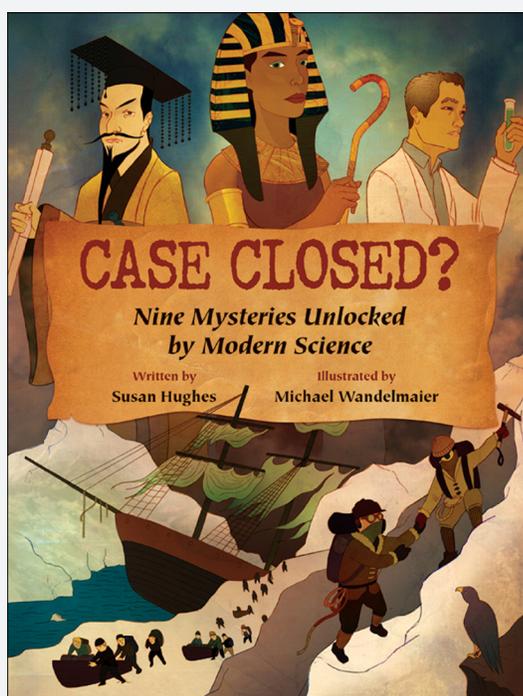


Second Reaction: Scientists Sleuth History's Mysteries

Hughes, Susan. Illus. Michael Wandelmaier. *Case Closed?: Nine Mysteries Unlocked by Modern Science*. Toronto, Canada: Kids Can Press, 2010.

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I was intrigued upon opening *Case Closed?: Nine Mysteries Unlocked by Modern Science*. Susan Hughes presents nine mysteries from the past in four parts accompanied by Michael Wandelmaier's illustrations and historical photographs. Looking at the table of contents, I realized that I was familiar with only four of the cases. Hughes not only writes about individuals who vanished without a trace, but she writes about a lost plane, a submarine, an ancient city, and a lost civilization. That's impressive for an 88-page picture book.

But how was I to share this in class? I determined that this book works across the curriculum. Choose your stance and unpack these stories. Social studies, science, reading, and writing classes all will benefit. I opted to read aloud to my three sixth grade science sections. Since it was the end of the school year, I read a different mystery to each class

over three days.

Hughes creates a four-part scaffolding around which she presents each case. She captures the sense of excitement felt by scientists starting their investigations. Next, she includes a few pages of background information to help readers understand the history of the mystery. The “Case Open” section makes it clear how modern technology helps provide new answers. Hughes ends each case posing a question, “Mystery Solved?” where she sums up what was learned and what’s left unresolved.

Student reactions showed their appreciation for Hughes’s structure. For instance, Meg pointed out that the smaller sections helped to hold her interest. The structure allowed the reader to approach the story slowly. Students had time to think about the text. Jessica wrote, “The best part of it is that while you’re reading, you can come up with your own theories.” The students looked forward to comparing their theories about what the researchers found. Joseph felt, “The mysteries were compelling and kept me guessing. Coming up with my own theories about what happened kept me interested.” To be honest, I didn’t expect these middle school students to be so captivated. They loved learning about these mysteries. One young girl even wanted the book turned into a video.

Leaving mysteries unresolved left many students wanting to know more. It’s a good sign when students hang around afterwards to ask questions and look through the book. Hughes is honest with the reader by showing how sometimes science provides answers while raising more questions.

I was disappointed in how Hughes framed the case of George L. Mallory, the first to attempt reaching Mt. Everest’s peak. His body and that of Andrew Irvine were never found. One student questioned why Mallory was so important. There have been lots of people who died climbing Everest and remained lost. The author fails to make it clear that there is a question about who was first to reach the peak. If Mallory died after reaching the top of Everest, then Edmund Hillary would lose his claim to being first. That seems to be a bigger unresolved mystery than not finding their bodies.

Michael Wandelmaier’s art supports the text in two ways. His illustrations capture a sense of time and place for the reader, helping him or her imagine scenes from long ago. Several students mentioned how his illustrations helped provide a sense of the culture of the Anasazi and the city of Ubar.

Classes valued the sense of daily life found in these illustrations. I was surprised by this insight. No photographs exist to document the death of the Romanov family. Yet Wandelmaier’s illustration captures the tension, fear, and hopelessness of the family, along with the determination of their assassins. That’s powerful.

Wandelmaier’s images also help explain the science involved. One illustration shows how CAT scans use a revolving X-ray tube to examine Hatshepsut’s mummy. His illustration of how the spectrometer was used to find lead in hair samples definitely helped me more fully understand how this works.

Wandelmaier intersperses photographs throughout the book. Students mentioned

how photos made the mysteries “realistic” and aided understanding. I found myself agreeing with them. I’m puzzled about some choices to use illustrations rather than photographs. Why illustrate someone when photographs exist? Wandelmaier’s illustrations describing how the Hsu Fu was built give the reader a strong sense of the work involved. A quick Google search pulled up a photo of the Hsu Fu that gave me a stronger sense of the boat’s sea-worthiness than the illustration.

Case Closed? is a perfect read for any middle school classroom. The text was engaging and informative without overwhelming the readers. In my experience, I have found that most non-fiction books of this depth are not suited for reading aloud. Reading *Case Closed?* aloud proved to be a pleasure for my sixth graders and for me. I look forward to sharing these stories next year.

About the Author

Brien Dick, Ph.D. teaches language arts and science to sixth graders. His students share their thoughts about reading on their blogs instead of using paper and pencil.