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Patricia Murphy

More than 300 years ago in 1658, a teacher and Moravian bishop, Johann Amos Comenius, created what is now recognized as the first picture book made expressly for children entitled *Orbis Sensualium Pictus (The Visible World in Pictures)*. This is most often referred to as *Orbis Pictus*. He was among the first to appreciate the belief that children remember things best if they see them (Saunders, 1999). "For it is apparent that children (even from their infancy) are delighted with pictures and willingly please their eyes with these sights" (Comenius as cited in Saunders, 1999, p. 8). The National Council of Teachers of English has established the *Orbis Pictus Award* given annually to recognize excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children.

Today, it is a challenge for teachers to convince resistant readers that literature holds secrets, adventures, and revelations worthy of their time and attention. When teachers demonstrate how to explore literature and guide students in doing so, teachers help break down barriers that are common among middle school students. The starting point for growth is each individual's effort to interact with the printed page. The teacher's task is to nurture and cultivate those interactions and transactions between individual readers and literary works so that readers of all ages will be able to construct their own meanings (Routman, 2000).

Unfortunately, when middle schools are structured to skirt the messiness of active participation and interaction, teachers lose opportunities to engage students in their learning. Picture books can help by entertaining, informing, and leading students to greater understanding of the world around them. They teach about content, about the world they represent, about form, about literature and about language and about how stories can be told (Benedict & Carlisle, 1992). For the many students not interested in specific content or academic learning in general, picture books are a captivating medium to learn content. Picture books can pique the interest of many adolescent students who, on the surface, may appear to be bored and apathetic.

What are picture books?

Picture books average 32 pages in length, with a picture appearing on every page or on every two-page spread. A symbiosis exists between the illustrations and the text. Just about any definition of a picture book includes the requirement that, in a marriage of words and pictures, the two partners share the responsibility of making the

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Students and teachers engaged in active learning — Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory — Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to student diversity

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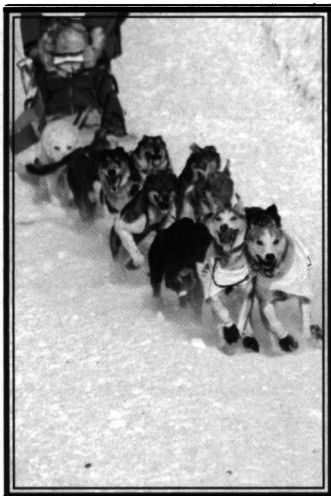
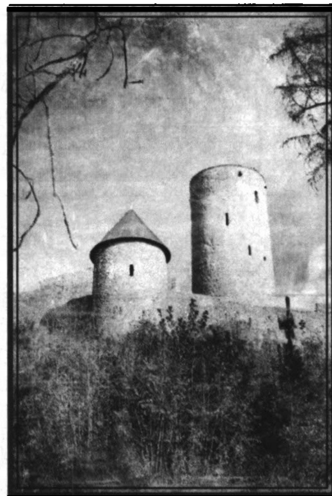
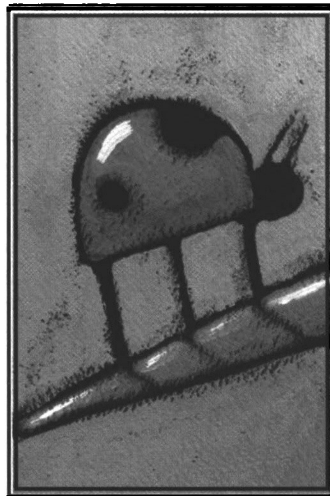
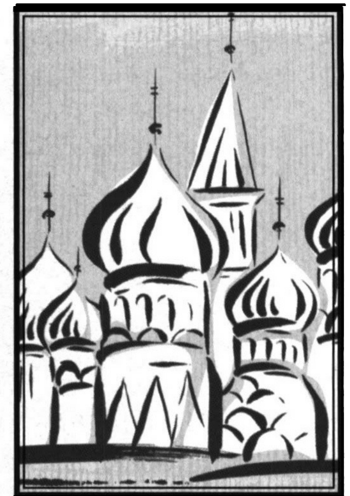
book work (Benedict & Carlisle, 1992). For example, the trade book, *Iditarod: The Great Race to Nome by Sherwonit* (2002), describes the origin and history of the race. However, the stunning photographs provide the visual reinforcement of the danger racers encounter and the bond between humans and dogs. This book provides an excellent example of the interdependency between the text and the illustrations. The actual reading event is a synergy of text and art; a new entity is revealed that is more than the sum of its parts.









Why use picture books?

The middle school classroom offers many compelling reasons for using picture books. First, they are short enough to be read in one sitting. Culham (2001) observed, "They are short on pages, but long on meaning" (p. 2). With precious little classroom instructional time, teachers and students can read a picture book from start to finish and still have time for meaningful subsequent assignments, discussions, or activities. Second, picture books contain intriguing illustrations and are pleasurable to view. Picture books provide an array of art styles and offer opportunities for aesthetic learning. Third, picture book texts, with their trademark brevity, contain carefully chosen words. The texts are often used as writing models. Fourth, picture books are reader friendly. Young people are allowed to relax and enjoy the reading.

Furthermore, struggling readers in the middle grades find *wordless* picture books the perfect vehicle for creating their own texts. Wordless picture books tell stories through illustration alone. Some wordless picture books suitable for stimulating writing are *Dylan's Day Out* (Catalanotto, 1989), *Tuesday* (Wiesner, 1992), and *You Can't Take a Balloon into the National Gallery* (Weitzman & Glasser, 2002). Young adolescents can benefit from using wordless books as foundations for their own oral language or writing. The stories they create from wordless picture books are *their* stories—they have composed them and they are, therefore, easier for them to read. Also, wordless picture books help English language learners, whether ESL or ELL, gain a sense of competence with the English language. "Wordless picture books guarantee successful reading experiences, simply because they contain no "right" words" (Cassady, 1998, p. 429; also see Wood & Tinajero, 2002).

Choosing and using picture books

Some picture books are more complex, challenging, and provocative than might be apparent at a glance: for example, Eve Bunting's (1980) *Terrible Things,* an allegory of the Holocaust; R. Innocenti's (1985) *Rose Blanche,* a little girl that finds a concentration camp near her home during WWII; and Patricia Polacco's (1994) *Pink and Say,* story of an interracial friendship during the Civil War between two 15-year-old Union soldiers. In evaluating the appropriateness of a picture book before use with students, teachers need to ask: Will the literary work to say something worthwhile to the students? Will the book support and complement the lesson's objectives? and Is the book appropriate for the grade level? (see Costello & Kolodzieg, 2006)

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Why not introduce important concepts and issues with picture books? Picture books are easily integrated into many aspects of the curriculum, allowing the students to make important connections among different subjects. "Connecting with literature has the power to humanize us—to help us understand the viewpoints, perspectives, hopes, sufferings, and longings of others" (Routman, 2000, p. 172). They allow students to see "the big picture." Being able to see the big picture encourages students to make those connections with their own life experiences. This is the captivating moment when evident and obvious in picture books than in longer works of fiction.

Reading and discussing picture books provide opportunities to improve oral communication. It is not surprising to see a quiet, reticent student express an opinion in a literature circle or during small-group reading. Adolescents need outlets to share their feelings and emotions about certain topics. Picture books provide this necessary outlet. Rather than admit their lack of comprehension, students who have no connections to the texts assigned in school often fall silent causing their

"Some picture books are more complex, challenging, and provocative than they appear at a glance."

readers are able to bridge their reading with prior knowledge. This learning and understanding is a pivotal point in enhancing students' chances of becoming lifelong readers. (Editor's note: also see Giorgis & Hartman, 2000)

Picture books provide models of good writing techniques that can inspire young authors. *Gettin' Through Thursday* by Melrose Cooper (1998) is frequently used by Routman (2000) to encourage her students to move beyond the story to connect it to their own lives and examine what the author and illustrator have done to hook them in, keep them interested, and inspire them so that they can use these techniques in their own writing.

> I always use a great picture book as an ice breaker—to capture students' attention, engage their sensibilities, and get them thinking about their own narratives. Carefully chosen picture books with outstanding literary quality can be wonderful models for encouraging focused student writing. (Routman, 2000, p. 382)

In *Wondrous Words,* Ray (1999) invites students to read a story and learn about the craft of writing from the experts. This process asks students to see with different eyes—to notice voice, mood, and metaphors, much as a carpenter or architect might walk into a house and appreciate its fine structure. Writers look beyond the plot and notice the craft, the way the story is designed and built. "Reading like writers" is a skill that must be taught and practiced in the classroom. These devices are more

teachers to assume these students are lazy. The teacher's task is to promote and encourage transactions between individual readers and literature.

Discourse and promotion of picture books in the social studies curriculum enable students to understand life in other historical periods or geographical regions as they develop understanding and appreciation of differing cultures. The following titles give students a broader perspective by probing the complexity and ambiguity of particular events in ways not typically addressed in the standard social studies textbook. In *The Wall,* Bunting (1990) talks to the reader through a young person's point of view about finding the name of a never-known grandfather on the Vietnam Memorial. In *The Harmonica,* Johnston (2004) has based the story on a true survivor account of the Holocaust, and in *Baseball Saved Us,* Mochizuki (1993) created a story about a young Japanese-American boy in an internment camp and the baseball diamond that gave the internees a purpose in life and a way of passing the time. Polacco's (1994) *Pink and Say* is the story of an interracial friendship during the Civil War between two 15-year-old Union soldiers. Fox's (2000) *Feathers and Fools* is an allegory about peacocks and swans, with symbolic references and ideas that would be an easy lead-in to discussion of the Cold War arms race, while Rylant's (1994) *Something Permanent* evokes emotion through poetry about the Great Depression.

Imagine this scenario: a group of seventh grade students launching into a study of the Holocaust in U.S. history—four to six children clustered around

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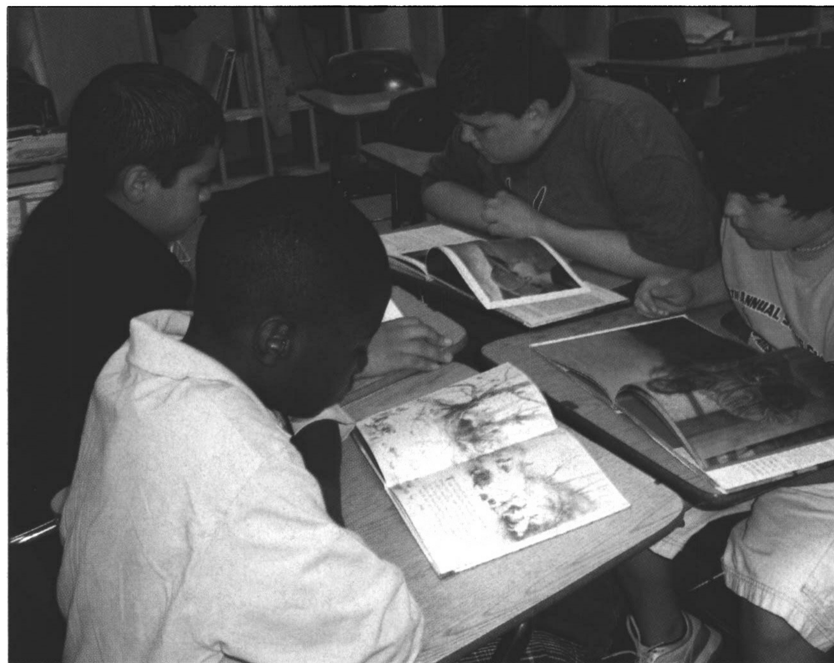
books such as *Harmonica* by Johnston (2004), *The Cats in Krasinski Square* by Hesse (2004), *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* by Bunting (1980), *The Butterfly* by Polacco (2000), and *Rose Blanche* by Innocenti (1985). These five books depict events and stories of the Holocaust. Imagine the new vocabulary, the images, the new insights, and the significantly increased knowledge brought about by these picture books. Imagine the conversations, discussions, and interest in the lives of those characters living through what these children have just studied as real events in history. Imagine the eager anticipation of reading the next book and the robust insights students will construct and nurture in their more grounded minds as they read (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006).

Through discussion and teacher explanation students make sense of what they are expected to learn and find answers to their own questions. This search for understanding will drive the desire to know more and to inquire independently and with guidance into topics of interest (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006).

In the social studies and science areas, recent nonfiction or informational picture books can present current and accurate information in an interesting format. The information in them is verifiable or documented and presents a multitude of topics in science, social studies, mathematics, language study, and the fine arts. Many fine authors write in this expository style. Examples of nonfiction include *Nobody Loves* by Simon (2001), *People* by Spier (1980), *Henry's Freedom Box* by Levine (2007), and *The Train of States* by Sis (2004). The titles of these books reveal the content of each book. Reading a picture book for information is different than reading a textbook for information. For example, compared to a textbook, these four picture books can reveal the point of view of the author more directly, focus more sharply on an individual or a topic and present specialized information that often gives readers a fuller understanding.

Language arts teachers find that picture books illustrate simple forms of literary elements found in more difficult texts. *My Man Blue* (Grimes, 1999) is a set of poems that provides a starting point for discussion of character development, point of view, voice, and setting. Yolen's (1992) *Encounter* examines the first meeting, through the eyes of a young native boy, between Columbus and the indigenous peoples of San Salvador. Johnson's (1999) *Old Dry Frye: A Deliciously Funny Tall Tale* is about a preacher who loves fried chicken, but ends up choking on a bone and dies. Last but not least, Bunting's (1991) *Fly Away Home* is about a young boy describing his life with his father living undetected in an airport and how they meet their basic needs. These picture books can be used as supplements to the curriculum text in teaching or illustrating literary devices. Other books illustrating parts of speech are Heller's *Kites Sail High: A Book About Verbs* (1988), *Many Lucious Lollipops: A Book About Adjectives* (1989), and *Behind the Mask: A Book About Prepositions* (1995). More humorous books include Cleary's *A Mink, a Fink, a Skating Rink: What Is a Noun?* (1999) and *Hairy, Scary, Ordinary: What Is an Adjective?* (2000). The use of literature to teach or reinforce parts of speech is more engaging for middle school students than a textbook or workbook.

Using literature is one of the most inviting ways to get children involved in mathematical thinking and the sciences. Stories offer readers and listeners an array of possibilities when seeking solutions to open-ended problems. As Laminack and Wadsworth (2006) pointed out, "This is taking the time to hover with ideas and concepts, as opposed to rushing to cover the curriculum" (p. 40). In the science and math curriculum, picture books are used to relate content to the world beyond school. *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei*



Picture books enhance vocabulary, foster independent reading, and promote diversity.

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(Sis, 1996) recounts the story of Galileo, the scientist, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and physicist, in simple language but with colorful illustrations. *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998) is the story of Wilson Bentley who discovered that no two snowflakes are alike. Demi's (1997) *One Grain of Rice* demonstrates how numbers double and grow from one to one billion in 30 days. Scieszka's (1995) *Math Curse* as well as *Science Verse* (2004) permeate the topics of math and science with humor and prose. In Simon's (1997) *Oceans,* students can explore how the author uses numbers to discuss oceans. Books by Japanese author and illustrator Anno explore factorials (*Anno's Mysterious Multiplying Jar* (1999)), logic (*Anno's Math Games* (1997)), permutations and combinations (*Anno's Magic Seeds* (1999))—all subjects studied by older students. These picture books can be used to introduce and learn math concepts. The more students read nonfiction science trade books, the better they can understand new concepts in physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology, botany, earth science, and mathematics. Students broaden their knowledge of a topic and their view of their world when they read informational picture books to learn how scientists and mathematicians classify, observe, experiment, hypothesize, and infer from data.

Conclusion

Picture books are effective teaching tools in middle level classrooms. Picture books for older students are longer, have more complex text and themes, and deal with topics that are more abstract and more intellectually demanding. They appeal to early adolescent students because of their interesting artwork, accessible language, and brief text, which stimulate enjoyment. Picture books, aside from enhancing the vocabulary of students, foster independent reading and can promote diversity in the classroom. Learning is more likely to happen when students like what they are doing—when they are involved, active, and learning from and with other students. Teachers who use picture books with young adolescents notice an increase in the depth of insight and interest shown by their students.

Picture books are for all ages, and they are about all subjects. Comenius was the first to recognize the value that pictures could bring to a text. Today, that marriage of text and illustration can help children unlock secrets and revelations worthy of their time. And, because of the sophistication and experience middle grades readers bring to the meaning of print, the educational rewards of sharing picture books are without limit.

Editor's Note

The following articles on using picture books to teach middle level students have appeared recently in *Middle School Journal.*

Brame, P. B. (2000). Using picture storybooks to enhance social skills training of special needs students. *Middle School Journal, 32*(1), 41–46.

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Editor's Note

An annotated bibliography of the books discussed in this article can be found at www.nmsa.org/msj/murphy

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