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Read Alouds That Rock: Wordless Wonders

By Patricia J. Murphy | Nov 22, 2021

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An interior illustration from Suzy Lee's wordless picture book *Wave*.

Continuing our series on Read Alouds That Rock, we asked some storytime experts to discuss the wonders of wordless picture books and how they share them with young readers. Not surprisingly, they had more than a few words to say. And see our stories on middle grade storytimes and picture book readalouds.

To some, wordless picture books are the avocado toast of the children's book world. Many can't get enough, some won't even take a bite, and still others either don't quite understand their appeal or don't know what to do with them. Well, that is until now.

PW spoke with six librarians, educators, and storytime presenters who feed their patrons, students, and storytime friends a steady diet of wordless picture books, and aren't shy about sharing their favorite recipes to engage, to get young readers on their feet, and to encourage a voracious appetite for books.

Alicia Rodriguez, bilingual outreach librarian with the Los Angeles Public Libraries, vividly remembers the time she spent listening to the stories her parents told her as a child—especially her mother who came from Mexico. “When the lights went out in my mother’s village, they would do [oral] storytelling; they didn’t have books. So my mom would tell my siblings and me stories and read us books, too,” Rodriguez said. “She used all kinds of voices, and our imaginations would run wild listening to and picturing all of the things she was telling us.”

Today, when Rodriguez isn't running around the Los Angeles area spreading the word about free programs and services that her libraries offer, she uses her family's gift for storytelling while reading wordless picture books at the storytimes she does especially for her Spanish-speaking patrons.

She begins each storytime by assessing these patrons' prior knowledge about the books' topic. “For example, with *Wave* by Suzy Lee, I will ask questions like: how many of you have been to the ocean or the beach? What did you see? How did the sand feel on your feet? What did the water taste like?” Rodriguez said. “Then, I'll set the stage by introducing the book's title, author and illustrator, and I'll say, “*You* are going to tell the story today!”

She says that this invitation allows the children to use their imaginations and develop storytelling abilities and language skills. To keep the wordless picture book party going, she may direct their attention to different images and ask questions like, what do you see? What is happening here? She may also ask for predictions, “What do you think is going to happen next?”

After fully exploring the book, Rodriguez leads post-storytime STEAM activities or extensions. These have included chalk drawing on sidewalks after reading *Chalk* by Bill Thomson, and visiting with a local marine biologist who shared sea slugs and starfish and a mini-aquarium to see sea life up close after finishing *Wave*.

Rodriguez said these tie-ins draw her children in and help build early comprehension skills, something she struggled with as a young reader. “I was a sixth grader who was reading at a second grade level. I wasn't comprehending what I was reading. So, by tying in multiple intelligences such as seeing, hearing, and building, I can help children find ways to understand and comprehend, because we all learn differently.”

Katherine Rodriguez-Agüero knows all about diverse learners as a doctoral student at Columbia University in New York City, a new teacher development evaluation coach at P.S. 24 in Queens, and a former early childhood educator. Also, as a child she didn't feel seen by her teachers when she immigrated to the U.S. from Peru.

Her doctoral research is focused on guiding monolingual teachers to help their multilingual students succeed. “I want them to feel that even though they don't speak a particular language they can be effective teachers,” Rodriguez-Agüero said. “While you may only speak one language, there are many ways to communicate with and empower your students who speak an array of languages.”

One way she is doing this is by introducing a literary process called “translanguaging” (coined by Ofelia Garcia) while reading with and/or supporting classrooms. “In many classrooms in Queens as well as other boroughs of New York City, there are many different languages—even within a few short blocks. And wordless picture books help bring them together,” Rodriguez-Agüero said. “Through the use of translanguaging, we can support and connect cultures. It allows children and their families to realize that words and objects can have more meanings than just one, and that multiple words can be used for a single object.”

Rodriguez-Agüero offers an Eric Carle-inspired example. “While you're reading a wordless picture book, you might come to a picture of a butterfly,” she said, “One child who speaks Spanish may say *mariposa*, while an English-speaking child may say

butterfly. So, there you are moving through different languages—or translanguageing. By doing this, you're using their words, honoring their languages, and acknowledging the speakers.”

Rebecca King is the early literacy services supervisor at the Arlington Heights Memorial Library in Arlington Heights, Ill., where she honors and acknowledges all of her patrons—big and small, oversees its popular programs and trains staff to effectively present storytimes for children ages up to five

While King and her storytime staff often have large storytime crowds, they reserve wordless picture books for smaller groups or one-on-one encounters. King explained, “With smaller groups, you can encourage more open-ended conversations where each child can take a turn describing what they see and telling the story themselves.”

To engage the young page-turners and storytellers, King encourages her staff to introduce wordless picture books as they do other picture books, plus do a “picture walk,” (where she shows kids the pictures first) ask questions, and incorporate the element of surprise whenever they can. “Sometimes when I’m reading a wordless picture book to a small group, I sneak a peek at the next page, and say, ‘Do you want to see the next page?’ I’ll do this if there’s a big reveal coming up,” King said. “I may show it to the children on my left, then, on my right, and last in the front. I try to give them an exciting moment.”

Excitement aside, King believes that the best part of a wordless picture book is more intimate and life-changing. “It is the amount of time that a caring adult is going to spend with a child talking about pictures in those books. That is what builds the love of reading.”

Maria Simon, head of youth services at the Wood County District Library in Bowling Green, Ohio, says she has the best job in the world because of the books and patrons surrounding her every day, and because of her view during story times—especially when reading wordless picture books. “I have the best seat in the house,” Simon said. “You see their faces just pop—and what’s going on inside their brains. Something is really clicking!”

To keep her storytime crowd engaged, Simon chooses only the wordless picture books that appeal to her as a reader. “If I’m enthusiastic about a book, I’ll want to share it and co-create the story with them.” Next, she makes props, thinks about questions she’ll ask, and gets the wordless picture book storytime started.

“I’ll introduce the book as a wordless picture book that doesn’t have words in it, or that there are only a few words or sounds, and that I’ll need help,” Simon said. “I’ll continue to explain that we’re going to look carefully at the pictures and tell the story together. They immediately seem to sit up, like, ‘Okay, you’ve got my attention—you need me!’ ”

This happened just the other day when she chose *Chalk* by Bill Thomson for storytime. “I began by asking questions including, ‘What do you think will happen when the children take shelter on the playground?’ ” she said. “Then, this little girl went on and on saying, ‘I would draw a sword, and I’d have a big battle with the dinosaur, and...’ She’s already writing this book and has a whole different take on it!” That girl isn’t alone. Simon said that her wordless picture book experience gives kids permission to tell their own stories—sometimes at the same time. “Some kids raise their hands, others shout out,” Simon said. “There’s also a lot of pointing, and a need to get up close and to touch the book. They want to interact with the book. It becomes real to them.”

And the library becomes a real place for them. “Kids begin to realize that there are a lot of different books in their library, and that there’s something for every one of them.”

Amanda Esko is a storyteller at the King’s English Bookshop, in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she shares stories for every child in the store (when in-person storytimes resume) and on Facebook and Instagram. Her popular storytime has turned her into a local celebrity with fans who love wordless picture books as much as she does.

“The wordless picture book is an amazing tool that allows kids to be in the driver’s seat and to lead the narrative,” Esko said. “So often adults are telling kids things—not just when reading stories, but throughout their lives. The wordless picture book allows the child to place themselves into the story and create stories within the framework of the pictures.”

Esko sees firsthand how engaging kids through the pictures in a wordless picture book can take them to a whole different level. “It’s because you have to think more critically than if the book has text. You can’t skim the words or let the words carry you. You have to rely on pictures and become engrossed in them,” she said.

She says it can be any wordless picture book like *Good Dog, Carl* by Alexandra Day. “All that is said is, ‘Good Dog, Carl!’, but when you look deeper you see that the dog is taking care of this baby, and how they’re in and out of mischief,” Esko said. “At first, it appears to be simple, but it turns out to be a beautiful way of telling a story where kids can put themselves in it or not at all.”

To help her kids immerse themselves in the stories that she chooses, Esko must first “walk” through the book and feel a strong affinity for the story. “If I don’t like it as a storytime, I can’t lead the children in an authentic way. With a wordless picture book, you *really* have to like it.”

Once she’s familiar with and fallen for the book, Esko’s next steps are to “gauge her audience’s needs and interests, and to read the room.” This information helps her determine the next choices she will make. Will she choose to narrate a bit, lean in with “I notice” statements, or let the kids take the wheel?

Sometimes, she might throw them the keys, with a little humor. “I’ll say, ‘Oh, my goodness. The words are missing—where did they go?’ and then I’ll explain that they’re going to tell the story themselves,” Esko said.

She may also offer other open-ended questions, and opportunities such as a “story start” or story building where each child tells a part of the story, and then passes it on. Or, she’ll help them make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. Esko said that all of these offerings and connections allow children to go back into the pictures and see what the adult sees, add more to the story, and develop early language and critical thinking skills.

“For example, in *A Ball for Daisy* by Chris Raschka, I may say: ‘I notice the red ball, what do you think will happen to the ball,’ and then they can finish the story,” she said. “This helps boost creativity, empathy, and problem-solving skills, especially if you’re reading the wordless picture book with a group. They’re going to have to work it out because others may have different ideas than theirs.”

This exploration of differing ideas affirms Esko’s long-held notion about children’s literature, “I’m a big believer that it is a powerful tool for social change,” she said. “It brings diverse voices to our shelves, helps us build empathy—and a larger view of the world. Because you don’t have words to put in the characters’ mouths, you have to think about the person, place, and time and what they might be feeling, and come up with the words yourself.”

David Feinstein, literacy educator at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass., and a former preschool teacher, is constantly coming up with ways to help people select and share books, facilitating storytime and other programming often tied to the museum’s exhibits, and immersing himself in picture books. With the museum’s most recent exhibit, *Speechless: The Art of Wordless Picture Books* (curated by three-time Caldecott Medalist and three-time Caldecott Honor recipient David Wiesner), which ran from July 17 through December 5, 2021, Feinstein had ample opportunity to spread love for wordless picture books.

Feinstein said that the exhibit delightfully details the unique features of wordless picture books—and celebrates what David Weisner called “their collaborative storytelling.”

It’s the collaborative nature of wordless picture books that Feinstein believes causes some parents, caregivers, educators to hit pause when choosing or reading them. But Feinstein insists, “There is no right or wrong way to read them!”

Feinstein also has a variety of techniques to get the best out of the wordless picture book reading experience. For starters, he suggests taking things slowly and looking carefully at the pictures. “If you go too fast, you might zoom right through and miss a lot.” This just may include missing the opportunity to help kids develop visual literacy, the ways they make meaning from images. It is something he and the museum’s staff are always thinking about.

In addition, Feinstein focuses on “close looking” through the Whole Book Approach, an interactive approach to storytime developed at The Carle by author Megan Dowd Lambert. Feinstein said, “It’s an approach that we use which is informed by Visual Thinking Strategies and grounded in open-ended questions: ‘What’s happening in the pictures? What do you see that makes you say that? And, ‘What more can we find?’ ”

While these questions may seem simple, if they are carefully worded as Feinstein suggests, “They will trigger a different cognitive thinking skill that is asking viewers to make connections between parts of pictures, and moving from single word responses to expressing one’s ideas in complete sentences. It is a tool for critical thinking and verbal oral literacy development—foundations for all literacy.”

The Whole Book Approach also switches the focus of storytime from reading *to* children to reading *with* children. “This offers the opportunity to have a book discussion rather than a performance,” Feinstein said. “So we are really facilitating that engagement and interpretation with a wordless or text book.”

And when you choose to read wordless picture books with children, Feinstein suggests parents, caregivers, and teachers might move from the simple (e.g. Color Zoo by Lois Ehlert) to the more complex (e.g. any of David Wiesner’s titles) among others, taking into consideration their audience’s interests and needs, and to build a comfort level.

Whichever wordless picture books they read, Feinstein said that what matters most is the experience between the adult and child engaging in a visual narrative. “This experience is the closest to reading a poem. It’s an open text with multiple entry points and different interpretations!”

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