LITERARY ANALYSIS
Help Children Take the Plunge With Picture Storybooks

Catherine Studier Chang

In Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, 12-year-old Douglas Spaulding and his father have just passed the shoe store. Douglas tries to convince his father to go back and buy him a new pair of sneakers for the summer:

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His father didn't even turn. "Suppose you tell me why you need a new pair of sneakers. Can you do that?"

"Well.. . ."

It was because they felt the way it feels every summer when you take off your shoes for the first time and run in the grass. They felt like it feels sticking your feet out of the hot covers in the wintertime to let the cold wind from the open window blow on them suddenly and you let them stay out a long time until you pull them back in under the covers again to feel them, like packed snow. The tennis shoes felt like it always feels for the first time every year wading in the slow waters of the creek and seeing your feet below, half an inch further downstream, with refraction, than the real part of you above water.

"Dad," said Douglas, "it's hard to explain."

Somehow the people who made tennis shoes knew what boys needed and wanted. They put marshmallows and coiled springs in the soles and they wove the rest out of grasses bleached and fired in the wilderness. Somewhere deep in the soft loam of the shoes the thin hard sinews of the buck deer were hidden. The people that made the shoes must have watched a lot of winds blow the trees and a lot of rivers going down to the lakes. Whatever it was, it was in the shoes, and it was summer.

Douglas tried to get all this in words.[1]

We all experience emotions and desires that we simply can't get into words. Children, too, frequently experience this frustration. They have a smaller reservoir of experience than adults do and fewer words on which to draw when trying to express their deepest thoughts and feelings. It isn't too surprising, then, that when a teacher asks her students to respond to and analyze a story, the students have very little to say. Not that the book hasn't stirred emotions and ideas, but the students, like Douglas, lack experience in verbalizing them.

One of the major responsibilities of all teachers is to help children articulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas. In literature study, it is crucial that students openly share their initial reactions to a work of literature. Only then will they be able to use their prior knowledge and experiences to make connections with the new ideas; and only then can the teacher help them expand on their responses and lead them into an in-depth study of literary analysis which, ultimately, creates literate adults.

Traditionally, children begin a formal study of literature in the seventh, eighth, or ninth grade. They are suddenly thrust into a situation in which they are expected to analyze a piece of literature in terms of plot, setting, theme, characterization, style, mood and tone — the traditional *elements* of literature.

This is often the setting which "turns off" many children who have been avid readers. In most cases, children are touched emotionally and intellectually by the story they've just read, but the teacher's demands to articulate those responses and analyze the story in a sophisticated manner is too much for them. In short, children are not prepared throughout elementary school for this inevitable formal approach to the study of literature.

How can elementary school teachers help to prepare students? This article attempts to answer the question by presenting and supporting the idea that class discussions of selected picture storybooks in the intermediate grades

— four through six — can provide the background needed to help students make a comfortable and smooth transition into the formal study of literature. Methods are suggested for using picture storybooks in a natural, non-threatening setting to acquaint children with some of the elements of fiction traditionally studied in secondary schools. The emphasis is on student involvement and, more specifically, student talk.

Why picture storybooks? First, picture storybooks provide a relatively concrete experience with the abstract elements of literature. The use of concrete experiences provides a foundation for growth and movement into the more abstract areas of literature study. The element of setting is an example; a child could identify the setting of a story by examining a picture more easily than by reading the author's description. Later, as the concept of setting becomes clearer, it will be easier for the child to identify setting through the text.

Second, most picture storybooks contain only 32 pages and can be read aloud comfortably in a single 10 to 20 minute session. All students share the literary experience and are ready to respond to and discuss the book immediately.

Finally, because of the picture storybook's length and structural simplicity, students have relatively little difficulty identifying literary elements. Most plots, for example, contain only one major conflict and climax. Usually there is only one major character and very few minor characters. Despite this relative simplicity of structure, however, picture storybooks can be a real intellectual challenge to the intermediate reader. While the structure is simple, the concepts, themes and language may be quite sophisticated.

Few children in the intermediate grades will be upset at the prospect of reading picture storybooks, which are often erroneously labeled "baby books." If, however, older children do appear to need some reassurance, the teacher might take the advice of Beckman and Diamond who make the following suggestions for using picture storybooks in the junior high school:

> Student concerns which may or may not be voiced are something like, "what are we doin' these kid's books for?" and "what are the kids in the other classes gonna think?" Such reasonable challenges can be met by either questions or statements. The choice depends on personal style and the teacher's relationship with the class. If questions have actually been raised, teachers may find it effective to smile knowingly and ask, "How old do you think the author of this book is?" and "Can you be saying that good stories can't have pictures?" The other, perhaps better way is to forestall such questions through introductory comments that focus on the intellectual challenge of the activity that will follow. With this framework established, students can be free to find out on their own that they will enjoy these books — even at their advanced ages. Once their concerns have been recognized, students are free to stay tuned, their maturity and dignity intact.[2]

To use picture storybooks effectively with fourth, fifth, and sixth graders to introduce elements of fiction, the teacher must first establish a conducive atmosphere in the classroom. Children should, first, enjoy reading. They should be read to daily, given time in class to read for pleasure in a comfortable setting, and encouraged to read to each other and listen to stories on tape. Class and group discussions of books should be open, the teacher and class members accepting to *all* responses. It is only after this positive, open atmosphere has been established and children are comfortable in sharing their emotional responses to books that the teacher can begin to help children examine stories in terms of the literary elements used by the author.

In order to introduce picture storybooks appropriate for intermediate readers and demonstrate how these books might be used to introduce literary elements to children, the elements of plot, humor, and characterization will be discussed at length. Some of the elements of plot which are typically studied include conflict, foreshadowing, and the surprise ending.

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In most picture storybooks the reader is introduced to the character(s), setting, and conflict on the first page. *The Wreck of the Zephyr,* by Chris Van Allsburg,[3] begins with a narrator telling of his or her discovery of the wreck of a small sailboat high on a cliff above the sea. An old man comes by and suggests that the waves carried it up there during a storm. When the narrator notes that waves couldn't reach that high, the old man says, "'Well, there is another story.' He invited me to have a seat and listen to his strange tale."

Thus, the conflict is established; the reader's curiosity is piqued and ready for the rising action. By stopping the story at the end of the first page and asking the students to identify what begins the action of the story or raises a question to be answered in the story, the teacher is introducing the concept of conflict.

Another of Van Allsburg's books, *Jumanji,*[4] can be used to examine a slightly more complex plot structure, one which has a minor conflict presented on the first page of

the story (a brother and sister are left home alone and are bored) to keep the reader's interest, followed by the major conflict on the second page of the text (they find a board game under a tree with the warning: "Free game, fun for some but not for all. P.S. Read instructions carefully").

Thus, by moving gradually from the simple to the more complexly plotted picture storybooks, the teacher is preparing children to later identify conflicts in novels.

Foreshadowing, a literary device used by the author to provide subtle clues to the outcome of the story, is not an easy concept for children to grasp. Authors/illustrators of picture storybooks frequently use the pictures to provide these clues, thus making the concept more concrete for the beginner. For example, Tomie de Paola in *Helga's Dowry*,[5] introduces Helga, a resourceful troll who loses her sweetheart, Lars, to Plain Inge, an ugly troll with a very large dowry. Not to be outdone, Helga decides to use her "troll magic" to go out and earn a dowry. When she is successful, Lars tells her he wants her back; Helga tells him that she wants to be loved for who she is, not what she has. And at that point the king appears and asks for her hand in marriage.

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Unless the reader has been paying attention to the pictures, which reveal the king watching Helga's every move, this conclusion will be puzzling. The reader who has been watching the king is prepared for the happy ending. The illustrations foreshadow the conclusion.

Tomi Ungerer's *The Beast of Monsieur Racine*,[6] employs both text and illustration in a much more subtle example of foreshadowing. The "beast" which Monsieur Racine befriends and studies turns out to be two children dressed in a blanket. Throughout the story, the descriptions and illustrations of the "beast" give the reader clues; the "beast" loves foods that are special favorites of children, ice cream and candy, for example, and we're told that "From a distance it looked like a heap of moldy blankets."

After reading and discussing the story, the teacher can challenge the children to be detectives and see if the author provides any clues concerning the identity of the beast (or the outcome of the story). This is a fun, natural introduction to the concept of foreshadowing.

Plot twists, or surprise endings in picture storybooks can be examined to determine how they affect the story. In *The Wreck of the Zephyr*,[7] cited earlier, the old man's story is about a boy who learns to fly his sailboat. While flying, the wind shifts and he crashes the boat into some trees high on a cliff, breaking his leg. When the old man is finished telling the story, he picks up his cane and limps away, leaving the reader with the sudden realization that the old man himself was the boy in the story. The "surprise" ending is effective in creating in the reader a sense of empathy with the old man, now that his story is known.

Bill Peet uses the surprise twist ingeniously to create humor in *Big Bad Bruce*.[8] Bruce is "a great shaggy brute of a bear" whose favorite sport is tossing boulders down hills and terrorizing the smaller animals in the forest. But Bruce soon meets his match in Roxy, the little witch, who shrinks him down to the size of a chipmunk. Bruce learns how it feels to be tiny and frightened. Roxy saves the tiny bear from an attack by an owl and takes him in as a pet. The reader, here, believes that the bear has learned his lesson and will live "happily ever after." On the last page, however, the illustration reveals Bruce happily tossing pebbles at the tiny grasshoppers, beetles and caterpillars in Roxy's garden. "From a bug's-eye view Bruce was a great big hairy-scary horrible brute of a beast." The twist is a thoroughly delightful surprise to the unsuspecting reader.

Students are generally aware of the technique of the surprise ending, but could benefit by sharing how the endings made them feel, and whether or not the "twist" was effectively used by the author as in *The Wreck of the Zephyr* and *Big Bad Bruce*.

When students are amused by picture storybooks, they can begin to evaluate the elements of humor in literature: What makes this book funny? What does the author/illustrator do in the book which makes me laugh?

In *The Stupids Die* by Harry Allard,[9] the humor lies in the character's names (Mr. and Mrs. Stupid, and Kitty, their dog), the absurdity of their approach to living (they believe they are dead when the lights go out), and the use of word play. Figurative language is used liberally and taken literally; Mrs. Stupid hopes her dress isn't too loud, as she sports an outfit made of live, cackling chickens. The illustrations, also, must be carefully examined to derive the full effect of the absurdity of the Stupids — a picture of a bucket of water on the wall is labeled "Lake Stupid." Children laugh at the absurdity of the book and enjoy finding all of the ridiculous elements which contribute to its humor.

Dr. Seuss uses incongruous situations to create humor in his classic, *Horton Hatches The Egg*.[10] Horton the elephant sits on a bird's nest in a small tree; the branch on which he sits is so heavily burdened that it's propped up to keep it from breaking off completely.

As children explore the elements of humor in books, they need not know or use terms like absurd and incongruous. However, children enjoy learning new words in meaningful contexts, and if they appear to be searching for "the right word" in their discussions, the teacher should take advantage of their curiosity to introduce the new vocabulary.

Picture storybooks lend themselves particularly well to discussions of characterization. Children identify quickly with the main character who usually dominates the story. Due to the length of the story, character development is minimal, forcing the reader to speculate about a number of issues related to characterization; such speculation leads to a careful examination of the book as well as some lively discussions.

In *Jumanji*,[11] for example, Peter and his sister Judy take home a board game which comes with a number of warnings, one of which is: "Once a game is started, it will not be over until one player reaches the Golden City." They begin the game and Peter lands on a square marked, "Lion attacks, move back two spaces." At once a real lion appears in the room! The action builds as they continue the game with volcanoes erupting and monkeys and snakes appearing all over the house until Judy reaches the Golden City. All evidence of the game disappears and the house returns to normal.

Peter is portrayed, early in the story, as a bit of a know-it-all. He assumes the game will be boring and yawns at its warnings. It is he, then, who is shocked and most frightened when the reality of the game becomes apparent. In contrast, Judy, who appears to have a healthy respect for the potential danger of the game, is no less surprised by it but handles it more maturely than her brother.

Class discussions based on the following questions encourage children to note subtle but significant insights into characters and to think about how the author reveals these characteristics: How would you describe each of the children before they found the game? What kinds of things in the story lead you to describe them that way? How does the author let you know what the characters are like? Do you think either of the children changed after playing the game? Why or why not? If so, in what ways? Do you know enough about the characters to predict how they would act in a new situation?

Bill Peet's *Big Bad Bruce*,[12] mentioned earlier, introduces a "great, shaggy brute of a bear" who takes pleasure in terrorizing smaller animals. Even after experiencing life from the perspective of a small animal, Bruce continues to be a brute.

This is an excellent story to use to combine creative dramatics with discussion to encourage a developing awareness of the elements of characterization. Students might discuss the question of how Bruce would react in different situations using their knowledge of the character. For example, in order to determine how Bruce would act if he were to enter their fifth-grade classroom during a science experiment, students need to go back into the story and examine Bruce's reactions to situations he encounters, look for patterns of behavior and carefully study the author's choice of words in describing the bear.

After the discussion, groups of children might be given the task of deciding on a setting and situation, determining how Bruce would act in that situation and dramatizing it for the class. For example, a group of children may decide to act out a scene in which Bruce attends a formal dinner party at the White House. The use of creative dramatics provides a concrete experience to reinforce the concept of characterization as well as some extra incentive for carefully studying the characters and how the author has developed them.

Inherent in the ideas presented here for helping children become aware of the elements of literature is the basic philosophy that children learn best when they are actively involved in their learning, using language in a natural setting. Part of the problem Douglas had in expressing himself was the fact that his father wasn't open to the idea of buying him new sneakers. Teachers must be open to *all* of their students' ideas, thus freeing the students to talk and learn as a result of this talk. Only then can picture storybooks be used effectively to help children identify and evaluate the various elements of literature, thus preparing them to make a smooth, comfortable transition into the formal study of literature in the secondary school.

Footnotes

[1]Bradbury, Ray. *Dandelion Wine*, New York : Bantam/Doubleday, 1957, 19-20.

[2]Beckman, J. and J. Diamond. "Picture books in the classroom: the secret weapon for the creative teacher" in *English Journal*, February 1984, 102-104.

[3]Van Allsburg, C. *The Wreck of the Zephyr*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983.

[4] . *Jumanji*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981.

[5]de Paola, T. *Helga's Dowry*, New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

[6]Ungerer, T. *The Beast of Monsieur Racine*, New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.

[7]Van Allsburg, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 3.

[8]Peet, B. *Big Bad Bruce*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977.

[9]Allard, Harry. *The Stupids Die*, 1981.

[10]Geisel, T. (Dr. Seuss). *Horton Hatches the Egg*, New York : Random House, 1940.

[11]Van Allsburg, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 4.

[12]Peet, *op. cit.*, see Footnote 8.

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