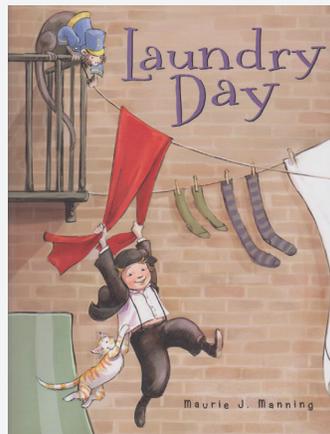


Second Reaction: Sorting Out Inferences in Visual Storytelling

Manning, Maurie J. *Laundry Day*. New York:
Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Kathleen Keeney



Is a picture really worth a thousand words, as the old adage says? Powerful memories of past joys and sorrows are usually relayed to others using words in text; however, these words are specifically designed to help readers or listeners create a mental picture as well as to build empathy through a shared visual of having been there. Too often people take for granted the multitude of times each day that they process information through pictures and visuals rather than through sounds and words.

As a child, I loved being read to by my parents and sought out picture books that communicated a strong plot with strong characters. Like many of my peers, I also enjoyed watching the stories communicated through motion pictures and animated films. I did not, however, find myself drawn to reading or listening to books that were presented in a *primarily visual* format, as in the case of comic books and cartoon strips. I actually dismissed pictorial laden reading material as being *less* able to tell a well-informed story, and I feel that I was actively encouraged during my many years as a student to seek books that contained a higher ratio of words to pictures. However, as a developing teacher I now see the richness and hidden value of reading and relating stories presented graphically. I am realizing that instead of slowing the reader down, pictures actually support comprehension more quickly than words because they can evoke an instant conceptual response and often fill in the gaps of communication where words fail. The strategy of using stories with pictures is particularly important for students

who are learning English as a new language and for students who struggle with reading and other language tasks. Pictures, rather than words, become the vehicle for communication of key ideas and for learning new vocabulary.

When I first received *Laundry Day*, I had to read it several times before grasping the important details of the story; my print-trained mind initially registered only the aesthetic qualities of pictures rather than the narrative details within them. Once I felt that I understood this charming graphic story of a little shoeshine boy living among immigrants in New York, I was excited to share it with my fourth grade students and to incorporate it into the final part of our two-week unit on historical fiction.

Prior to reading the book, I gave students an advance organizer for thinking about strong visual stories by asking them to share their favorite cartoon on the whiteboard. This exercise heightened the students' excitement and curiosity, and they were very pleased when I compared the graphic novel format of the story to "watching a cartoon where you really have to use your eyes to understand the story." I chose to introduce the read aloud during their writing time, so that I could assess the students' reflective responses to the book as well as their candid reactions.

The students' initial reactions to the book were overwhelmingly positive. They loved the challenge of following the story across multiple pages using their eyes and were instantly able to point out details that I had not even noticed. One of those details was the kitten that loyally trails the little boy as he tries to locate the scarf's owner. A look at my students' written responses also showed how much they liked the text because they had interpreted many other subtle details about the story, including themes of community, responsibility, and selflessness. A glance at one desk group's journals revealed a variety of positive and negative reactions. One little girl liked the fact that when the little boy returned the scarf to Miss Fajah, she promptly "gave it back," while another little boy did not like that "the boy had to go everywhere to return the headscarf, then she just threw it down again." Opportunities to use inferring strategies such as discussions about the author's intended meaning could also be supported through this book's graphic format.

With *Laundry Day*, author Maurie J. Manning treats readers to a rich story about the community and the interrelatedness of actions within the human experience. While the story is almost quiet verbally, the beautiful and intricately detailed illustrations communicate a powerful story of actions that speak much louder than words.

About the Author

Kathleen Keeney is a student teacher from Purdue University and is currently working in a Crawfordsville, Indiana, fourth grade classroom. She enjoys dance, cooking, and reading in her spare time and is constantly looking for new ways to address the needs of the many visual learners she encounters in the classroom. She will graduate with a degree in elementary education with a reading specialist focus in May 2013.