Second Reaction: Using Illustrations to Foster Writing Instruction


**Kristin Strasser**

The saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” is well represented in *The Secret Box* and *Polka Dot Penguin Pottery*. While one selection relies solely on pictures, the other gains its momentum with a significant image. First grade students are very cognizant of illustrations and their details. The obvious difference between these two books is the text. While *Polka Dot Penguin Pottery* has detailed text about writing, *The Secret Box* has no text. Both books involved a lot of imagination on the reader’s part. I would use these books to help with my writing instruction. A lot of first grade students struggle with “writer’s block.” Both of these books show how an illustration can lead to a story. Both of these books end with an unpredictable ending as well, which invited their readers to continue telling the story in their minds.

In *The Secret Box* by Barbara Lehman, the story starts with a boy putting a box in the floorboard of what looks like an orphanage. The following pages then show the change in setting. The city changes around this fenced-in building. This is a wonderful way to represent a change in time, but not location. The story then leads to another group of children, years later, discovering this secret box. They can tell from the contents of the
box that there is a map and a picture of a carnival. These children then follow the map, which leads to secret passages. Once they reach the pier with the carnival they are taken to a secret room with other children. This is where your imagination takes you places, as the characters are from the past. The story ends with another group of children finding the secret box.

I had a hard time figuring out how to share this book with my students. I didn't want them all to try to tell me the story at once. At first I shared this book with two individual students, who were able to retell the story in two very different ways. I then decided to share it with the whole class using my document camera so that every student could see the story. I introduced this book by showing them the cover and asking for predictions about the story. I asked what kind of things they would have put into a secret box. When asked about how to read it, one student answered, "You have to look at the pictures and read it with your own words." I found that a lot of my students struggled with this story because they couldn't get over the fact that there weren't words. When I asked for reasons why the students liked the book I got a variety of responses. One student said, "It can get people thinking," while another student said, "You can make a picture in your head of what will happen next." When I asked if there were any students that dislike the book one student replied, "You didn't know exactly what was going on." Two other students were disappointed that they didn't know more about the characters, replying, "You don't know their names" and "you didn't understand how they felt."

Polka Dot Penguin Pottery by Lenore Look is about a young writer named Aspen, who is suffering from writer's block. Her parents take her to a paint-your-own pottery store to help her get writing ideas. She struggles as she wants to paint an egg, but doesn't know how to paint it. She watches many other children as they get started on their own pottery. She then begins to paint her egg, turning a spill into a masterpiece. This beautiful egg leads a new story, and the "writer is at work" yet again.

I introduced this book to my students by discussing what they do when they can't think of something to write about. A lot of students mentioned talking with a friend, thinking about their family, or looking at a picture. The students enjoyed the language used, as well as the vivid illustrations. Several students recalled a time when they painted their own pottery, with their family and in art class. The first thing many of my students noticed was the format of the book. They enjoyed the fact that the pages turned up, not right. When we discussed the character Aspen, one student said, "That is how I feel sometimes when it is time to write." Another student said, "Sometimes it is hard to think of things to write about, but if you take a break from thinking you can think of something." When asked what they thought of this book, a lot of students enjoyed getting to know the character. They also enjoyed the authentic Chinese language used, like "GungGung" (grandpa) and "PohPoh" (grandma).
I enjoyed sharing these books with my students. They enjoyed using their imagination with each reading. To follow up with both stories, I had them choose one of the two books and write an extended ending. It was refreshing to see so many different ideas from these selections.

When presenting these books to my students, I appreciated the opportunity to focus on the illustrations. When looking at details in the illustrations I was able to highlight the importance of details in writing as well. These books were a good fit for my first grade classroom.

**About the Author**

**Kristin Strasser**, who received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Purdue University, is a first grade teacher at Wyandotte Elementary School. She is in her eleventh year of teaching first grade. Strasser lives in Lafayette with her favorite audience: her husband and two young children.