

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

November 2002 | Volume **60** | Number **3**

Reading and Writing in the Content Areas Pages 48-51

Aren't These Books for Little Kids?

Picture books can bring the events and people of history to life for middle school students.

Linda Webb Billman

Jenna, a 9th grade social studies teacher and one of my graduate education students, shakes her head in disbelief. Holding several picture books in her hands, she asks, "You want me to read these to my students? These books are for young kids." We speak about how she might integrate the books into a unit on World War II and about the need for students to develop the in-depth understanding of content that is rarely available from a textbook. I encourage Jenna to share several of the books with her students. The following week she reports,

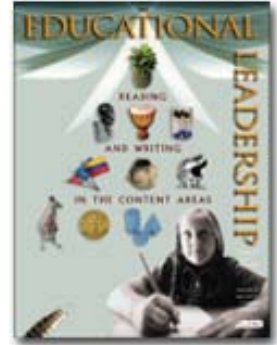
My students really liked those stories. The students not only listened to them, but we also had a great discussion afterwards.

In my experience of working with teachers and conducting workshops on how to integrate picture books into the social studies curriculum, Jenna's initial response to using picture books is a common reaction. Secondary and intermediate grade teachers rarely include such texts in their teaching because they believe them to be too immature for adolescents. Educators frequently perceive picture books, which are often marketed to young children, to be no more than simple illustrations and shallow text.

In reality, many picture books—especially those related to historical events—are more appropriate for older students than younger students. Young students simply do not have the background experiences to comprehend many of the texts that focus on World War II. For example, Kodama's *Shin's Tricycle* conveys the terror associated with the bombing of Hiroshima. Bunting's *So Far from the Sea* describes the lives of children of Japanese ancestry who were housed in U.S. relocation camps from 1942 to 1945. Using picture books to address such complex issues and situations is appropriate when one realizes that the books are actually written for a more mature audience (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2000).

Picture Books in the Social Studies Classroom

Definitions of picture books vary, but Giorgis and Hartman (2000) provide teachers with some general guidelines: Picture books usually contain 32 pages; pictures appear on every page or double-page spread; and the text and pictures work together to create meaning. Picture books do not necessarily have a low reading level or immature interest level.



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When they are used effectively in the classroom, picture books can help students learn more about the world around them. Social studies incorporates history, culture, politics, and other concepts that students may have difficulty relating to in a textbook; picture books provide the interest, images, and readability that students may need to engage with content material.

In fact, many students find picture books to be more interesting than textbooks. Rather than providing breadth, picture books are more likely than textbooks to focus on a single topic and explore it in depth (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2000). Using a number of different picture books in a unit of study introduces students to a variety of perspectives on a topic.

In addition to encountering different perspectives, students who work with picture books become sophisticated readers who must interpret the author's messages by studying both the illustrations and the text. According to Kiefer (1995),

An artist can enhance our affective response to a book through the choice of elements of art, knowing that there are emotional associations we bring to certain configurations of line, shape, color, texture, and value. (p. 53)

For example, the anonymous quality of characters' faces and the use of harsh colors and angles in Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika* allow students to feel the chaos associated with the bombing. At times, the illustrations in these books appear at odds with the text. In *Let the Celebrations Begin!* by Wild and Vivas, softly colored illustrations contradict the dreariness of the text's setting as women in the Belsen concentration camp make the children gifts of rag dolls to celebrate their anticipated liberation.

Another benefit of picture books is their accessibility for students who have difficulty reading or who use English as their second language. Most secondary school students, for example, can easily read Tsuchiya's *Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War*. Its content, focused on the starvation of elephants because of their potential harm to Tokyo's population if the city were bombed and the animals escaped, can result in a very adult discussion within the classroom.

As with all classroom materials, teachers should carefully consider which picture books to use in class. Selection criteria for picture books include illustrations and stories that appeal to students, absence of stereotypes, authentic and current information, content that extends the topic being covered in class, differentiation between facts and opinions, and rich language with illustrations that reflect the text (Farris & Fuhler, 1994).

To introduce picture books to the students, many teachers read the books aloud to demonstrate that the teachers consider the books to be appropriate literature for adolescents. Before reading the story, the teacher should introduce it, note that the text requires both words and illustrations to create meaning, and provide the context in which the story takes place (Giorgis, 1999).

A class discussion often follows the oral reading. Teachers of older students need to develop students' critical thinking skills by asking questions: Whose story is this? Who benefits from this story? What voices are not being heard? (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez,

1999). In addition, teachers and students may examine authors' perspectives, moral and ethical issues raised in the book, and the books' relevance to current events. Students also need opportunities to read, interpret, and discuss the illustrations in the books on their own or within small groups. Bainbridge and Pantaleo (2001) note that

the size of picture books and the fact that they are picture books encourage group work and collaborative construction of meaning. (p. 407)

Picture Books in a World War II Unit

Once teachers recognize the benefits of picture books for teaching difficult concepts to all levels of middle and high school students, they can begin to incorporate the books into lessons. For example, teachers can use picture books effectively in a unit on World War II.

Some students first study World War II in the 5th grade. Others encounter the topic during the late middle grades or in their high school classes. As a result, students bring varied knowledge and understanding to the topic. A World War II unit that incorporates picture books provides a meaningful foundation for students as they explore this period in history and engage in a variety of activities that incorporate both literacy and social studies.

When teaching about war in particular, picture books provide a face to the people, times, and situations, and allow students to move beyond the memorization of dates and places (Saunders, 1999). In addition, readers may more easily identify with the characters in a book than they would with historic figures presented in a textbook. See the sidebar below for a list of picture books related to World War II that are suitable for middle and secondary school students.

To introduce the unit, teachers might consider using one of two books. Popov's *Why?* is a wordless picture book about a frog and mouse who initiate a battle because the mouse seizes a flower from the frog. Fox's *Feathers and Fools*, with its limited text, provides readers with vibrant and haunting images of a war between peacocks and swans when the two species become jealous of each other. The books' analogies to war set the stage as students discuss the moral dilemmas associated with conflict.

The World War II unit's strength is its series of open-ended, literacy-based activities. Students learn not only about World War II, but also about the people involved in the war and their responses to the situations they encountered. For example, they might examine how individuals and governments reacted to the bombings of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima, atrocities of the concentration camps, and the emotional, physical, or financial tolls associated with the war. Stevenson's *Don't You Know There's a War On?* depicts the life of a family waiting for Dad to come home from the war. In the meantime, they purchase war bonds, use ration stickers, and watch newsreels—unfamiliar activities today.

The students supplement the picture books with interviews with family members or other community members to gain personal insights into how armed services members and their families back home supported the war effort. As a result of their research, students raise questions that go beyond the information in their textbooks: How did women's roles change

during this time? Who were the Tuskegee airmen? What was the impact of the atomic bomb?

Other methods students use to conduct their research include examining period radio broadcasts, newspaper accounts, movies, and photos; listening to guest speakers who lived through the war; and reviewing Internet and library resources. Students conduct their research individually or in small groups and then convey their findings to classmates through a variety of formats. Rather than submit research papers, students might write scripts developed from their research and read them to their peers; create and present video newsreels, computer presentations, poetry, artwork, and diaries; debate such issues as the creation of internment camps; and examine and create examples of government propaganda efforts. The teacher can develop activities that meet the Standards of the National Council for the Social Studies.

A Springboard to Learning

Throughout the World War II unit, picture books—whether read to or read by the students—offer a depth of information not always found in textbooks. Additionally, the books' varied vocabulary and illustrations allow students to create a foundation so that they can better comprehend information from other sources. Students who have difficulties reading or whose first language is not English will especially value these books.

Picture books should be used in combination with open-ended activities that allow students to create individual or small-group projects that employ their strengths in such areas as writing, music, art, or technology, and that can encourage reluctant students to engage with the material. Finally, teachers must view picture books as a viable resource and encourage students to use their creativity when teaching others what they have learned.

Picture Books for Teaching Middle and Secondary School Students about World War II

Books about War

Feathers and Fools. Mem Fox. (1989). San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Why? Nikolai Popov. (1996). New York: North-South Books.

Books about the Holocaust

A Picture Book of Anne Frank. David A. Adler. (1993). New York: Holiday House.

Best Friends. Elisabeth Reuter. (1993). Germany: Yellow Brick Road Press.

Flowers on the Wall. Miriam Nerlove. (1996). New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust. Livia Bitton-Jackson. (1997). New York: Scholastic.

Let the Celebrations Begin! Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas. (1991). New York: Orchard Press.

Miracle in the Glass. Ruthann Crosby. (1998). Anchorage, AK: Frozen Chosen.

The Butterfly. Patricia Polacco. (2000). New York: Philomel Books.

The Lily Cupboard: A Story of the Holocaust. Shulamith Levey Oppenheim. (1992). Mexico: HarperCollins.

The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark. Carmen Agra Deedy. (2000). Atlanta, GA: Peachtree.

Books about the Japanese Experience

Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War (Tomoko Dykes, Translator). Yukio Tsuchiya. (1988). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Hiroshima No Pika. Toshi Maruki. (1980). New York: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard.

Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story. Ken Mochizuki. (1997). New York: Lee and Low Books.

Shin's Tricycle. Tatsuharu Kodama. (1992). New York: Walker and Company.

Books about the American Experience

Autumn Street. Lois Lowry. (1980). New York: Yearling.

Baseball Saved Us. Ken Mochizuki. (1993). New York: Lee & Low Books.

Don't You Know There's a War On? James Stevenson. (1992). New York: Greenwillow Books.

Lily's Crossing. Patricia Reilly Giff. (1997). New York: Yearling.

So Far from the Sea. Eve Bunting. (1998). New York: Clarion Books.

Nonpicture Books

I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942–1944. Hana Volavkova (Ed.). (1993). New York: Schocken Books.

Rosie the Riveter. Penny Colman. (1995). New York: Crown Publishers.

Sadako. Eleanor Coerr. (1993). United Kingdom: Puffin.

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