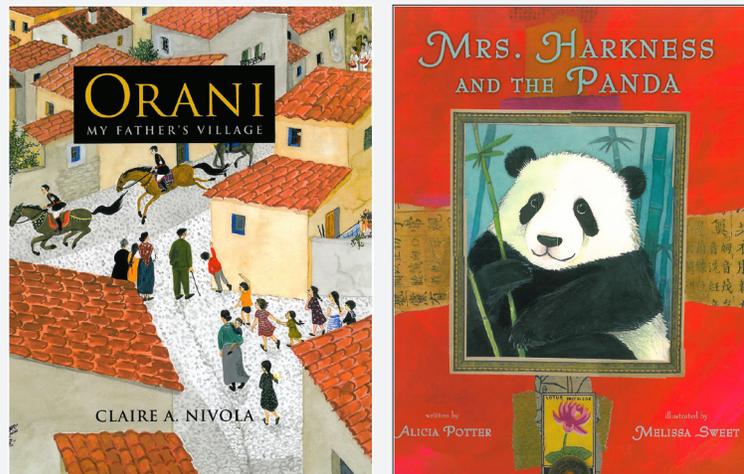


Second Reaction: Two Countries, One Love

Nivola, Claire A. *Orani: My Father's Village*. China: South China Printing Co. Ltd, 2011.

Potter, Alicia. *Mrs. Harkness and the Panda*. New York: Knopf, Borozoi books, 2012.

Gloria Chen



I fell in love with Claire A. Nivola's "Orani" as soon as I began reading it. Both the text and the pictures grasped my heart! I decided to share this lovely book with a reading group I taught in the summer. The five students' ages might be a bit older than what most reviewers suggested—they were going into grades 5–8 this fall. However, I believe readers will never outgrow this book, and older readers can appreciate the writing style and art of Claire A. Nivola at a deeper level.

There were four girls and a boy in this group. At the beginning, I asked the students to work together to draw a map of Europe on the white board. This provided an opportunity for these preteens and teenagers to work together to review their geography. They cheerfully taught and corrected one another, and eventually generated a nearly perfect map—I noticed they were pretty good with drawing the "boot" of Italy—that was great, because the village of Orani was not far from it.

I added an island to the west of the boot, and wrote "Orani" at the center of the island with a red marker, just as what's done in the last page of the book. Then I asked students

what country this island belonged to. There were various answers, and I was delighted that several students replied, “Italy.”

Since the group was small, I sat down with the students on a rug, forming a circle. I held the book and showed the students the front and the back covers and the maps in the book. The students had fun comparing the maps in the book with the one they drew on the whiteboard. After I read aloud the first page and showed the students the picture on that page, I quietly passed the book to the girl to my left. She understood my intention and continued to read the second page and showed the group the picture as well. The rest of the group soon picked up the pattern and continued to take turns reading and showing the pictures. When the fifth student finished, I handed the book to the girl to my left again, and she kept on reading to the amazingly quiet reading group, and then passed the book on.

Each student had three opportunities to read the pages aloud and showed the pictures before they finished with a sigh of satisfaction. Since the group was small and we sat down in a circle, we were able to listen to everyone’s reading and savor the pictures. After showing smiles of understanding and appreciation, students began to make comments. Some of them asked to hold the book closer so they could see the details of the pictures, and one pointed out that the pictures were like those of “Where is Waldo,” only they were more like real life. Upon this comment, we re-checked each picture, and were amused to find that, sure enough, Claire was in every picture where there were people. Her red skirt and parted hair with a clip vividly showed the audience how much she was involved in the life of the Orani villagers.

Students then commented that everyone, not only Claire, in the pictures “always had something to do” or “were always doing something.” I believed the students meant the pictures were not just “illustrations”—they were telling stories as much as the texts did, or, perhaps even more than the text did!

I then invited each student to share one event in the book which was most impressive to him/her. The boy yelled “the dead body,” which made some the other four girls cover their eyes. The boy then said it was good to die at home. I admired the boy’s observation, because dying at home is no longer a common practice in the US. I took this opportunity to explain the philosophy of “Hospice.”

Several girls mentioned the wedding dance, but they had a hard time finding the bride. One girl commented perhaps the bride and the groom had left for the honeymoon, like many American newlyweds did, and another said perhaps the bride in Orani did not wear a white wedding dress. Upon hearing this comment, all the girls were excited to find the bride in the circle. They also found Claire among the dancers—she was the youngest!

After we closed the discussion, many students asked if they could borrow the book to share with their siblings or friends. I told them of course they could, and encouraged

them to write the stories of their own neighborhoods. We all agreed that “Orani” was truly Claire’s village, not only her father’s.

Mrs. Harkness and the Panda was another interesting picture book which I chose to read aloud to a small group of elementary school students, ranging from kindergarteners to third graders, whom I taught in a summer reading group. Since that was a group with multiple ages, I designed the book reading with various comprehensive levels in mind.

First I asked students the following questions:

What is your favorite animal?

What animals are black and white in color?

What are some animals that you have read about or seen on TVs, but have never seen for real?

What are some animals that have become extinct?

What are some of the endangered species?

The first two questions were for younger students (kindergarteners and first graders), and the last three questions were for older students (second and third graders). The students had a good discussion, especially on question two and question three. The responses for question two included zebras, rabbits, chickens, ducks, geese, swallows, butterflies, pandas, and even snakes! The responses for question three came with dinosaurs (of course), hyenas (students knew how to say the word, but we had a good debate over how to spell the word, and eventually we consulted a library), pelicans, prairie dogs, pandas, geckos (again some students insisted the gecko is not a real animal, but just an icon of an insurance company, and we had to look it up in a dictionary to confirm it indeed was an animal), and alligators.

Then I invited students to guess what animal we were going to read about. Since I was a teacher with Chinese ethnic background, students knew enough to make a perfect guess—panda! Yes!

I showed students the cover of the book *Mrs. Harkness and the Panda* along with a few stuffed pandas and told them too bad I did not bring a real panda with me. Some students pointed out we could see real pandas in China and in the zoo in Washington DC. I took this opportunity to ask them if they knew what was the first zoo in the United

States that kept pandas, and students were all surprised that the answer was the zoo near our town—Brookfield Zoo in Chicago!

This discussion made a good transition into reading this book, because the two pandas Mrs. Harkness brought to the United States, Su Lin (in 1936) and Mei-Mei (in 1937), were kept in Brookfield Zoo, and that was long, long before pandas Ling-Ling and Sing-Sing went to the National Zoo in Washington DC in 1972. I gave the stuffed animals to younger students to hold and began to read the book *Mrs. Harkness and the Panda* aloud. A student commented that the name “Harkness” did not sound Chinese, such as “Chen.” I used this comment to raise students’ curiosity about this book.

As I was reading the book to the students, I showed them the beautiful illustrations which richly featured Chinese people, characters, calligraphy, and geography. I carefully explained to students that Mrs. Harkness was a real person, and she would have been more than one hundred years old if she were still alive. I also used the illustrations to show students the contrast of the two worlds—New York City, where Mrs. Harkness lived, and the bamboo forests in Szechuan, China, where Mrs. Harkness got the baby panda, as well as the different outfits of Mrs. Harkness and the Chinese guide she hired, and other Chinese folks. For the first half of the book, I read in English to the students, but when I continued to read about Mrs. Harkness’s journey in Asia, I used Chinese to go along with the English words of several geographic names—Singapore, Hong Kong, Yangtze River, Chungking, Chengdu, China, and Shanghai—and invited students to say the names in Chinese with me. They loved that! Of course they liked to say the name of the panda in this book, Su-Lin, and the word panda in Chinese—(there are two) “mao xiong” (cat bear) and “xiong mao” (bear cat)—whichever you like!

There were two issues I touched upon finishing this book:

Mrs. Harkness scattered her husband’s ashes in the Chinese mountains to remember him as an explorer there. We briefly talked about death and how people remember the deceased. I made sure the younger students understood what we discussed.

Capturing wild animals and taking them to a foreign country, as Mrs. Harkness did, was acceptable in 1936, but today, there are laws prohibiting us from doing this. There are better ways to study and relocate wild animals.

About the Author

Gloria Chen was an ESL teacher for Fort Wayne Community Schools, Indiana, and she is currently teaching college reading and writing at Indiana Institute of Technology.