

*The Power of Language in Books for Children*

REVIEW BY JENNIFER RABOLD, BOSTON UNIVERSITY

The articles reprinted in this issue of the *Journal of Education* address the subject of language in one way or another. Carol Chomsky writes about how very young children demonstrate extraordinary creativity in developing both spoken and written language. Donald Durrell and his co-researchers reported on the factors that contribute to success in beginning reading and were among the first to suggest the importance of the alphabetic principle, a discussion that continues to this day. Elie Wiesel tells us how and why he writes, how writing is his duty, his passion, his method of survival. Burton Blatt reminds us of the power of language to limit or empower, arguing that the labels we give to children, particularly regarding disability, change our behavior toward them and change the children themselves. Carol Greenes echoes Professor Chomsky's argument for recognizing the child's ability to construct meaning, but in the discipline and community of mathematics. In order to function in this community, children must learn the community's language.

Given the language thread that runs through this issue, this review will focus on children's books that address language in diverse ways and include: a book with no words at all, a book in Braille, a collection of poetry, a book about written language, and a book about spoken language. These books for young readers have been selected for teachers to use with their students as they engage them in the many purposes of language. Recommendations for using the books in the classroom are provided with each selection, from application to reading and writing instruction, to history and modern languages. But these books offer much, much more, providing windows into history, into culture, into disability, into the lives of others, allowing children to learn more about the world and about themselves.

*The Red Book*

by Barbara Lehman

32 pages

Houghton Mifflin. 2004.

(Ages 4–8)

Award: Caldecott Honor Book 2005

Admittedly, the choice of *The Red Book* by Barbara Lehman in a group of books about language may seem unusual, since the book contains no words at all. However, *The Red Book*, a wordless picture book, will spark a whole mysterious story's worth of words in the mind of the child who reads it, recalling Carol

Chomsky's belief in the "child as innovator" (p. 37), as creative and active constructor of language and meaning.

The first few pages show a young girl bundled up against the cold in a big gray city as she spies a red book lying partially hidden in a pile of snow. She picks it up and takes it to school, where she can't resist its call and opens it to find a series of progressively more magnified pictures of a young boy walking on the warm sand on an island far away. The pictures show the boy discovering a red book in the sand and opening it to find, in turn, progressively more magnified pictures of a young girl in a cold gray city reading a red book. They suddenly realize they are looking at each other, which is when the adventure really begins.

The possibilities for using *The Red Book* in the classroom are endless. Like most wordless picture books, very young children or struggling readers can "read" the story with no assistance from adults. But the "story" is more complex than most wordless picture books and requires inference, an aspect that may appeal to teachers of older children working at more advanced literacy levels. Furthermore, the mysteriousness of the story allows for multiple interpretations and creative thinking, as children imagine the possible implications of such a universe.

The most interesting opportunities for using *The Red Book* in the classroom, however, lie in its use in writing instruction. As with other wordless picture books, children can learn how to write a story with a beginning, middle, and end if they render the story represented in the book in words on the page. But the unique story line of *The Red Book* allows children to write the story without the risk of imitating the teacher's model or producing exactly the same story as every other child. The possibilities for creative writing are even more promising, recalling Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, whose mysterious illustrations have inspired thousands of young people to write their own stories. Students may be motivated to write about how the red book came to be, what happens to the two children after the story ends, what happens to the young man who discovers the book next, or what adventures they might have with their very own red book.

Carol Chomsky argued that, "What the child needs from the environment is the raw material on which to work—exposure to the language in meaningful situations, useful communication, and attentiveness to the task at hand" (p. 38). *The Red Book* provides rich "raw material" and an opportunity to actively construct meaning within the constraints imposed by story structure, constraints that teach children how to innovate while respecting literary tradition.

### *The Black Book of Colors/ El Libro Negro de los Colores*

by Menena Cottin

Illustrated by Rosana Faría

Translated by Elisa Amado

Unpaged

Groundwood. 2008.

(Ages 5–10)

*Selected Awards:* Bologna Ragazzi Award 2007, *The New York Times*

Best Illustrated Children's Book of 2008

*The Black Book of Colors (El Libro Negro de los Colores)* by Menena Cottin may be another surprising choice for this group of books, but it shouldn't be. *The Black Book* is a "bilingual" book, so to speak, as the text on each page is accompanied by the Braille interpretations. Or perhaps one should think of the printed text as the interpretation, for *The Black Book* is designed to be read by children who are blind. The colors in the book are not colors that the sighted can see; they are presented to the reader's other senses through descriptions that appeal to the reader's sense of touch, taste, smell, and sound.

But the book is also designed for sighted children for a very definite purpose: to allow them to experience the language used by blind children when they read. The illustrations can only be experienced through touch, as illustrator Rosana Faría has created raised black line drawings on black paper that readers can feel as they run their fingers over the page, as with the Braille words. Without the sense of sight to limit them, children can understand colors in completely different ways, as Menena Cottin guides them with her beautiful and evocative imagery. Since she can't rely on visual stimuli to describe the color red, for example, she conjures up unripe strawberries and sweet watermelon and the sensation of feeling one's own blood.

What a wonderful way to introduce children of any age to the power of language to paint pictures in the mind! One could imagine teachers using *The Black Book* as a springboard for writing assignments where children develop their own associations with colors, or extending the approach even further, translating the experiences of one sense into another, describing sound through sight or taste through touch.

Like *The Red Book*, *The Black Book of Colors* takes advantage of children's talents for "linguistic innovation" (Chomsky, p. 37) and creativity. Just as importantly, *The Black Book* answers Burton Blatt's call for redefinitions of ability and disability. By eliminating the advantages of sight for the reader, Cottin and Faría demonstrate how the ability to see may actually inhibit the full use of the other senses. In *The Black Book of Colors*, the absence of the spectrum of color may open our eyes to the richness and depth of the many other qualities of color.

### *Poetry for Young People: American Poetry*

Edited by John Hollander

Illustrated by Sally Wern Comport

48 pages

Sterling. 2004.

(Ages 8 through adult)

Any collection of books about language must necessarily include books of poetry. The rich tradition of American poetry makes it possible for teachers to introduce the work of many distinguished poets to children. In one of the most recent volumes in the *Poetry for Young People* series, *American Poetry*, John Hollander has chosen to include a broad sampling of the work of some of our most celebrated poets, from Walt Whitman to Maya Angelou.

Hollander has selected some of the most familiar poems, like Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," and some less well-known, such as one of T. S. Eliot's *Landscapes* poems, "Virginia." He is not afraid to present some of the more difficult poems, like Wallace Steven's "Anecdote of the Jar." He does provide a short introduction for each poem, imparting historical context, highlighting important literary techniques, and suggesting some interpretations. But children of all ages will appreciate Sally Wern Comport's imagistic illustrations, which offer sufficient clues to understanding the themes of the poems to allow children to arrive at their own interpretations.

The *Poetry for Young People* series has never garnered any awards, as the most distinguished honors are generally bestowed on fiction, with the notable recent addition of the Orbis Pictus award for non-fiction. But *American Poetry* and the other volumes in the series deserve to be recognized for introducing poetry of quality and gravity to children, rather than limiting them to poetry that is expressly written for children. Hollander's *American Poetry* respects children's ability to appreciate the language and the power of poetry.

### *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*

by Jen Bryant

Illustrated by Melissa Sweet

34 pages

Eerdman's Books for Young Readers. 2008.

(Ages 8 through adult)

*Selected Awards:* Caldecott Honor Book 2009, NCTE Orbis Pictus Award 2009, *The New York Times* Book Review Best Illustrated Children's Books of 2008

Elie Wiesel suggests in the interview included in this issue that writing is "an act of courage and of necessity" (p. 49) for the great writers. Great American writer William Carlos Williams, though he chose a vocation as a physician, never gave up the passion for poetry that he developed as a child. He continued to write poems, even as he delivered babies and healed the sick, scrawling notes on prescription pads and in the inside covers of books, late at night in the attic and in between house calls. He wrote because he had to. He wrote as an "act of necessity" (p. 49).

Jen Bryant's *A River of Words* tells the story of how Williams grew into that great poet, how he developed his signature style and selected the subject matter of "ordinary things," like wheelbarrows in the rain and big red fire engines and the plums in the refrigerator. She tells the story of his ordinary life and extraordinary insights into the ordinary, which he transformed for all of us into things of beauty.

But the most beautiful quality of *A River of Words* is Melissa Sweet's remarkable, award-winning illustrations. She creates collages onto which her illustrations and the text are imposed, collages consisting of ordinary materials that Williams, himself, might have grabbed to jot down a few lines. The inside covers of old books form her primary canvasses, and old maps, pages from old medical texts, prescription pads, receipts, and scraps of paper serve as the backdrops for fragments of Williams's poems as he might have recorded them. The style is decidedly modern, reflecting the era in which Williams wrote and by which he was undoubtedly influenced, and yet the illustrations capture the accessibility and playfulness of Williams's poetry.

Teachers introducing poetry to their students would choose well with William Carlos Williams, and Bryant and Sweet's innovative book presents a straightforward and entertaining introduction to one of the greatest American poets. Bryant and Sweet assemble inspired back matter, where readers will find a timeline of events in Williams's life juxtaposed with corresponding world events and his most famous poems. An author's note and illustrator's note enhance the book as well; here children can gain insights into the creative processes of writing, researching, and creating art. Perhaps they too will find that writing will become an "act of necessity" (p. 49).

### ***D is for Doufu: An Alphabet Book of Chinese Culture***

by Maywan Shen Krach  
Illustrated by Hongbin Zhang  
32 pages  
Shen's Books. 1997.  
(Ages 8–12)

*Selected Awards:* 1998 Skipping Stones Honor Award, Parents' Guide to Children's Media Outstanding Achievement in Reference Books For 1998

Alphabet books have become a separate genre in children's literature. Bill Martin's rollicking *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (1989) and David Pelletier's award-winning *The Graphic Alphabet* (1996) are perfect for the very young. Older children will enjoy Graeme Base's more complex *Animalia* (1987), Chris Van Allsburg's alliterative *The Z Was Zapped: A Play in Twenty-Six Acts* (1987), and Laura Rankin's *The Handmade Alphabet* (1991), a beautiful interpretation of the American Sign Language alphabet for any age. Numerous alphabet books can be found to meet a plethora of needs and interests, from dinosaurs, endangered animals, and football to topics in geography, science, reading, and art.<sup>1</sup>

*D is for Doufu* is one of the recent examples that add to the list a unique point of view: not only the culture of China, but

the written language of Chinese, the forms and meanings of its pictographs. Starting with A for pīnyīn (romanized) ài, Maywan Shen Krach explains each element of the corresponding pictograph: the symbols for heart, breath, and movement, which together coalesce to form the Chinese word for love. Then Shen Krach expounds upon the history of the word, including the beliefs about what love means in Chinese culture. Each letter consists of equally detailed and enlightening explanations of the pictographs, from vehicle to dragon. Shen Krach incorporates many of the major facets of Chinese culture: food (tofu and chopsticks), martial arts (kungfu), holidays (lantern parade), entertainment (mahjongg), music (pipa), and beliefs and traditions (filial piety and the Chinese horoscope).

Hongbin Zhang's illustrations likewise reflect Chinese culture, with his use of canvasses unusual in children's literature but common to Chinese arts, such as silk, hand-made paper, rice paper, and fabric. Shen Krach and Zhang supplement the fascinating text and exquisite illustrations with information on the history and continuing evolution of the Chinese language, both written and spoken, and precise instructions on the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese.

Chomsky highlights children's active, creative role in learning language, maintaining that we should provide "exposure to the language in meaningful situations" (p. 38). Teachers should be encouraged to take advantage of the enthusiasm of children for learning language by exposing them to other languages whenever possible, especially a language like Chinese, which is in such demand today. *D is for Doufu* provides a "meaningful situation" through which to introduce young readers to both the Chinese language and the culture with a depth that may only inspire children to want to know more.

### ***Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

by Doreen Rappaport  
Illustrated by Bryan Collier  
Hyperion Books. 2001.  
(Ages 5–9)

*Selected Awards:* Caldecott Honor Book 2002, Coretta Scott King Honor Book 2002, *The New York Times* Book Review Best Illustrated Books of the Year 2001

Like *A River of Words*, Doreen Rappaport has interspersed her story of the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. with words from her subject's own writing and speeches, a reflection of her title. *Martin's Big Words* tells the compelling story of one of the great figures of the Civil Rights Movement by emphasizing the power of King's words to change history.

Rappaport writes of the words that limit, like the "White Only" signs King saw in the windows of the stores and restaurants in the town in which he grew up, as well as the words that empower, the words of his father's sermons and his mother's assurances that, "You are as good as anyone." She identifies the

inspirations for King's belief that the "big words" the world most needed were "peace" and "together" and "love." She recounts his involvement with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the marches and protests, and the violence the protesters suffered as they practiced non-violence, including, ultimately, the tragedy of King's own assassination.

This is a weighty book about a turbulent time, and adults who present this picture book to children must discern whether they are mature enough to understand the challenging subject matter. However, Rappaport tells the story with sensitivity and a sense of hope, emphasizing the impact King made on history, reminding readers that, "his big words are alive for us today." Illustrator Bryan Collier contributes to the feeling of hope in the story through his inspirational paintings and collages, often framed by the stained glass windows that serve as a metaphor for the light King brought to all of our lives.

Furthermore, Carol Chomsky argues that we should encourage children to read books "as complicated as they are willing to tackle" (p. 40). Children should not be shielded from the truth, even if that truth is an ugly chapter in the history of our nation. Profound moments in history like the Holocaust and the Civil Rights struggle must be passed on to future generations. Wiesel reminds us that, "Words can never express the inexpressible; language is finally inadequate" to communicate some truths, but "we must give truth a name, force man to look" (p. 50). For ultimately, "language is an instrument of power and of hope" (p. 49), which is the message of Rappaport's tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## CONCLUSION

Elie Wiesel describes his writing process as starting with silence: "In the beginning there was silence—no words" (p. 50). It was in silence that he suffered, in silence that he finds the words to convey his experience, and it is in silence that he writes. Some of the children's books reviewed here invite silence, others, sound. Some of the books speak in prose, oth-

ers in poetry.

Some of the books tell the stories of the people who have used language to change their worlds; they are people whose names, like the names of the authors whose work is reprinted in this issue, are well known. They are voices we recognize, voices that have been allowed to speak once more from the past. Other books reveal voices of the future, voices to which we might not have attended before, voices who may yet change the world.

But all of the children's books reviewed here illustrate, or indeed, exemplify the power of language—to make meaning, to understand and define and communicate one's life experiences, to transform what others see and think, to shape one's world. As children learn to construct language and create meaning, reinventing their worlds anew, they will best be served by immersion in the "fertile environment" Chomsky calls for that books like these provide.

## Note

1. For more information on using alphabet books in writing workshops, including a categorized alphabet book list, see Evers, A. J., Lang, L. F., & Smith, S. V. (2009). An ABC literacy journey: Anchoring in texts, bridging language, and creating stories. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(6), 461–470.

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Lauri Hornik, President and Publisher of Dial Books for Young Readers, began her career as an editorial assistant at Houghton Mifflin Children's Books in 1988, right after graduating from Harvard. She moved to New York City six years later as Senior Editor at Bantam Doubleday Dell, and then joined Penguin in 1999 as Editorial Director of Dial. In her time at Penguin, she has edited the National Book Award Finalists *A River Between Us* by Richard Peck and *The Rules of Survival* by Nancy Werlin; New York Times Bestsellers *The Book With No Pictures* by B.J. Novak, *Counting by 7s* by Holly Goldberg SI (Imprint of Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers). Imprints. Visit Web Site. View All Titles. Book videos. Fiction - Distinctive voice, not typical mainstream, with a little edge to it for teen fiction and interesting non-fiction. Specifically interested in books with these subjects or themes: picture books, chapter books, mysteries, biography, science fiction, fantasy, graphic novels, middle grade and young adult fiction and non-fiction. Main Address: 1230 Avenue of the Americas New York NY 10020 USA.