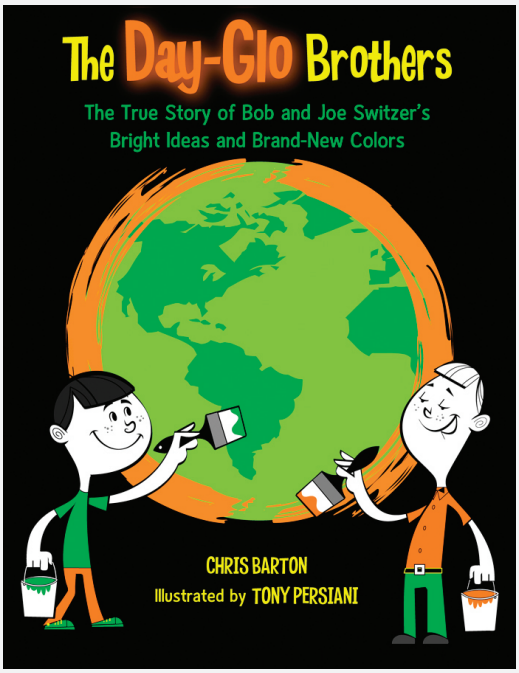
Second Reaction: The Bright Ideas of the Switzer Brothers

Barton, Chris. Illus. Tony Persiani. *The Day-Glo Brothers: The True Story of Bob and Joe Switzer's Bright Ideas and Brand-New Colors*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2009.

Beth Heath



The Day-Glo Brothers, written by Chris Barton and illustrated by Tony Persiani, tells the real-life story of Bob and Joe Switzer, and their accidental invention of fluorescent colors. Beginning in the early 1900s, the story chronicles the lives of the Switzer brothers and the impact of Day-Glo colors on our lives today. The story is well suited to the teaching of science and biographies, and best lends itself to upper elementary or middle school classrooms.

While this first appears to be an ordinary picture book, upon closer examination, it is a nonfiction text most appropriate for older students. The illustrations seem to appeal to younger readers, while the technical terms in the text seem more challenging for younger students to grasp. Elementary students may have difficulty relating to some of the events

described in the book, but they will most likely connect with the many uses of Day-Glo colors in our world today.

I read this book aloud in my third grade classroom, and the reaction from my learners was mixed. Overall, the class preferred the illustrations over the text. They especially liked the contrast of the bright colors against the otherwise black, white, and gray pictures. Students who were interested in science or nonfiction reading had more positive comments about the story. Many who disliked the book had trouble understanding the concepts in the story, or simply did not have an interest in the particular topic. Here are a few of their insights on the text and illustrations:

> "I really like the book because it has a lot of science." (Kaleb, 9)

> "I liked the book *The Day-Glo Brothers* because I like nonfiction books. I really enjoyed the pictures too because I like cartoon pictures. Before we read this I didn't know anything about the Switzer brothers, so I learned a lot." (Kelsey, 9)

> "I liked *The Day-Glo Brothers* because lots of the pictures were shiny. I also liked the illustrations and the scientific words in the story." (Jameson, 9)

> "I liked the drawings because they were colorful. I did not like the book because it had too much science." (Celtic, 9)

> "I did not like the story because it does not make any sense to me. I like the pictures and the bright colors." (Allyson, 8)

> "I did not like the book because I was not interested in it. I liked the pictures because of how they were drawn." (MiKayla, 9)

Adult readers also had similar reactions. Many were intrigued by the story behind the Day-Glo colors and overall agreed that the text was filled with many historical and scientific facts. One reader commented, "The pictures and color distracted me from reading each page."

I agree that the pictures at times dominate the text, and I fear that if read independently, many young readers would become discouraged or distracted themselves. The story seems more appropriately suited as a teacher read-aloud, or as an enrichment tool for teaching science.

In the future, I would use this story as an introduction to a unit on biographies. It would serve as a useful motivator for students and would allow me to model many of the common features found in biographies. Not only does Barton describe the many events in the lives of the Switzer brothers, but he also explains the impact their inventions have made on society.

The book could also serve as a method for teaching students the important life skill of perseverance. The Switzer brothers certainly did not intend to create these new colors, but with hard work and determination, they took their failures and turned them into successes. Both men set out to impact the world, and they certainly did, just not in the way they originally intended.

In closing, I believe *The Day-Glo Brothers* would benefit upper elementary or middle school teachers beginning a study of biographies, or those who wanted to enhance the teaching of science. While struggling readers may have more difficulty pursuing the text independently, they could still learn an important life lesson if teacher support was provided. The story of the Switzer brothers is one worth telling, and, when used in the appropriate context, could prove a powerful teaching tool.

About the Author

Beth Heath has been teaching third grade in Monticello, Indiana for the past six years. She received a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Purdue University and a master's degree in Education from Indiana Wesleyan University.