First Opinion: Discovery and Imagination: Two Books that Break Routines and Set Course for Adventure


*Lakia M. Scott*

*The Secret Box* is a wordless picture book illustrated by Caldecott-award-winning artist Barbara Lehman. The story draws the reader in by way of adventurous discovery. This story begins in a newly developing town as a young boy hides a set of clues in the baseboards of an attic. Detailed illustrations of the town show its evolution into city life; the modes of transportation change, architectural structures are developed, and work for its residents becomes more industrialized. However, the home seems to remain the same – it is and has been a dwelling where young children live, learn, and play. Discovering this hidden box, three youngsters piece together a journey that not only takes them through the historical beginnings of the area, but also reveals a few pleasant surprises that continue to exist. Their journey ends where fun begins. While the treasure hunt ends for one group of youngsters, it begins with a new group of children in the attic discovering the clues during another time period when the city has changed even more.
One of the more noticeable strengths of this text is Lehman’s ability to capture the multiple views as if the reader were peeking through these secret places or taking a birds-eye view of the town. These snapshots further tie into the theme of discovering places both new and old. Additionally, she weaves together a book that is culturally aware of various ethnic groups. While the reader cannot easily decipher where this story takes place, it is blaringly apparent that this neighborhood presents diversity and change. On the other hand, the story, though incredibly adventurous, may send the wrong signals to young readers. For one, the youngsters are left alone and unattended not only in the dwelling, but also as they scavenge through the city. Taking this journey through secret places and passages, these children could be considered mischievous or “up to no good.” While the text does not directly give young readers sanction to do the same things, illustrating a guardian that shadows them wouldn’t have hurt the overall theme.

Polka Dot Penguin Pottery, written by Lenore Look and illustrated by Yumi Heo, also relates to discovery. The story’s main character, Aspen Colorado Kim Chee Lee, is a young author who has a strategic routine for writing her stories. Just as she elaborates on this process, she is faced with writer’s block. Her grandparents decide to take her and her sister to a place that screams creativity and imagination: Polka Dot Penguin Pottery. As she peruses clay models, she finally selects an egg-shaped piece but is continuously distracted by other patrons and their ease in turning messes into masterpieces. Commonly referring to the techniques she uses in writing her stories, she grows frustrated and discouraged. All of her careful planning and organizing is doing nothing for her in this chaotically creative setting. Nearing a breakdown, she begins to see how her mess could be something more when her baby sister mistakenly drools and drips paint over her egg. She canvases her egg with a scenic view of a butterfly garden, and everyone begins to marvel at her creation.

The underlying theme seems to be that sometimes we must step out of our routine in order to gather new perspectives. This idea is demonstrated by the book's format: the pages are oriented vertically and the illustrative backgrounds are consistently creative and energetic so that each angle of the pictures provides a unique view for the reader. Also, Look provides dialogue that seems to be aimed at debunking the cultural myth of Asian-American children and families being overly methodical in striving for excellence. Young readers may be able to connect to this main character’s striving for perfection and the stress associated with that aim, but they should also find relevance in the element of creativity as a main ingredient in doing something enjoyable. Polka Dot Penguin Pottery also demonstrates how discovery can lead to something truly remarkable. If there are any shortcomings to this picture book, they would be the limited insight provided into the lives of young Asian Americans and their families. Aside from the nicknames of the main character and her grandparents, there are no words, innuendos, or instances that could help the reader learn more about this culture. From these two books, readers might want
to embark on their own adventures and to find new talents; the books illustrate imagination and discovery in timeless and invaluable ways.

About the Author

Lakia M. Scott is an urban education doctoral student in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her current research interests include: urban literacy, urban student populations, and charter school environments. While reviewing these texts, she made her greatest attempt to discover and imagine her own childhood adventures.