GENERAL INTEREST

Anne Burke and Shelley Stagg Peterson

A Multidisciplinary Approach to Literacy through Picture Books and Drama

Anne Burke and Shelley Stagg Peterson argue that "picture books offer a medium for teaching visual and critical literacy across the curriculum." To support this idea, they describe a multidisciplinary unit on World War II that pushes high school students to utilize visual and print literacies to analyze, comprehend, and relate to public events and private struggles from history.

Student engagement with visual texts is common. David M. Considine explains that adolescents live in a society where "[t]his nonverbal and highly visual culture is expanding rapidly as a result of the communication revolution" (634). Intensely visual media such as text messaging, video games, television, and computers are ubiquitous in students' everyday lives. In a world where students increasingly engage with visual texts, picture books represent a valuable addition to the secondary curriculum.

Many picture books today explore complex themes and address topics appropriate for secondary school students (see sidebar). These books require readers to use both visual and print literacies to understand and interpret them, as the illustrations and text "form an artistic unit that is stronger than either of them would be alone" (Stewig 9). Indeed, Lee Galda and Kathy G. Short assert that "[i]llustrations are not an extension of the text that simply reinforce the meanings of the words, but are necessary for comprehension" (506).

Drawing on their extensive visual knowledge, readers have the potential to gain a deeper sensitivity to the characters' emotions and intentions, and greater insight into the issues and struggles portrayed in the books, than may be possible when reading the text alone. Adolescent readers can enhance their understanding of even the most complex social issues when reading picture books.

Selection is a critical factor when bringing picture books into secondary classrooms. Not all picture

books are appropriate for secondary students' critical reading and interpretation of diverse perspectives. Teachers must consider the complexity of text and illustration interactions and the level of sophistication of the themes when making decisions about which picture books to use.

In this article, we argue that picture books offer a medium for teaching visual and critical literacy across the curriculum in secondary classrooms, and we present a unit on World War II that integrates objectives from the theatre arts, social studies, and art curricula. Students in grades 10 to 12 completed the unit in their theatre arts class in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Their learning in all the subject areas was enriched through dramatic response to two books: Roberto Innocenti's *Rose Blanche*, a partially fictional book, illustrated in oils, that explores the perspective of a German child caught risking her life to help German Jews; and William Kaplan's *One More Border: The True Story of One Family's Escape from War-Torn Europe*, which tells the story of the author's escape from the Nazis on a journey that took him across Asia and eventually to Cornwall, Ontario, Canada. Chalk and pastel illustrations, together with period photos and documents, add to *One More Border's* realism and historical accuracy.

Through the study of these historical picture books, students developed a deeper appreciation for the difficult decisions made by individuals living in Europe during World War II. The books helped students to "understand both the public events that we usually label 'history' and the private struggles that have characterized the human

RECOMMENDED PICTURE BOOKS FOR ADOLESCENT READERS

Bang, Molly. *Nobody Particular: One Woman's Fight to Save the Bays*. New York: Holt, 2000.

Formatted in a comic-book style, this book chronicles Diane Wilson's successful campaign to force Formosa Plastics Corporation to curb its discharge of chemicals into the Gulf of Mexico, where she is a commercial shrimper.

Gerstein, Mordicai. *The Man Who Walked between the Towers*. Brookfield: Roaring Brook, 2003.

As the World Trade Center was being completed, Philippe Petit, a young aerialist, walked on a tightrope between the two towers. Part of the memory of the twin towers is this daring high-wire walk.

Hathorn, Libby. *Way Home*. New York: Crown, 1994.

The lines, colors, shapes, and textures of Gregory Rogers's illustrations show the dark, uncertain environment of a boy who lives on the street.

Tan, Shaun. *The Lost Thing*. Melbourne, Victoria: Thomas C. Lothian Pty, 2000.

Shaun Tan's surrealistic collages add to the otherworldliness of this cross between a science fiction story and a puzzle about belonging.

Wild, Margaret. *Let the Celebrations Begin!* New York: Orchard, 1991.

As World War II neared its end, women in the Belsen concentration camp made stuffed toys and held a party for the children.

condition across the centuries" (Huck et al. 462). The use of role play allowed students to test hypotheses and examine alternative points of view beyond their experience.

Anne, the theatre arts teacher in the school, worked with the students' history and visual arts teachers to develop a multidisciplinary, six-week unit based on the stated objectives for each subject listed below:

Art: "Students will develop the ability to perceive the elements and principles of design in art and in the environment . . . [and] use appropriate art terminology in writing about and in discussing art" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, "Art" 5).

English/Theatre Arts: Students will respond personally and critically to a range of

texts, "applying their understanding of language, form, and genre." More specifically, students will "demonstrate a willingness to explore diverse perspectives to develop or modify their points of view" and "interpret ambiguities in complex and sophisticated texts" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, "English" 18, 16).

History: Students will critically analyze major issues involving the rights, responsibilities, roles and status of individual citizens and groups in a local, national, and global context. In particular, students will describe the "tragedy of war" with reference to the Holocaust (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, "World").

As part of a schoolwide initiative, teachers decided to work together and bridge curriculum areas to bring a richer experience for students. In the theatre arts class, which doubled as an English credit, students were evaluated on their understanding of character as demonstrated through role-play activities. They used the text resources from their history course, the artistic elements of design learned in visual arts, and the picture books used in their theatre arts class.

Teaching the Integrated Unit

In the first week of the unit (see fig. 1), students examined the Battle of Beaumont Hamel, a World War I event that was a cultural reference point for many students in Newfoundland and Labrador. Many students knew of relatives who had died in this battle. They shared personal anecdotes related to them by their grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles; read articles on World War I from their history textbook, *Spotlight Canada* (Cruyton and Wilson); and watched a short film entitled *Never Again* from the Heritage Canada series on World War I. With this information and the knowledge they gained in their history class, which was focused on World War I, students created a tableau, or still scene, of soldiers at war and explored gestures and voices for the soldiers in a role-play activity. They created scenes of what they believed to be the personal perspectives of the people who lived during this historical period.

The unit was introduced with this war to encourage students' personal connections to the events. Sharing this information of loss and memory contributed to a sense of community, and it did help

FIGURE 1. Components of the Multidisciplinary Unit

Weeks of Study	Unit Components	Activity	Activity	Activity
One	World War I historical/cultural connections	War exploration of poem "In Flanders Fields"	Study of history text on war film <i>Never Again</i>	Creation of still images based on history text and video
Two	World War II	Issues of conflict through historical photos	Applying artistic elements learned in art course to historical photos	Finding character voice in historical photos
Three and Four	<i>Rose Blanche</i>	Introduction of illustrations from <i>Rose Blanche</i>	Small-group discussion of artistic elements in illustrations	Role-play activities using illustrations
Five	<i>Rose Blanche/One More Border</i>	Small-group discussion of monologues and role play	Response to writing prompts on creation of character using artistic elements	Introduction of double-page spread from <i>One More Border</i>
Six	<i>One More Border</i>	Small-group discussion of artistic elements in illustration	Role-play activities using illustration	Response to writing prompts on creation of character using artistic elements

students to see our contributions and the extent and damage of war to a country with a small population.

Week Two was devoted to introducing events and issues in World War II and elements of design in illustrations. Students extended what they had learned in their visual arts class by studying photographs to learn how plots and characters are developed through illustrators' use of line, shape, and color. Anne showed how thin, bold, straight, and angular lines help to convey mood and emotions. For example, horizontal lines usually suggest peace, serenity, and stability; vertical lines imply aspirations and ideals; and diagonal lines generally show confusion and the motion of activity. She also presented examples that demonstrated how dark colors usually create a mood of gloom, danger, mystery, threat, or emotional intensity, whereas lighter values usually give a sense of lightness, joy, and tenderness. Other examples showed how curved shapes are usually associated with nature and freedom, whereas defined shapes are often seen as rigid, man-made objects. They discussed the emotion and events portrayed in photographs of scenes from World War II and the stories that were being told.

Students applied this understanding to their study of two illustrations in *Rose Blanche* in Weeks Three and Four. One showed Rose Blanche walking up a set of stairs, glancing sideways through the win-

dow to look at the activities going on in the street below. In the second illustration, Rose Blanche is crossing a bridge while witnessing the town's mayor trying to capture a boy who had escaped from the back of a truck. Students discussed the following questions as they read the text and illustrations:

- > Discuss the use of line in the illustration. How does the artist use vertical, diagonal, or horizontal lines? How does the use of line allow the viewer to feel any emotion or see any symbolism in the picture? How does the use of line contribute to the development of the character in the illustration?
- > What do the colors in the picture symbolize? What emotions do you feel when you study the use of colors in the picture? How does the illustrator's use of color in the picture help you understand what the character is feeling?
- > Discuss the use of shape in the illustration. Does the artist use curved or manmade shapes? Are the outlines of the objects and the characters in the illustration heavy or hazy with soft edges? How does the use of shape in the picture contribute to your sensing emotions of the character? How does the use of shape make you feel toward the character?

Students then developed individual monologues for each of the characters using what they had learned

in their group discussions. They presented monologues, created tableaux, and role-played what was happening in the scenes pictured in the illustrations.

In the fifth week, students talked in their role-play groups about how they had used the artistic elements to create their characters for the role play. They then responded to four writing prompts in their response journals:

1. Explain how the artist's portrayal of the character's facial expressions, actions, body language, and gestures in the illustration assisted you in developing the character for the role play. In your response, you may discuss the illustrator's use of line, color, and shape.
2. Colors can be symbolic and represent emotions for the character. The use of line, color, and shape may embellish a character's emotions. How does the illustrator's use of the artistic elements of design help you display the character's emotions during the role play?
3. Describe one tableau your group presented based on the illustrations. You may wish to discuss the illustrator's use of line, color, and shape in your creation of the various tableaux.
4. Identify a pivotal moment in the drama when you felt you empathized with a character that you played. If you feel the illustrator's elements of design assisted you in understanding the character, explain how. If not, explain how the illustrator could have used the artistic elements to increase your empathy for the character.

As shown in Figure 1, the sequence of events was repeated for *One More Border*. Students identified how the illustrations added to the meaning they constructed, created tableaux, and role-played the book's scenes. Students used a two-page spread showing the Kaplan family arriving in Cornwall, Ontario, Canada, and being greeted by Oma and Opa, Mr. Kaplan's parents, at the train station as a starting point for their discussions and role plays.

Students' Learning in English/Theatre Arts, History, and Visual Arts

The contributions of picture books to students' visual literacy and response to literature are well documented. David M. Considine, Cheri Anderson, and Cyndi Giorget al., for example, show how picture books can be

used to teach elements of design in elementary classrooms. Preservice teacher education students in Dee Storey's study and elementary children in work by Galda and Short and Barbara Z. Kiefer show how children gain a deeper understanding of the stories in picture books when examining elements of design. These researchers looked at how the illustrations and written text worked together to create the story. Our research moves into an even broader interdisciplinary realm, as we use picture books and drama to develop high school students' visual literacy, their response to literature, and their understanding of historical issues and events. We have used the elements of design to help us organize our observations of students' learning in English/theatre arts, history, and visual arts.

Line

Students applied their understanding of the illustrator's use of line when discussing *Rose Blanche*:

Larissa: Just look at the windows; don't you think the lines should be horizontal? They look diagonal to me. I think the diagonal lines mean confusion of some sort.

Mark: I believe the confusion [*pointing to the diagonal lines*] in the picture is about the emotions the people are showing.

Larissa: Yes you are right, the windows should be horizontal, but they are diagonal. I think horizontal [*lines*] refers to peace.

Mark: From the window you can see everything on the street, all of the lines. There are vertical, diagonal. . . . Look here at the roof [*pointing to the shingles in a diagonal form*].

Monique: It shows what she sees. It's her perspective.

Phillip: [*pointing to the diagonal lines on the roof and the lines of the building*] Yes, because, well, she is a German child, so she is in a place by herself, but everyone else outside the window appears to be confused and not in order. Like, she is in order, but everything else is not. These people do not see the soldiers on the street. They are oblivious. Like, the lines on the windows could represent prison bars. She is trapped.

Mark: [*points to the lines of the window*] So it's like the people outside are trapped in chaos, while she is inside free and safe from their thinking.

Students demonstrated a keen awareness of the psychological and emotional impact of the Nazi soldiers' presence in the streets that Rose Blanche looked out onto. They sensed the incongruities highlighted by the illustrator's use of line. Behind the vertical lines, Rose Blanche is in a stable setting looking down on a volatile world yet, at the same time, there is a sense of her being caged within those barred windows, being protected and yet confined within spaces in which unknown dangers might lurk.

Students voiced their awareness of the contribution of illustrations to the text's meaning. Responding in her journal to an illustration in *One More Border*, Stephanie claimed, "I do believe the illustrations help us to understand the feelings, emotions of the character. Sometimes with just text alone we do not see the expressions or the lines the illustrator uses to show those expressions. The lines of their faces and the wrinkles of their clothes can make us understand what they feel." Students' reading of the book and their understanding of the horrific historical context in which the story was set were enriched by their awareness of the emotional impact of the illustrator's use of line.

Shape

Students contrasted the soft, rounded shapes in the illustration found near the end of the book, when the family in *One More Border* has found security in Canada, with the unyielding bars on the windows and defined staircase in the illustration near the beginning of *Rose Blanche*. Ben discussed in his journal how the shapes of the objects and buildings in *One More Border* influenced his interpretation of what the character was thinking: "If we look at the architecture in the picture, the lines on the wood are curved and are very soft looking. The shape of the brick on the building is not hard or rough, the shapes are soft, not defined, blurred and curved which could be associated with nature and freedom. They were now free." Showing his sense of the ways in which shapes in the illustration contributed to the overall emotional responses he felt when reading the end of the book, Mark wrote, "The curved shapes of the smoke from the train shows they are now on a new journey. I think where the smoke is trailing down the platform shows how their past is fading."

Ben showed his awareness of the tensions created by the tight, rigid shapes in the *Rose Blanche*

illustration through a monologue he developed for his group's role play. Here he takes the role of Rose Blanche's school friend:

Rose Blanche is always by herself. Why does she go to school so early? She never wants to play with my scooter anymore, and she stopped walking to school with my mother and I. This morning, I saw her standing on the stairs of the school looking out the window. She told me she doesn't like the soldiers or the trucks, but I think they are near. The soldiers will let you sit in the back of the truck if you let them. I miss the way Rose Blanche used to be. She was always so happy. Now she seems so sad and confused. I wish I could help her.

Ben's interpretation of the illustration and text through this monologue shows an understanding of the complexities of the Nazi soldiers' presence in German children's lives. For some children, the soldiers' presence may have been exciting and energizing, yet for others such as Rose Blanche, the soldiers' presence and all they stood for were terrifying and restrictive in their daily lives. Similarly, Jacob showed the contradictions in the lives of Nazi soldiers in his written explanation of his group's role play: "I was one of the soldiers leaning up against the car. I did not show any emotion except anger. I showed this in the way I stood. The colors of the soldiers are drab which shows they are lifeless and have no emotion. The shapes of the cars and the round tires contradict what the soldiers are like. These shapes usually represent freedom. They [the soldiers] don't want the Jews to be free, yet the curved lines represent freedom." Reading the visual images and the print, these students drew from many layers of physical, emotional, and historical information in their exploration of the story's nuances.

Color

The illustrators of the two books used colors to communicate tone and emotion. Students interpreted the characters' intentions and the contrasting ethos of the scenes depicted in the colors of the illustrations in the two books. Responding in her journal to the illustration in *One More Border*, Larissa asserted, "The illustrator's choice of color is very important. The color of Oma's sweater is very warm and inviting. It's orange, red and yellow. It has a homemade feeling. It is welcoming of her family to their new home where they

can live safely. The colors assisted me in portraying Oma's character as being warm, friendly and open." This illustration depicted a scene at the end of the book when the family had left Nazi-occupied Europe.

The colors were different in the scene showing Rose Blanche looking out at the street in her German village. In reference to *Rose Blanche*, Ruth said in her group discussion, "You can tell by the gray tones used that it is a dull atmosphere. That would obviously make her cautious." The bright red of Rose Blanche's bow caught Monique's attention: "The primary color is red in the illustration. It could be for the feelings of passion both characters are feeling—the passion for Rose in wanting to save the Jewish children and violence for the Nazis as they destroy everything around them." Through their responses, the students showed not only their sense of the soldiers' tragic impact on everyday lives of ordinary people but also their respect for the heroism of particular individuals who resisted the Nazi's malevolent intentions in whatever ways they could. The images had a welcome side effect that appealed to students' innate sense of social justice.

Benefits of Developing Multidisciplinary Literacy

Through this multidisciplinary unit, students explored diverse viewpoints on historical issues and events. They developed a deeper appreciation of the lives of individuals within the World War II European context through dramatic role play, establishing a real emotional connection with a time and place studied in their history class. In addition, throughout the unit, students drew on and fur-

thered their extensive knowledge of visual elements. Fostering students' development of visual and print literacies was important for their reading of texts across the secondary curriculum.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Burke and Peterson discuss how pictures and illustrations can add to students' learning of a particular subject and use picture books to teach about World War II. In "Picture Books as Framing Texts: Research Paper Strategies for Struggling Writers," picture books give students frames for structuring research projects, freeing them from the language of encyclopedia sources and allowing them to focus their attention on the content of their papers. Using picture books as models, students are able to think more about what to say and less about how to say it, which leads to better learning experiences and better writing. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=306