In his insightful article, “Chaperoning Words: Meaning-Making in Comics and Picture Books,” Joseph Sutliff Sanders enters recent critical conversations about the relationships between picture books and comics by situating these two literary forms in the different spaces in which they are read. Both comics and picture books are texts that combine words and images but, he argues, the meaning-making of these different forms is mediated very differently because picture books, as a form, “anticipate that they will be read by at least two human beings simultaneously, one of them speaking the words and looking at the images, the other listening to the words and looking at the images” (61–62). The literate adult, in this scenario, is able to chaperone the text, restricting the meaning of the images by omitting, changing, adding, and interpretively performing the words on the page for the listening child. Comics, on the other hand, “anticipate a child who reads without adult supervision” (72) and, indeed, comics “are hard to read out loud because they are designed for a solitary reader who will do the work of combining words and pictures” (74). These differences are not merely formal, he argues, and signal greater ideological differences between these forms: one that is beloved and the other shunned; one that is legitimate while the other is suspect; one that invites adult control while the other potentially usurps it.

Within this context, what readerly space, then, do books for early readers inhabit, and what sort of reader-text relationship do they anticipate? Do they fall into a space in between being adult- or child-chaperoned? Like comics and picture books, they are also texts that combine words and images, and, similarly, they are also texts that borrow from these and other literary and artistic forms in ways that blur lines among genres, forms, and categories of texts. Unlike picture books, though, Early Readers are meant to be read by a solitary child. Unlike comics, Early Readers are (for the most part) sanctioned as texts that aid younger readers in developing literacy. If, then, these texts are both and neither, can we perhaps more fully understand them and their roles as both aesthetic objects and cultural artifacts by carefully reading the spaces they inhabit, depict, and create?

To explore these questions, the books in the Babymouse series are ideal because they borrow from various genres and forms. At the time of this
writing, there are 18 books in the popular Babymouse series published over the past nine years by sister-and-brother, writer-and-illustrator team Jennifer and Matthew Holm. Each book in the series uses both comic panels and speech bubbles as well as full-page illustrations with captions and other illustrative techniques. Each book is compact in size, is ninety-six pages long, and is printed (with the exception of an orange Halloween issue and a green-and-red Christmas issue) in black, white, and pink. As is the case with comics and picture books (though not all Early Readers), illustrations in the books in this series are not secondary to the written text. Words, images, typeface, layout, page turns, and gutters all must be read and interpreted in tandem in order to actively make meaning from the text. The books feature the adorable, clumsy, cupcake-loving character, Babymouse, who lives the humdrum, black-and-white life of a typical third grader (if “typical” is American, white, middle class, suburban), except in the imaginative spaces—often depicted in full- or double-page illustrations—where she dreams and daydreams in vivid pink of being, among other things, Queen of the World, the Little Mermaid, a park ranger, an astronaut, a rock star, a surfer, and, of course, a fairy tale princess.

I was originally motivated to write about this series because I was struck by how limited and limiting Babymouse’s world felt to me. The overt message of each book seems to be that Babymouse is blessed with an active imagination, which is an awesome quality for a girl to have because she will need to learn creative ways to compensate for the ways in which her life is bound to be limited by her status as child and, perhaps permanently, by her status as female. These limits, and the power fantasies that accompany them, could be seen as a result of Babymouse’s position as child in a world controlled by adults. In his book, The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature, Perry Nodelman argues that child characters are often depicted as being frustrated by the lack of control and freedom in their lives, a limitation frequently represented fictionally by the space of the home and the home-away-home-again narrative structure so many books for children follow. He writes,

Home is equivalent to what the texts are themselves: a controlled and limited space provided for a child by a more knowing and more capable adult in order to protect the child from the less limited but more dangerous world outside—the world away from home, the world represented in literature for adults. As a result, the texts tend to focus frequently on justifying the need for home and the desirability of staying there. Their central thrust is, in a very real sense, a justification of their own existence—a celebration of safely limited places for children. (63)

Read through this lens, the ideological functions of the books in the Babymouse series may be reflected in their form. The book—as narrative, aesthetic object, and as cultural artifact—conveys those messages to the implied
child reader that adults want her to internalize. The form and content of the text work together to frame and contain the imagined child reader’s desires so that they conform to the rules that adults hope they will accept and follow in the private and public spaces they are allowed to inhabit, and that they will exercise the bodily and mental restraint required of them in these spaces.

These adult-imposed restrictions on space are especially poignant in the contemporary urban and suburban landscapes of industrialized western nations, where the actual spaces children are allowed to occupy have been diminishing over the past few decades. In her chapter for this collection, Helen Bittel cites Sandra Hofferth who:

documents a 31% decline in “time spent in outdoor activities” by American children between 1997 and 2003 (38) and suggests this may be “linked to safety and security concerns” (46). Similarly, Rhonda Clements notes that only 31% of mothers surveyed reported that their children played outdoors daily, even though 70% had done so as children (72) and most were aware of the benefits of such play (75).

Henry Jenkins argues that because they have fewer play spaces and less room in which to move, many contemporary children have had to create virtual, imaginative, metaphorical spaces for themselves inside of video and computer game spaces that provide an illusion of movement, sweeping virtual landscapes, and a hyperreality that may be more exciting than their limited lives. And, like many of the physical, mediated, commercial, or even public spaces available to contemporary children, the amount and the quality of the space grows or is limited by a child and family’s purchasing power, location, socioeconomic class, cultural differences, and gender (264).

In “The Importance of Play,” David Whitebread reports that a child’s gender often determines the play spaces children are encouraged to occupy:

In cultures in which there is rigid separation between adult male and female roles boys and girls are prepared for these roles through the toys and games provided, with boys play often being more competitive, physical, and dangerous and girls play being more focused on their future domestic role, involving play with household objects, such as pots and pans, tea-sets, and dolls. (11)

These differences in types of play also, generally, give boys greater access to physical spaces than girls. Jenkins writes that, “If cultural geographers are right when they argue that children’s ability to explore and modify their environments plays a large role in their growing sense of mastery, freedom, and self confidence, then the restrictions placed on girls’ play have a crippling effect” (268). Within these sociocultural contexts, then, it makes sense
that girl readers might be drawn to a text, like Babymouse, depicting a female character who longs for more freedom of movement, but must learn to make do.

Fictional children generally have had more freedom of movement than child readers, but also have historically been depicted in gendered spaces that afford greater freedom of movement to boy characters and that often relegate girl characters to domestic spaces. This trend continues in contemporary Early Readers, books geared toward children just learning to read independently at the same time as they are—increasingly and within social and institutional settings like schools, playgrounds, and organized sports—being socialized into gendered roles. A number of books for early readers feature lively girl characters like Junie B. Jones, Ivy and Bean, and Franny K. Stein, who have been praised for being intelligent, outspoken, and independent. However, these girls (or mice) reside in far more limited fictional spaces than their male counterparts (Harold and George, Danny Dragon-breath, Sparrowboy, or Elmer Elevator), who go out into the wider world to fight crime, chase dragons, or to be a pirate. Babymouse, a character who has been lauded by various critics as “smart” (Karp) and “resolute” (Spisak), is especially intriguing in terms of these depictions of gendered spaces because each episodic book in the series is about the ways she uses her active imagination to compensate for her limited everyday life by living mostly in a fantasy world influenced by comics, movies, and adventure stories. The illustrations of her fantasy life take up more physical space on the page, use more color, and are drawn in a more lively and playful style than the scenes depicting her home and school life. For example, a two-page spread in Babymouse: Queen of the World features one black-and-white page cluttered with thickly-drawn panels illustrating Babymouse having to take out the trash, being annoyed by her little brother, and being dwarfed and penned in by a pile of “boring homework to do” (14). With each panel, the space Babymouse occupies gets smaller and more crowded, until there’s only room for her head and torso. In contrast, the right side of this two-page spread is a full-page pink thought bubble depicting Babymouse imagining herself as “Queen of the World!” (15). Here, she wears a tiara, is holding an ice cream cone, and, most significantly, she is surrounded by abundant white space (actually, pink space) that is in sharp contrast to the cluttered page opposite (14–15).

This celebration of imagination as a tool to compensate for limited space and restricted mobility is repeated and reinforced in each book in the Babymouse series, as Babymouse dreams of adventure but learns a small lesson at the end of each book that usually involves facing the reality of her situation, accepting limits, and embracing her position as a child. For example, in the first book in the series, Babymouse: Queen of the World, Babymouse longs to be invited to a slumber party being hosted by popular mean girl, Babymouse’s grade school (cat) nemesis, Felicia Furrypaws. Babymouse initially has plans with her best pal, Wilson the Weasel, to watch Attack of
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the Giant Squid, but she stands him up after she gets herself invited to the slumber party by doing Felicia’s homework for her. Babymouse fantasizes about how much fun the party is going to be but is disappointed when all the girls at the party do is talk. She, predictably, realizes that she’s made a mistake, that she should never have abandoned her true friend Wilson, and that her humdrum life is not so bad after all: “My life IS great,” she realizes (Holm, Queen 84).

Nodelman argues that many children’s narratives depict the consequences of misplaced childhood desires. They are “built around a child getting what she wants and discovering the implications of wanting it” (37). In the case of the Babymouse books, the adult narrator and the savvy child reader know, before the character knows, that Babymouse has made a bad decision based on misplaced desire and unrealistic fantasies: the message we and she get from this “lesson” is that she doesn’t enjoy the party because she should have appreciated her true friend instead of trying to fit in with the popular kids. Wilson shares her interests and enjoys her company, and she should have been content with his friendship. In other words, she should never have desired an invitation to the party in the first place. Nodelman claims that as an adult author and narrator guide the child character and reader toward a conclusion, “these texts all seem to offer hints that the focalized child character is not seeing everything there is to see or possibly not understanding events in the various ways they might be understood. The narrator seems to see more and know more” (20). This is certainly the case with Babymouse and the intrusive, all-knowing, patronizing, adult narrator of the series. There are several pages in this first book of this series, for example, when the narrator’s words take up much more physical space on the page than Babymouse’s words. For instance, when Babymouse realizes that her life actually is great just the way it is, a large text box covering half the frame and most of her body reads, “I knew you’d figure it out eventually, Babymouse” (84). It seems, initially, as though the illustration, framing, and patronizing adult narration are all working together to box her into a smaller, more confined space, which she willingly, though begrudgingly, accepts.

However, if the adult narrator, author, and illustrator were this obviously oppressive, I don’t think young readers would enjoy the book as much as they seem to, at least based on sales figures. Indeed, part of what makes Babymouse so cute, so sassy (the two words repeated in just about every review of the books) is the way she talks back to the voice narrating her adventures. After the narrator patronizes her in the scene described above, for example, in the next frame, Babymouse responds directly, hands on hips, gazing at the narrator (and us) saying, “You didn’t have to rub it in” (84). And, significantly, the narrator apologizes, and takes up much less narrative and visual space with a small “Sorry” drawn into the corner of this frame so that it doesn’t cover any of her body. The savvy child reader, who has perhaps enjoyed the dramatic irony of knowing things the fictional Babymouse didn’t know, may then be doubly delighted by having this knowledge
confirmed by the adult narrator, who is then also put in his place for being smug and intrusive, for sounding like an adult, and for restricting Babymouse’s space and sense of agency. For newly independent readers who were just recently, or currently still are, being read to by adults, Babymouse’s interactions with her intrusive narrator may mirror their own reading experiences and their struggles for reading and meaning-making independence. In these ways, the relationships among child reader, child character, adult author and illustrator, and adult narrator become an intricate, metafictional dance in which meaning is constructed in relation to and cognizant of power negotiations occurring both inside and outside the text.

Maria Nikolajeva explains that because most children’s texts are written for child readers by adults, “This means that children’s literature as a form of art is in one respect more complex than adult literature; it always has two systems of codes, one addressed to the child, another addressed, often unconsciously, to the adult beside or behind the child” (57). I agree that most, if not all, works of children’s literature are characterized by this dual address, which creates a layered narrative space that addresses different groups of readers, but, as shown in the above example, the Babymouse books (and numerous other Early Readers) may be playing in this space a little differently. In The Pleasure of the Text, Roland Barthes distinguishes between text “that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading” versus text that creates blissful pleasure because it is unexpected and “discomforts” and therefore challenges the reader (14). Barthes is dismissive of the ability of commercial, mass-produced texts to create blissful pleasure for readers because “the model of this culture is petite bourgeois” (38) and thus simply reinforces dominant narratives or ways of viewing the world. This may be the case with the mass-produced Babymouse books, or it may well be, instead, that a blissful pleasure is created for a very specific group of readers who are negotiating the difficult space between being read to and learning to read independently. Because Babymouse, as a character, is playfully metafictional and surprisingly cheeky as she performatively breaks the fourth wall of the book space by talking back to her narrator, writer, illustrator, publisher, and even the reader, the child reader is being hailed by the text in multiple ways that are more complex than a dual audience of adult/child.

For example, in Babymouse: Heartbreaker, Babymouse goes stag to the school dance, where she meets up with Georgie, the giraffe, who explains that he didn’t ask her to the dance, even though he thinks she is terrific, because he was sure she had already been asked by someone else (86). As they dance, the narration and pace of the comic panels create the feeling of a movie screen that cinematically fades to black as our narrator announces, “They look just adorable, don’t they? I hope she doesn’t step on his toes. Sigh. Let’s leave them alone, shall we?” (88–89). The narrator, who is arguably a full-fledged character in his own right, includes the child reader in
his adult gaze, asking the reader to admire Babymouse’s adorableness and asking the reader to be polite enough to give Babymouse and Georgie some privacy. On the way home from the dance, the intrusive narrator poses the question some readers may want answered: “Well?!!?!?” he asks, to which Babymouse responds, “Well, what?” He continues to press for an answer, “Did you kiss him?” and she sticks out her tongue and says, “ewww” (90). On the next page, he persists even more: “Well, did you?” and she, looking annoyed, responds, in a speech bubble that moves out of the frame of the comic and into the empty white space on the page, “You know, you really need to get a hobby” (91). As is the case with numerous other narratively complex Early Readers, like the books in the Captain Underpants series, there are layers of narrative address beyond just a dual audience of innocent child and knowing adult. The metafictional elements of these books, combined with a narrator who often addresses the child reader as a peer, combined with their comic book form (which demands an active reader able to synthesize words and images), create texts that are unpredictably pleasurable, with moments that move the reader into more empowered spaces, even as Babymouse, the character, is restricted.

To more fully work through and complicate a discussion of readerly pleasure and empowerment, I need to first further expand my definitions of space to move past the fictional spaces that characters inhabit and the narrative spaces between authors and adult and child readers, and into the cultural and commercial spaces inhabited by the readers, creators, and publishers of books produced for and marketed as Early Readers. Babymouse, like just about every other work of children’s literature, is a product, but more specifically, Babymouse is also a brand. In her essay, “The Market Child and Branded Fiction,” Diane Carver Sekeres explains that “publishers and marketers also want children to be consumers as well as readers” (400). Publishers ensure that child readers become consumers, she argues, by branding, creating an emotional connection for the consumer that will build loyalty. Significantly, one of the ways a fictional character is branded, Sekeres claims, is by creating a space for the fictional character to exist beyond and outside of a work of fiction. Sekeres defines this as a “market child,” a character that is created as a brand to exist beyond the pages of a book in an intertextual, social, commercial and mediated network she calls a “playspace” (406). “Publishers like products that create an ongoing desire in consumers to keep buying” (403), and likable, portable, branded characters able to exist in the commercial, cultural playspace beyond the pages of a book can help to create this desire.

While Babymouse, the character depicted within the books, accepts limited spaces, Babymouse, the brand, roams freely. She moves beyond the conventions of the book space by popping up on the copyright page and on the inside of the front and back covers. In Babymouse, Our Hero she sits on top of the copyright page, yawning, “Boring!” (4), and on the inside of the back cover of this book she playfully draws facial hair onto the faces
in the illustration of the book’s author and illustrator. In *Camp Babymouse* she yells down to the text on the copyright page, “Hey! I’m NOT a work of fiction!” (4), while in *Babymouse, Rockstar* she stands under a list of the books in the series announcing, “I wish they’d make more!” (2). Additionally, Babymouse, the brand, further exceeds book space through her web presence on the Internet. On the series’ website, decorated in many shades of pink, Babymouse pops up on the screen that lists the books in the series to tell us, “Read all the Babymouse books—trust me they’re really good!” (“Babymouse”). Therefore, while one can argue that the ways in which Babymouse sassily talks back to her narrator and publisher, and the ways in which she exceeds the bounds of the narrative book space are playfully metafictional, if the series is re-considered within the larger space of marketing and consumer culture, then these textual excursions can be read as a way to give Babymouse a life beyond her books, a way to move her into the playspace of consumption, to make her a recognizable and desirable brand in the Early Reader marketplace that is characterized by books written in multi-volume series that are meant to be collected.

Indeed, with her thickly drawn, minimal lines, Babymouse is depicted as an iconic symbol designed to evoke an emotional response from a very specific niche market of consumers who crave something cute. And, cuteness as a commodity exists in a distinct cultural and relational space of its very own: feminine, helpless, soft, round, and, oftentimes, pink. Anne Allison explains that cuteness gets packaged “in a hyperconsumerist form that is technologically advanced and nomadically portable” (Allison 35). She cites one advertising agency report claiming that, for many consumers, cuteness as character branding can be “fetishistic” because, according to one advertising agency, “cute characters are appropriated as symbols for identity—personal, corporate, group or national” (40). Significantly, in a 2006 *New York Times* article on the marketing of cuteness, Natalie Angier reports that, “New studies suggest that cute images stimulate the same pleasure centers of the brain aroused by sex, a good meal or psychoactive drugs like cocaine.” She quotes art professor Denis Dutton who says, “Cute cuts through all layers of meaning and says, Let’s not worry about complexities, just love me” (Angier). Indeed, cute solicits such pleasurable emotions that advertisers have long used it to sell products: babies and small children or cartoon characters with big eyes and rounded faces are used to sell everything from toilet paper to tires, from cookie dough to car insurance.

Angier further explains that, “Cuteness is distinct from beauty […] emphasizing rounded over sculptured, soft over refined, clumsy over quick. Beauty attracts admiration and demands a pedestal; cuteness attracts affection and demands a lap” (Angier). Cuteness relies on our need to nurture, is coded feminine, and is directly marketed to girls and women. Babymouse’s status as cute—she neatly fits the list above and even her name is infantilized—further complicates the relationship between child character and the child reader/consumer. Rather than being a character with which children readily
identify, Babymouse may instead be a cuter, clumsier, less-insightful, younger child the reader can coddle, collect, and perhaps even fetishize.

This relationship between reader and text is also significant because it signals a contemporary construction of the child reader as a consumer with purchasing power (or influence over parental purchasing power) and with desires that need to be created, fueled, and managed. While children’s books have always been commercial products, the nature of this market has shifted dramatically over the past few decades. Sekeres explains that, “Before 1980, 99% of children's books were sold through libraries and schools” (402). But that, “By the turn of the century, 90% of children’s and young adult books were sold directly through bookstores; book clubs; mass merchandizers such as Walmart; and the Internet” (403). Books that used to be marketed mostly to librarians and teachers are now marketed directly to parents, caregivers, and children. As Rebekah Fitzsimmons notes in her contribution to this collection, books for early readers have become part of an especially lucrative market geared toward young children and their well-meaning parents:

The Early Reader picture book series on the market today have on average four to six distinct micro-niche categories. Additionally, the more specific these categories become, the more disposable the books are; children may outgrow each category of books within a matter of months and require a whole new round of books on the next level. Thus, it is no surprise that Early Reader picture books have remained a lucrative genre. (50)

Babymouse creators Jennifer and Matthew Holm are no strangers to the appeal of branding and marketing; before creating Babymouse and other children’s books, illustrator Matthew Holm worked in graphic design and animation, and author Jennifer Holm worked in advertising and as a producer of television commercials (Button and Bandre 9). I am not, by pointing this out, asserting some sort of nefarious motive for the Holms but am instead highlighting the author’s and illustrator’s keen awareness of children’s literature—the Early Reader in particular—as one part of the commercial sector. That awareness has made their books a commercial success and must, most certainly, affect the meanings child readers take from the books and the larger contexts in which they and the texts are situated.

Sekeres writes that, “When brand awareness is part and parcel of the conception of a story, I submit that ideologically, the story reflects marketplace goals as well as the personal ideological goals of the author” (400). Recent shifts in distribution—from schools to stores—combined with the vertical and horizontal integration of international publishing conglomerates, influence every aspect of contemporary children’s books, their content and contexts, and our interactions with these. As Fitzsimmons explains in her
chapter, the lucrative market for Early Readers has expanded significantly over the past 60 years as publishers have cultivated narrower and narrower niche markets. As the consumers being targeted shift from librarians and teachers to parents and their children, the purpose, content, and context of Early Readers is shifting as well.

Babymouse, as a character, is not only taught to desire the limited and safe spaces of home, she is also encouraged to dream in the mediated and hyperreal playspaces of consumption. In his introduction to the collection *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, Douglas Kellner explains that Baudrillard’s “postmodern universe is one of hyperreality in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life” (8). There’s not a single dream that Babymouse has that isn’t an example of the hyperreal. The books are filled with visual and verbal allusions to television, film, and other forms of popular culture such as fairy tale princesses or rock stars. These allusions are also evident in the mediated form of the texts: When she dreams of being a rock star, she’s on the cover of *Rolling Mouse* (Holm & Holm, *Rock Star* 62); when she climbs a bunk bed in *Camp Babymouse* she imagines herself in a King Kong film (22); and her dream of being the Little Mermaid is framed by the shape of a television screen (Holm & Holm, *Beach Babe!* 26). These books assume a child reader who already exists (or who needs to learn to exist) within a highly mediated and commercial cultural space.

Books—even those for the youngest of readers—are not read in a socio-cultural vacuum, and are always already filtered through a reader’s other textual experiences, many of which, increasingly, are from electronic media. Novelist M. T. Anderson said that, “No longer can we imagine ourselves exterior to the media, outside of sales oriented image complexes—because these things formed us. Our hopes, our dreams were scripted at least partially by ad campaigns” (qtd. in Shoemaker 111). Babymouse’s mediated dreams and the mediation of Babymouse as a brand assumes an audience of young readers whose identities are scripted in this way, as the books also simultaneously contribute to this scripting. Within these larger cultural contexts, it makes sense that the form the Babymouse books take is also scripted by other media texts and forms, flowing less like a chapter book and more like an animated television cartoon with voice-over narration, a pre-show teaser at the front of each book, and a tantalizing preview of the next upcoming episode at the end.

While we tend to romantically imagine independent reading—a child curled up in a comfy chair with a book—existing in a private space, the child and the book actually exist in a much larger, mediated space of production, consumption, and meaning making. The best Early Readers enhance children’s desire to read but, as consumer products that must compete for the dollars of parents and child readers, they also exist as commodities that, to sustain themselves, need to construct their readers as desiring consumers.
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Books like those in the Babymouse series are a product of recent cultural, educational, publishing, media, and marketplace trends that, for better or worse, situate Early Readers within a complex commercial web that, increasingly, constructs young children as active (or perhaps passive) consumers. Or, as Babymouse, the brand, advises readers in the paratextual end pages of Babymouse: Queen of the World, if you want to be Queen of the World, “First, get your stuff” (96).

Works Cited


