asleep and moved while dreaming or escaped from the world under the river and returned by themselves). Among the cases with helpers, the most common was an imaginary entity that helped outward and return movements (e.g., the protagonist followed a demon child, or a dwarf told the protagonist to return home, and the protagonist noticed themselves in familiar wood).

Various imaginary entities helped the protagonists in the outward movement. The most frequent were 6 cases with bed assistance (e.g., after the protagonist recited an incantation written on a mysterious bed and fell asleep, the protagonist went to a fairy world). Familiar objects such as beds and stuffed toys (1) with fantasy and paranormal entities, such as demons (3) and dwarves (3), helped the protagonists move. Various animals helped the protagonists move outward; the most common were cats in 7 cases (e.g., a cat invited the protagonist to go through a clay pipe to reach the animal world), followed by foxes (5) and mice (3). Additionally, various humans helped the protagonists with outward movement; the most common were old men in 6 cases (e.g., an old man taught the protagonist how to get to the demon's dwelling and defeat it), followed by old women (3), and mothers (3).

The return was simpler than outward movement, that is, the protagonist arrived at the original place instantly (e.g., when

the protagonist was scared and closed the eyes in the haunted world, the protagonist returned to the original world). In many cases, the identity of the helpers were unclear because the return was described vaguely.

**Table 2.** Helpers for the protagonist's outward and return movements (number of cases, %).

|                      | Outward |      | Return |      |
|----------------------|---------|------|--------|------|
|                      | Case    | %    | Case   | %    |
| None                 | 89      | 36.6 | 102    | 42.0 |
| Imaginary entity     | 66      | 27.2 | 43     | 17.7 |
| Animal               | 45      | 18.5 | 32     | 13.2 |
| Human                | 31      | 12.8 | 20     | 8.2  |
| Others <sup>1)</sup> | 1       | 0.4  | 3      | 1.2  |
| Unclear              | 11      | 4.5  | 43     | 17.7 |
| Total                | 243     | 100  | 243    | 100  |

<sup>1)</sup> Simultaneous involvement of different classes of helpers, such as animal and imaginary entity

### 4.2. Outward Helper

Since the depiction of the return movement was simplified, stories focused on the experiences that the protagonists gained from outward movement and their destinations. We examined the relationships between outward helpers, gender, age, and the protagonist's intentions, as shown in Table 3. Based on a previous study [15], items that occurred in more than 10% of all cases were selected. Regarding the protagonist's gender, men were most likely to move without assistance, followed by cases where men were helped by imaginary entities, cases where women moved without helpers, and cases where men were helped by humans. Regarding helpers and the protagonist's age, in most cases children moved without helpers. Next, there were cases in which children were helped by imaginary entities. There were cases in which children were helped by animals, and adults moved without help. In relation to the helpers and protagonist's intention to move, the most common cases were when the protagonists voluntarily moved without helpers (e.g., using a toy ladder truck to go to the attic world). The number of cases involving helpers was dispersed and none exceeded 10%.

**Table 3.** Relationships between outward helper and gender/age/movement intention of protagonist (number of cases, % in parentheses).

|                            | None         | Imaginary entity | Animal       | Human        | Others     | Unclear    | Total         |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|--------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| Male                       | 61<br>(25.1) | 42<br>(17.3)     | 23<br>(9.5)  | 25<br>(10.3) | 0<br>(0.0) | 9<br>(3.7) | 160<br>(65.8) |
| Female                     | 27<br>(11.1) | 19<br>(7.8)      | 19<br>(7.8)  | 5<br>(2.1)   | 1<br>(0.4) | 2<br>(0.8) | 73<br>(30.0)  |
| Male and female            | 1<br>(0.4)   | 4<br>(1.7)       | 3<br>(1.2)   | 1<br>(0.4)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 0<br>(0.0) | 9<br>(3.7)    |
| Unclear                    | 0<br>(0.0)   | 1<br>(0.4)       | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4)    |
| Child                      | 63<br>(25.9) | 51<br>(21.0)     | 31<br>(12.8) | 18<br>(7.4)  | 1<br>(0.4) | 6<br>(2.5) | 170<br>(70.0) |
| Adult                      | 26<br>(10.7) | 12<br>(4.9)      | 11<br>(4.5)  | 13<br>(5.4)  | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4) | 63<br>(25.9)  |
| Senior                     | 0<br>(0.0)   | 2<br>(0.8)       | 3<br>(1.2)   | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 3<br>(1.2) | 8<br>(3.3)    |
| Child and adult            | 0<br>(0.0)   | 1<br>(0.4)       | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4)    |
| Unclear                    | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0)       | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4) | 1<br>(0.4)    |
| Voluntarily                | 55<br>(22.6) | 19<br>(7.8)      | 10<br>(4.1)  | 11<br>(4.5)  | 1<br>(0.4) | 6<br>(2.5) | 102<br>(42.0) |
| Accepting after invitation | 0<br>(0.0)   | 24<br>(9.9)      | 20<br>(8.2)  | 11<br>(4.5)  | 0<br>(0.0) | 0<br>(0.0) | 55<br>(22.6)  |
| Forcibly taken away        | 15<br>(6.2)  | 22<br>(9.1)      | 11<br>(4.5)  | 9<br>(3.7)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4) | 58<br>(23.9)  |
| Unknowingly                | 19<br>(7.8)  | 1<br>(0.4)       | 4<br>(1.7)   | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 0<br>(0.0) | 24<br>(9.9)   |
| Unclear                    | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0)       | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0)   | 0<br>(0.0) | 4<br>(1.7) | 4<br>(1.7)    |

### 4.3. Storyline

#### 4.3.1. Protagonist's Intention to Move and Outward Destinations

Table 4 shows the relationships between the protagonist's intentions to move and their destinations for outward movement. The most frequent cases were when the protagonists voluntarily went to paranormal places (e.g.,

jumping out of the window of the house and exploring the starry sky). Paranormal places, such as the land of sweetness and the world of ghosts, are highly imaginative and impossible to visit in reality. In addition, there were cases in which the protagonists were invited and accepted to move to paranormal places (e.g., a turtle invited the protagonist and took him to the castle where the Dragon King lives at the bottom of the sea).

**Table 4.** Relationships between protagonist's intention and destination on outward movement (number of cases, % in parentheses).

|                              | Voluntarily   | Accepting after invitation | Forcibly taken away | Unknowingly | Unclear    | Total          |
|------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|---------------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| Paranormal place             | 53<br>(21.8)  | 28<br>(11.5)               | 20<br>(8.2)         | 16<br>(6.6) | 2<br>(0.8) | 119<br>(49.0)  |
| Animal world                 | 18<br>(7.4)   | 7<br>(2.9)                 | 7<br>(2.9)          | 4<br>(1.7)  | 0<br>(0.0) | 36<br>(14.8)   |
| Natural place                | 14<br>(5.8)   | 6<br>(2.5)                 | 10<br>(4.1)         | 3<br>(1.2)  | 0<br>(0.0) | 33<br>(13.6)   |
| Existing place but cannot go | 5<br>(2.1)    | 10<br>(4.1)                | 7<br>(2.9)          | 0<br>(0.0)  | 1<br>(0.4) | 23<br>(9.5)    |
| Imagination or dream         | 7<br>(2.9)    | 0<br>(0.0)                 | 9<br>(3.7)          | 1<br>(0.4)  | 0<br>(0.0) | 17<br>(7.0)    |
| Human living area            | 5<br>(2.1)    | 4<br>(1.7)                 | 4<br>(1.7)          | 0<br>(0.0)  | 1<br>(0.4) | 14<br>(5.8)    |
| Unclear                      | 0<br>(0.0)    | 0<br>(0.0)                 | 1<br>(0.4)          | 0<br>(0.0)  | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4)     |
| Total                        | 102<br>(42.0) | 55<br>(22.6)               | 58<br>(23.9)        | 24<br>(9.9) | 4<br>(1.7) | 243<br>(100.0) |

#### 4.3.2. Another World and Experience

Table 5 presents the relationships between the protagonist's outward destinations and their experiences. The protagonist's experiences varied from unrealistic, positive, or negative

interactions to learning. The most common cases were protagonists who experienced adventure or fighting in paranormal places (e.g., going to the troll's dwelling, defeating the troll, and saving the princess). There were various combinations of destinations and experiences, and no

other item exceeded 10% of all cases.

**Table 5.** Relationships between another world and protagonist's experience (number of cases, % in parentheses).

|                              | Unrealistic experience | Playing or receiving hospitality | Adventure or fighting | Fear or difficulty | Helping others | Solving challenges | Finding     | Learning from experience | Unclear    | Total          |
|------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Paranormal place             | 23<br>(9.5)            | 19<br>(7.8)                      | 31<br>(12.8)          | 14<br>(5.8)        | 6<br>(2.5)     | 12<br>(4.9)        | 10<br>(4.1) | 3<br>(1.2)               | 1<br>(0.4) | 119<br>(48.0)  |
| Animal world                 | 8<br>(3.3)             | 9<br>(3.7)                       | 2<br>(0.8)            | 5<br>(2.1)         | 4<br>(1.7)     | 6<br>(2.5)         | 1<br>(0.4)  | 1<br>(0.4)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 36<br>(14.8)   |
| Natural place                | 4<br>(1.7)             | 16<br>(6.6)                      | 7<br>(2.9)            | 0<br>(0.0)         | 4<br>(1.7)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 2<br>(0.8)  | 0<br>(0.0)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 33<br>(13.6)   |
| Existing place but cannot go | 13<br>(5.4)            | 4<br>(1.7)                       | 0<br>(0.0)            | 0<br>(0.0)         | 4<br>(1.7)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 0<br>(0.0)  | 2<br>(0.8)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 23<br>(9.5)    |
| Imagination or dream         | 9<br>(3.7)             | 3<br>(1.2)                       | 3<br>(1.2)            | 1<br>(0.4)         | 0<br>(0.0)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 0<br>(0.0)  | 1<br>(0.4)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 17<br>(7.0)    |
| Human living area            | 4<br>(1.7)             | 4<br>(1.7)                       | 2<br>(0.8)            | 1<br>(0.4)         | 1<br>(0.4)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 1<br>(0.4)  | 1<br>(0.4)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 14<br>(5.8)    |
| Unclear                      | 0<br>(0.0)             | 0<br>(0.0)                       | 1<br>(0.4)            | 0<br>(0.0)         | 0<br>(0.0)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 0<br>(0.0)  | 0<br>(0.0)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 1<br>(0.4)     |
| Total                        | 61<br>(25.1)           | 55<br>(22.6)                     | 46<br>(18.9)          | 21<br>(8.6)        | 19<br>(7.8)    | 18<br>(7.4)        | 14<br>(5.8) | 8<br>(3.3)               | 1<br>(0.4) | 243<br>(100.0) |

#### 4.3.3. Experience in Another World and Change After Returning

Table 6 shows the relationships between the protagonist's experiences in another world and the changes after their return. Various changes were confirmed; the protagonist obtained something such as an ability or object (e.g., while playing

hide-and-seek with animals, the protagonist noticed to have returned to the original world, but the cloth was attached to a brooch given by the animals there), growth of the protagonist, well-being, mysterious phenomena, etc. As the numerical values were dispersed regarding experiences and changes, none of the items exceeded 10% in all cases.

**Table 6.** Relationships between protagonist's experience in another world and change after returning (number of cases, % in parentheses).

|                                  | Unrealistic experience | Playing or receiving hospitality | Adventure or fighting | Fear or difficulty | Helping others | Solving challenges | Finding     | Learning from experience | Unclear    | Total          |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Acquisition of object or ability | 14<br>(5.1)            | 20<br>(7.3)                      | 14<br>(5.1)           | 8<br>(2.9)         | 1<br>(0.4)     | 6<br>(2.2)         | 4<br>(1.5)  | 12<br>(4.4)              | 0<br>(0.0) | 79<br>(28.6)   |
| Harmony or peace                 | 7<br>(2.5)             | 3<br>(1.1)                       | 19<br>(6.9)           | 5<br>(1.8)         | 0<br>(0.0)     | 5<br>(1.8)         | 12<br>(4.4) | 7<br>(2.5)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 58<br>(21.0)   |
| Change of feeling                | 9<br>(3.3)             | 10<br>(3.6)                      | 2<br>(0.7)            | 0<br>(0.0)         | 6<br>(2.2)     | 3<br>(1.1)         | 3<br>(1.1)  | 1<br>(0.4)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 34<br>(12.3)   |
| Not depicted                     | 8<br>(2.9)             | 9<br>(3.3)                       | 6<br>(2.2)            | 2<br>(0.7)         | 1<br>(0.4)     | 3<br>(1.1)         | 0<br>(0.0)  | 2<br>(0.7)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 31<br>(11.2)   |
| No change                        | 13<br>(4.7)            | 3<br>(1.1)                       | 7<br>(2.5)            | 1<br>(0.4)         | 0<br>(0.0)     | 2<br>(0.7)         | 1<br>(0.4)  | 0<br>(0.0)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 27<br>(9.8)    |
| Object changed                   | 6<br>(2.2)             | 9<br>(3.3)                       | 2<br>(0.7)            | 1<br>(0.4)         | 0<br>(0.0)     | 1<br>(0.4)         | 0<br>(0.0)  | 2<br>(0.7)               | 1<br>(0.4) | 22<br>(8.0)    |
| Something disappeared            | 7<br>(2.5)             | 7<br>(2.5)                       | 4<br>(1.5)            | 1<br>(0.4)         | 0<br>(0.0)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 2<br>(0.7)  | 0<br>(0.0)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 21<br>(7.6)    |
| Others                           | 0<br>(0.0)             | 1<br>(0.4)                       | 2<br>(0.7)            | 0<br>(0.0)         | 1<br>(0.4)     | 0<br>(0.0)         | 0<br>(0.0)  | 0<br>(0.0)               | 0<br>(0.0) | 4<br>(1.4)     |
| Total                            | 64<br>(23.2)           | 62<br>(22.5)                     | 56<br>(20.3)          | 18<br>(6.5)        | 9<br>(3.3)     | 20<br>(7.3)        | 22<br>(8.0) | 24<br>(8.7)              | 1<br>(0.4) | 276<br>(100.0) |

#### 4.4. Supplementation About Movement

The protagonists accompanied someone in 47 of the 243 cases. Humans followed them in 23 cases, including siblings (7), friends (7), and caregivers (6). Animals followed them in 23 cases, including cats (10) and dogs (5). Imaginary entities followed them in 7 cases, 5 of which were stuffed toys that behaved according to their will.

The boundaries between the real world and other worlds were categorized when the protagonists moved. As many as 89 cases were related to topography (mountains, valleys, forests, roads, etc.). Other cases included artifacts (27), doors or windows (23), sleep or dreams (23), sky (20), holes/caves/tunnels (13), trees or bushes (10), weather such as rain and clouds (7), imagination (5), animals (2), others (2), and none or unknown (33).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *Helper for Movement*

Child readers expand their range of daily activities by repeated exploration, and the outside world appears fascinating. Children live with the need and ability to grow bigger than they are now and leap to greater heights, which leads to the pursuit of knowledge, adventure, and imagination [16]. In the fantastic there and back again stories, protagonists often went to another world and returned without special help. The authors suggest that the protagonist stepping into the new world without the need for help, project the characteristics of children who are strongly oriented toward new experiences. In addition, according to Bettelheim [9], when the protagonists of folktales go to the wider world, they first proceed alone but gradually encounter and receive help from primitive things such as trees, animals, and nature. Readers can gain a perspective that humans who are isolated at first will eventually have meaningful and fruitful connections and gain confidence and peace of mind that will help them deal with situations when they are in the wide world. The depictions of protagonists going to another world and accumulating experiences with or without assistance gives children a sense of security and encourages them to step into the external world.

### 5.2. *Description of Return Movement*

When comparing outward and return movements, there were many cases where helpers were unknown or absent, and the depictions of return movements were simple. This can be explained by the secure base of the attachment theory. This secure base allows children to explore the outside world and return with confidence that they will be welcomed into the secure base of caregivers [12]. A prerequisite for establishing a secure base is the conviction that the child's caregiver will respond positively when the child shows attachment behavior. Owing to this conviction, the process of safe returns from exploratory activities is natural and has received little attention. The results of this study show that there and back again stories provide children with simulated exploratory experiences with the overlapping nature of a secure base.

Simplification of the return movement is also found in the story of Hansel and Gretel. After defeating the witch, they easily returned home, even though they wandered outward into the forest. Saito [11] stated that the growth of the two children was one reason for the simplified return movement. Bettelheim [9] described children crossing a river on the return movement but not when entering the forest on the outward movement. This symbolizes the children going up to a higher level as humans than when the story started. The weight of these stories is biased toward the protagonist going to another world and gaining new experiences. It is likely that the simplified return movement is natural, and the structure of the story is easy for children who gain new experiences daily. In particular, the laws of the real world do not apply to the imaginary world. The mechanism through which protagonists

enter and exit a fantasy world is unrealistic. Anything can occur in such situations. The absence of an explanation about the mechanism of another world stimulates readers' imagination and provides opportunities to expand their rich imaginary world, even after reading the book.

### 5.3. *Outward Helper*

Relationships with concrete helpers are discussed in this section. In addition, discussions on animal helpers are omitted in this study because they have already been conducted [13]. Regarding the gender of the protagonists, there were many cases in which men were helped by imaginary entities or by humans to move. Similar to previous studies [17, 18], there were many male protagonists in the present study. The authors are likely to have adopted men as protagonists because they have a high affinity for imaginary entities as helpers who lead them to another world due to the gender stereotype of men being highly active and curious [19]. Readers would enjoy the stories by projecting themselves onto the protagonists without excessive fear of the outside world because of the efficient expression of interest and curiosity that the protagonist feels toward another world.

Regarding the protagonist's age, the children moved often owing to imaginary entities. In previous studies [17, 18], many of the protagonists in picture books were children; this study strengthens the tendency. In addition, there were many imaginary helpers. Imaginary entities include not only supernatural beings that do not exist, such as demons and ghosts, but also familiar objects, such as beds and stuffed toys that move spontaneously or speak to help children. Imaginary moving depictions of familiar objects can be referred to as animism, which believes that objects have life and consciousness. Children between 4–6 years of age think that objects have feelings, but this belief gradually disappears around the age of 12 [20]. They think about who they are on an animistic basis. The boundary between objects and creatures is ambiguous for children, and it is natural for them to feel that objects and animals converse with them; children expect objects and animals to tell them important things [9]. Children with animistic ways of thinking might feel congruity and follow the story and fantasize about familiar things, even if they can judge that the object in picture books lead the protagonist to another world is unrealistic. Children's fantasies include supernatural things and the world that spreads out from familiar objects and animals. They can obtain materials from stories to create diverse imaginary worlds.

This can also be explained by the proximal development zone [21]. It is the level at which a child can perform activities independently and with adult assistance and is created primarily in play. As children grow, they expand their range of physical and social activities. In this process, they develop an interest and curiosity about the outside world, but there are many things that they cannot achieve on their own. Stories in which protagonists reach places they cannot go on their own with the help of imaginary entities, in other words, stories in which protagonists become able to do so, might be appealing.

Children who are stimulated by stories may be motivated to actively tackle unreachable goals or develop their own imaginary worlds.

#### **5.4. Storyline**

In terms of the protagonist's intentions and destinations for outward movements, they tended to move to paranormal places either by themselves or after being invited and providing consent. The other worlds as destinations were expressed as tolerant and open worlds for the protagonists. Exposure to such stories is thought to alleviate excessive fear of the outside world among children as they expand their range of activities in real life. Since children are self-centered and have animistic ways of thinking [9], they believe that the objects and animals they are interested in will respond to them if spoken to and therefore feel that the protagonists are accepted in paranormal places. These storylines match the characteristics of the children.

Regarding the relationships between the destinations and protagonist's experiences, protagonists often adventured or fought in paranormal places. Smith [22] stated that children want picture books of adventure stories that they can experience with the protagonists through reading. Adventure stories provide children with unknown experiences and a sense of exhilaration about life and broaden their interests and perspectives by making them want to experience the same experiences as the protagonists. If the stage of an adventure story is set in a supernatural place, it becomes extremely attractive to children.

Children cannot engage in adventure in paranormal places, but in addition to reading picture books, they have simulated daily experiences of pretend play with peers. Pretend play is an activity in which children act with peers to match their roles and needs in order to achieve a result. Children experience social interactions and develop social functioning during pretend play [23]. Furthermore, in accordance with the development of symbolic functions, the content of pretend plays has gradually changed from simple storylines based on daily experiences to complex and lengthy narratives using extraordinary information obtained through picture books and hearsay [24]. Pretend plays are influenced by the media in culture and incorporate impressive characters and themes [23]. Picture books not only reflect imaginative pretend play that children perform in their daily lives but also serve as materials for children's imaginative activities.

#### **5.5. Narrative Diversity**

This study aimed to grasp the tendencies of helper's involvement and storylines; however, many survey items showed varying frequencies of occurrence, representing ambiguous trends. The there and back again story in a picture book is established as a story format in which characters go and return, but the elements that influence the flow of a story have not been patterned. There is no template for there and back again stories to make children feel that they are attractive and promote reading. Furthermore, readers can link the stories

to various experiences and thoughts. For example, folktales have values in terms of influencing readers' inner processes and helping them find their own ways to solve problems rather than providing useful knowledge about the external world [9]. Readers extract relevant elements from stories and use them to address real-world problems. Readers can overcome various difficulties by reading diverse stories and accumulating simulated experiences.

In these stories, the protagonists always return safely, regardless of how the story develops. This guarantee gives the children a sense of security. A similar function is played by the opening and closing phrases of picture books. The story begins with "Once upon a time..." and ends with "... lived happily ever after." This story format with fixed phrases has the effect of separating the imaginary world from the real world, like a picture frame [24]. In this process, children capture the imaginativeness of the story and draw out their worries from the subconsciousness without fear because happiness is guaranteed in the end [9]. In these stories, children enjoy reading by projecting themselves onto the protagonists with peace of mind because of the guarantee that the protagonists will return.

#### **5.6. Supplementation About Movement**

##### **5.6.1. Accompanier**

More siblings and friends accompanied the protagonist's movement than caregivers. The there and back again stories portray exploratory activities in which children leave their caregivers and return; thus, siblings or friends of the same generation as the protagonists are suitable as accompaniers. There are many folktales about siblings cooperating to save each other. Children should gradually learn to cooperate with peers to complete tasks without dependence on parents. Folktales convince children that they can overcome the dangers that their parents told them about and dangers which they fear [9]. Indeed, young children's interactions with peers influence their socialization [25]. Children behave with their peers in an organizational framework with rules, reflect on themselves in relation to others, and acquire the ability to understand others' perspectives [26]. Peer interactions are essential for developing the concepts of mutual respect, equality, and reciprocity [27]. Children acquire social skills and engage in cooperative activities, such as group play, by building relationships with peers within a social framework. In addition, children acquire responses and release behaviors through observational learning or modeling, even without actual experience [28, 29]. Children will be able to gain simulated experiences regarding socialization in the real world by seeing protagonists in picture books sharing a common understanding with their siblings and friends and acting together in another world.

Among the imaginary entities that followed the protagonists, stuffed toys moved according to their will. Stuffed toys are familiar to many children and can serve as transitional objects [30]. Transitional objects are specific inorganic objects that infants carry as symbols of their caregivers to relieve stress caused by separation anxiety. They

are often warm and soft objects, such as towels and stuffed toys, and are important for the healthy mental development of infants. Even in fantastic there and back again stories, it is natural that stuffed toys play the role of protecting protagonists from the stress of being separated from their daily life and following them to the other world. The authors reflected on the psychological characteristics of child readers of picture books. In fantastic there and back again stories, the stuffed toys began to move and sometimes spoke. Therefore, they do not completely match the characteristics of general transitional objects. In this case, stuffed toys are imaginary companions [31, 32]. Many young children have imaginary companions [33]. Children with imaginary companions have more friends, are less shy, are more imaginative, have a better understanding of the theory of mind, and have better language skills in real life [32]. Imaginary companions are important friends who share daily lives with children for a certain period and support their development. The companions in there and back again stories also share experiences with the protagonists and support them. Picture books depict the relationships between stuffed toys and protagonists, and it is easier for child readers to accept the simulated experiences because they are similar to their own lives and thoughts.

#### 5.6.2. Boundary with Reality

When the protagonists move to another world, there are many geographical boundaries, such as mountains, valleys, forests, and roads. These landforms are also used in fairy tales and folklores as boundaries between the ordinary world and other worlds. Hansel and Gretel were abandoned by their parents and wandered through the forest all night until they reached the witch's house. Saito [11] discussed that since the children did not come across any signs of terrifying beasts that the woodcutter worried about or other creatures, the ordinary forest transformed into a forest where witches lived, and the mysterious elements of the forest invited the protagonists to its depths. People feel awed by natural landforms, such as forests and valleys and may also consider them sacred. For example, mountains that form the natural features of Japan have supported livelihoods such as agriculture, hunting, and fishing, and have been revered as objects of nature worship since ancient times [34]. At the same time, mountains were regarded as a different world that separated from the living sphere of humans. Yanagida [35] examined folktales about ascetics, hermits, and spirits with primitive lives in the mountains and showed that the Japanese have long felt strangeness beyond human comprehension of the deep mountains.

Saito [11] insisted on the possibility that passages and entrances that connect this world and another world in the stories were not created by authors, rather, they were a part that was miraculously left connected when the original world was separated. People's awareness of natural landforms retain the mystery of nature, which has fascinated them for many years and may have assigned functions as passages and entrances in modern stories.

Furthermore, boundaries that separate real and fantasy worlds can work as gates that connect the two worlds and as

mediators that generate a fantasy world. Children who enjoy imaginative play in picture books, for example, use fallen trees to play expeditions; after setting real objects as the basis of their imagination they develop a free imaginary world [36]. Humans do not create imaginations and fantasies from nothing but construct them by combining elements that have been experienced in reality [8]. The boundaries that seem to separate the real world from the imaginary world can be regarded as the origin of the imaginary world for characters in the stories. While reading a story, children may encounter parts that overlap with their experiences and thinking patterns, find answers to their questions, and stimulate their imagination.

## 6. Conclusion

In picture books of fantastic there and back again stories, many descriptions are linked to the activities of children during the developmental process. In many cases, the protagonists moved to the different world by themselves without help, implying children's preference for novel experiences. The simplified description of the return movement was consistent with the conditions for establishing a secure base. In storylines with helpers, the boys were predominantly moved by the help of imaginary entities, which are associated with the image of active and curious males and animism of child perception. Assistance by imaginary entities overlaps with the zone of proximal development. The protagonists voluntarily moved to or were invited to visit paranormal places and were accepted there, reflecting the self-centered nature of children. Cases in which the protagonists engage in adventure or fight in paranormal places would be attractive to children. These features of fantastic there and back again picture books are expected to support children's understanding of stories and encourage them to expand their imagination. Various narratives without templated contents could encourage children to use their imagination to overcome various difficulties in life.

## Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Mayekawa Foundation.

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